

West Papuan protests voice discontent with Indonesian rule

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Thousands of West Papuans rallied in the local capital Jayapura on July 7 to demand the provincial legislature reject the region's special autonomy status within Indonesia and call for a referendum on self-determination. An upper house of tribal leaders, the Papuan People's Assembly (MRP), voted in June to reject Papua's autonomy status, which was introduced in 2001.

According to international reports, the demonstration was the biggest in the province since the fall of former Indonesian dictator Suharto in 1998. The Australian reported that 20,000 people took part in the initial rally, with 4,000 occupying the parliament into the night. Radio New Zealand reported that up to 50,000 people had taken part.

The demonstrators marched 17 kilometres from the office of the MRP to the provincial legislature. Shops and office buildings were closed and police were deployed. Clad in traditional costumes, protesters unfurled a banner reading: "Special autonomy fails, ask for referendum." Markus Haluk, a protest leader from the Pegunungan Tengah Students Association, said autonomy had "failed to protect the rights of indigenous Papuans".

More than 300 Indonesian police and soldiers, together with armoured vehicles, moved in to take over control of the parliament after a deadline for the rally to disperse had passed. The situation escalated to a tense standoff when protest leaders sought negotiations with police. A meeting was held for several hours, resulting in an agreement with police that protesters would be permitted to spend the night on the legislature grounds and stay there until 6 pm on July 9.

The Indonesian media downplayed both the size and significance of the protests. Estimates of the numbers ranged from the Jakarta Post's few hundred to 2,000 cited in the Jakarta Globe. Photographs published on the Indybay web site, however, show the main street of Jayapura teeming with demonstrators.

According to Indybay, community organisers also reported on further rallies in outlying towns and in the highland areas. In Manokwari, police violently blocked the rally and dispersed protesters. In Merauke, over 1,000 people marched to the regional legislature to present their demands. In the highlands town of Wamena, shops and businesses closed as hundreds rallied.

The protests followed a previous march through Jayapura on June 18, during which protesters carried banners saying, "Independence is not negotiable" and "Reject Special Autonomy", and called for a boycott of all regional elections. Student leader Haluk was quoted by the Jakarta Globe as demanding that the government also close down the foreign-owned mining giant PT Freeport. "Freeport's activities here only benefit those in Jakarta," he said. "We're left with the garbage."

The protests, which take place against a background of deepening poverty and underdevelopment, indicate tensions are escalating. In December, Indonesian security forces were mobilised in Timika, a southern Papua province, when the killing of separatist leader Kelly Kwalik provoked rioting. Kwalik, the commander of the military arm of the Free Papua Movement (OPM), was killed during a police raid of his hideout. Hundreds of police and soldiers placed the airport, gas stations, convenience stores and banks under heavy security. Police fired warning shots into the air to disperse a protest following the funeral and many as 500 mourners threw stones at the security forces.

Under the special autonomous status of 2001, the Indonesian government handed limited control of lucrative natural resources tax revenue to the local administration. The concession was part of former president Abdurrahman Wahid's efforts to reach a deal with local elites. The region is the most resource-rich of the Indonesian archipelago, featuring oil, gas, gold and copper, yet most of the Papuan population lives in abject

deprivation. In a 2005 study, the Central Statistics Agency identified Papua as having the lowest human development index in Indonesia, rating it at 62.1 compared to the national average of 69.6. It has the poorest health standards and the highest infant and maternal mortality rates. Malnutrition is estimated to affect one-fifth of its people, including half the children under five.

Papua remained under Dutch control for more than 15 years after Indonesian independence from colonial rule. When the Dutch administration agreed to support Papuan ambitions for sovereignty in 1961, Indonesian President Sukarno sent in troops to assert Jakarta's control. Tensions between the Papua elite, which had been groomed for independence by the Dutch, and the Indonesian government quickly emerged over control of the region.

In the 1960s, a separatist movement emerged and the OPM has since engaged in an ongoing low-level guerrilla struggle. Resentment was further fuelled by the phoney character of the UN-supervised "act of free choice" in 1969, and the settling of migrants from Java and Sumatra in Papua. After General Suharto fell, a number of Papuan leaders who had previously backed Jakarta's control began to call for independence as a means of getting greater access to revenues.

A tougher line against separatism was invoked when Wahid was ousted and Megawati Sukarnoputri installed as president in 2001. One of the main criticisms of Wahid was that his negotiations with independence groups were paving the way for more East Timors and the breakup of Indonesia. The hard line policy against separatism has been pursued under President Yudhoyono, who came to power in 2004.

Tens of thousands of Indonesian troops are currently deployed in the province to suppress the limited guerrilla resistance by the OPM, along with any expression of separatist sentiment. Allegations of abuses by police and military personnel, including the notorious "anti-terror" units, have been frequently made by international organisations. The US-based Human Rights Watch last month released a report that condemned the Indonesian government for criminally prosecuting peaceful protests by separatists. In July 2008, 46 Papuans were arrested on charges of treason after they hoisted the Morning Star flag, a banned symbol of Papuan independence. Many were subjected to torture and imprisoned for 10 years or more.

A particular focus of discontent is the Freeport mining operation. With reserves valued at \$40 billion, Freeport is

the largest single gold deposit in the world and the third largest open-cut copper mine. Its US owners and their British and Australian partners have extracted billions of dollars in gold from the mine. In 1967, Freeport was given rights to more than 100,000 hectares of traditional lands. Since then, some 2,000 villagers have been forcibly removed to make way for mining, waste dumping and the construction of townships, roads, airfields and military posts.

The demand for independence from Jakarta has come to be widely associated in Papua and elsewhere with an end to authoritarian rule and the securing of basic democratic rights and a better standard of living. However, Papuan separatist leaders are cynically exploiting these sentiments in order to advance a political agenda that is equally inimical to the interests of ordinary working people.

The underlying perspective of the separatist leadership was set out by a 3,000-strong Papuan Peoples Congress in June 2000, which insisted the people "behave cordially and in a supportive manner towards investment activities in Papua". In other words, a small layer of the indigenous elite is offering to serve as the local agents of the mining conglomerates who are plundering the province's natural resources.

As the experience of East Timor since its formal independence in 1999 demonstrates, the creation of a tiny capitalist statelet would not alleviate the poverty and oppression of the population one iota. What is necessary is a unified struggle of the oppressed masses of West Papua, as well as in Papua New Guinea, and the working class and rural poor across the Indonesian archipelago for a socialist perspective.



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