

Student protests in Indonesian Papua suppressed by police violence

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A protest involving thousands of students and workers in Wamena in the Indonesian province of Papua on September 23 was brutally attacked by police and military forces, resulting in at least 32 deaths and 66 injuries.

It is to date the most violent event in this year's protests in Indonesian Papua, now in their eighth week. The protests first erupted on August 17 when police, soldiers, and Islamic militia members assaulted Papuan students in the East Javan city of Surabaya.

The Wamena protest was apparently sparked by an incident two days earlier, in which a non-Papuan teacher at a senior high school described one of his indigenous students as “a monkey.” The students of SMA PGRI Wamena high school were outraged and immediately took to their phones to share the story with students from other local schools. Within two days around 5,000 students joined them on the streets.

On the morning of the Wamena protest, workers and university students from the town and surrounding villages marched alongside the high school students, forming a large demonstration. Police and military officers deployed in Wamena responded by opening fire on the crowd. Horrified and angered by the sudden shootings, the protesters set fire to several government buildings.

Later that day, President Joko Widodo stated in a press conference that the clash between protesters and security personnel had been provoked by the spread of “fake news”—or, as he called it, “a hoax” perpetrated by Papuan separatist groups. This was reiterated by police, who alleged that pro-independence activists had dressed up in school uniforms and effectively led the march.

Widodo further claimed that an armed criminal group had descended from the nearby mountains and swept

through the town, stirring up riots and torching homes. He provided no evidence whatsoever for these claims, nor did he elaborate on the name or leaders of the marauding group.

The official police report argued that the majority of victims were non-Papuan migrants who had been targeted by native Papuan rioters and died from stab and arrow wounds, and from being trapped inside burning buildings. This is characteristic of the government's efforts to divide working people along ethnic lines and whip up racist sentiment. Antara, the national news agency, closely linked to the state apparatus, reported that 16 non-Papuans and only one native Papuan were killed, while 66 others were maimed “by the rioters brandishing machetes and arrows.”

The government has attempted to cloak the Papuan protests in secrecy, shutting down internet services and imposing a ban on international journalists. First-hand accounts, however, have leaked out despite government censorship and presented a sharply contrasting picture of the Wamena shootings. Witnesses told foreign media outlets about the police violence and suggested the true death toll may be significantly higher than the official toll of 32 people.

An anonymous university student, 19, explained the involvement of the police to the *Guardian*: “There was a shootout and we fought back with rocks and arrows. The police shot at the Papuans. There were about 16 to 20 people who died directly on the street that I saw.” Yance, 18, a student told Al Jazeera the he saw his friend being shot in the chest after police had blanketed the crowd in tear gas.

Another witness saw victims of the police brutality being brought to the Wamena hospital after the shooting, including a young student who had been shot

in the back. The following day, he saw six bodies laid out in the hospital's morgue, who all appeared to be of "high school age." Police and military patrols have since been observed guarding the entrance of the hospital, blocking access to anyone trying to verify the number of deaths. The police presence has also made it difficult for families to visit their injured relatives.

Government authorities have continued their cover up. Ahmad Mustofa Kamal, the police spokesman of Papua province, insisted that police had not received any reports of protesters being harmed by gunfire. But this is not the first time that the national police have flatly denied using extreme violence against protesters.

On August 28, a large gathering of protesters in Deiyai regency stood outside the Regent's Office asking the Regent to sign a joint statement they had written. Soldiers and police officers, waiting inside the building, proceeded to fire gunshots into the crowd, killing at least eight people. Mobile phone signals were disrupted in the area of the shooting. Dedi Prasetyo, a police spokesman, denied the use of gunfire and told the media that no one was killed in the incident except two policemen.

The use of police state measures in West Papua is an attempt to crush any form of resistance to the abuse of democratic rights and the economic and social crisis facing working people. President Widodo has visited the Papuan provinces five times since his 2014 election and has promised better living conditions for impoverished Papuans. However, conditions have only continued to deteriorate.

After the shootings in Wamena, as many as 4,000 people were forced to evacuate. Residents are also fleeing the town and the entire regency, Jayawijaya, of their own volition, after hearing of a huge military deployment due to arrive in the area. Tens of thousands of civilians throughout the West Papua region have been forced from their homes by security forces.

According to Veronica Koman, an Indonesian human rights lawyer, some of the 6,000 troops currently stationed in West Papua are being employed to blockade roads connecting villages, towns, and regencies, in order to prevent protesters in different areas from uniting in force.

Unintimidated, the Papuan protesters have continued demonstrating, drawing strength from recent student movements in Jakarta and other major cities. Over the

last two weeks, tens of thousands of students across the country protested the Widodo government's proposed regressive criminal code. In the wake of the Wamena shootings, the students stood in full support of the Papuan protesters and demanded an "end to militarism" in West Papua.

While protesters have been calling for Papuan independence from Indonesia, such a move will not benefit ordinary working people but represents the interests of a small elite layer that seek to profit from foreign investment seeking to exploit resources and cheap labour. Workers and students in Indonesian Papua should turn to their class brothers and sisters across the Indonesian archipelago and internationally in a united struggle against social inequality and the capitalist profit system.



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