

Rising class tensions across Indonesia trigger West Papua protests

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Demonstrations involving thousands of people have broken out across the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua in the past three weeks, resulting in violent repression by the police, military and Islamist thugs. According to scanty reports, the protests have resulted in the burning of government buildings, confrontations with police, mass arrests and dozens of deaths or injuries.

The protests and clashes began on August 17 after police and Islamic militias brutally attacked Papuan students in the East Javan city of Surabaya. The social unrest comes amid intensifying economic and social tensions across the entire sprawling Indonesian archipelago, home to 263 million people.

Because of an anti-democratic internet shutdown by the Indonesian government across the remote Papuan provinces, and bans on international journalists, information on the clashes is hard to verify. But social media reports indicate that a number of protesters have been killed. Witnesses of a single clash in Papua's remote Deiyai regency said at least eight bodies were located after security forces opened fire on protesters.

Despite the official censorship, videos have emerged online showing protests by Papuan students and workers in what is estimated to be 30 towns in the two provinces, as well as in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, and several other cities, including Medan and Bandung. Last week, demonstrators torched parliament and police buildings in the Papuan capital, Jayapura. Police fired tear gas and 600 extra paramilitary troops were deployed to the city.

The unrest erupted on August 17, Indonesian Independence Day, when armed Indonesian police, soldiers and Islamic militia members stormed a student dormitory in Surabaya that housed Papuan students, arresting 43. The students had allegedly refused to raise

the Indonesian flag. According to eye-witness accounts, students were tortured and called "monkeys," "pigs" and "dogs" during the attack.

This assault has triggered another wave of secessionist agitation, which date back to the Indonesian annexation of the former Dutch colony in 1961. The violent official response has involved thugs from the Banser militia, the paramilitary wing of the Islamic organisation Nahdlatul Ulama, working in close collaboration with the Indonesian military. "If the TNI [Indonesian military] commander or the defence minister asks us, the only thing we can say is that we're ready," Banser leader Alfa Isnaeni told the media.

By some estimates, President Joko Widodo's government has deployed more than 6,000 military personnel to the Papuan region in an effort to quell dissent. Video obtained by Australia's Special Broadcasting Services (SBS) showed paratroopers descending in the highlands of Wamena and in Sentani, near Jayapura.

Papuan business and political elites once sowed illusions in Widodo, who pledged to address inequalities and human rights abuses in Papua during his first election campaign in 2014. But conditions have only worsened.

Both the "pro-independence" protests and the Islamist-linked repression are driven by efforts to divert underlying and growing social tensions into divisive communal conflicts. The resource-rich, but deeply impoverished, provinces on the western half of the island of Papua have become a particularly acute demonstration of the immense social inequality wracking Indonesia.

While transnational mining conglomerates, backed by local capitalists, extract super-profits from the archipelago's natural wealth and the labour power of

local workers, millions of people live in abject poverty.

Driven by global financial forces, this social divide throughout Indonesia has escalated since the collapse of the 33-year Suharto military dictatorship in 1998. Today, an estimated 1 percent of the Indonesian population owns 50 percent of national wealth, and the richest 10 percent possesses 77 percent, while most people lack decent jobs, housing and essential social services.

In Papua, much of the brunt of this exploitation and inequality is now borne by workers from across the wider archipelago. The government's "transmigration" program has encouraged the human influx in order to satisfy the demands of the mining companies and other employers for larger sources of cheap labour.

Today, as a result, more than half the provinces' nearly 4 million people are not Papuans. This has led to the incitement of conflicts over land, jobs and retail businesses. But it also provides the objective basis for a unified working class struggle against the government-backed corporate ruling class.

Successive governments in Jakarta have responded to the escalating social tensions in Papua by stirring up animosities between locals and internal immigrants, and conducting brutal crackdowns on any unrest. Papuan separatist leaders, in turn, have exploited local outrage to try to pressure Jakarta for limited autonomy concessions and a greater share of the corporate proceeds for the small indigenous elites.

Last year, for example, a dispute developed over the ownership of the multi-billion dollar US-run Freeport Grasberg gold and copper mine in the central highlands, one of the world's largest and most profitable such projects. Widodo's government sought to have Freeport divest 51 percent of the shares in the mine to the Indonesian government. Papuan governor Lukas Enembe, a political powerbroker, demanded 20 percent go to Papua. In October, a deal was struck with the central government for a 10 percent stake.

The demand for independence from Indonesia has come to be widely associated in Papua, Australia 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 cynically divert these sentiments into calls for intervention by the major imperialist powers to support

the establishment of another capitalist state.

In January this year, exiled West Papuan independence advocate Benny Wenda handed a petition with 1.8 million signatures to UN Human Rights High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet demanding an internationally-monitored referendum. "How many people need to be killed for the UN to intervene," he told SBS News, referencing the similar calls for a referendum in East Timor, then an Indonesian territory, in 1999.

As the bitter experience of East Timor since its formal independence demonstrates, the creation of such a statelet would be a vehicle for intensified global corporate exploitation, benefiting only a small local elite. There is only one way to alleviate the poverty and oppression of the population. That is a unified struggle of the workers and poor masses of Papua, as well as in neighbouring Papua New Guinea, and the working class and rural poor across the Indonesian archipelago and globally for a socialist perspective.



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