Governance and the Cycle of Violence in Papua: The Nduga Crisis:

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Abstract

Indonesia’s last regional conflict remains intractable. We are reminded of this by demonstrations and mass detentions in 2018 around the 1 December anniversary of Papua’s ‘Independence’ Day and the killing a day later of at least 16 construction workers in the central highlands district of Nduga with the military operations that followed. These events will be discussed further in the paper after a brief outline of the conflict in Papua.

Keywords

Papua, Indonesia, Nduga Crisis, Violence, Autonomy Law

Introduction: Papua and the Indonesian state

Papuan resistance to Indonesian rule has existed as long as there has been an Indonesian administration. Indeed, the assertion of the right to establish an independent state pre-dates the advent of the Indonesian administration in 1963. Resistance against Indonesian rule and the struggle to establish an independent state has been pursued by both peaceful political and armed means.

After the fall of President Suharto’s New Order Government in 1998, there was a rapid and broad mobilization of support for independence in Papua, as there was in Timor-Leste and Aceh. In February 1999 a team of 100 Papuan leaders met with President Habibie and demanded that Papua’s independence be recognized. President Abdurrahman Wahid, more than any of the other Reformasi-era Presidents, sought to accommodate Papuan aspirations, when, on a visit to Papua to welcome the new Millennium, he agreed that the province could be called Papua and that the Papuan Morning Star flag could be flown. Abdurrahman Wahid funded the Papua Congress, a pro-independence mass gathering held in mid-2000 by the Papua Presidium Council (PDP), led by Theys Eluay. The “Papuan spring” of relatively free mobilization and expression of opinion came to an end with the detention of Theys Eluay and other PDP leaders in late November 2000 and the assassination of Theys Eluay by Kopassus (Special) troops a year later.

Under Presidents Megawati Sukarnoputri and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono peaceful pro-independence activity was criminalized, with activists like Filip Karma given long prison sentences for raising the Morning Star Flag. This approach to the governance of Papua has meant that Papuans have not shared in the freedoms of organization and expression that have developed in the rest of Indonesia.

The Special Autonomy Law of 2001 was the Government’s response to Papuan demands for independence. It provided for broader autonomy, with greater authority and allocation of revenue, devolved to the province rather than provided under the nation-wide decentralization laws introduced by President Habibie. Under Special Autonomy, the provincial government had authority in all
areas except foreign affairs, external defense, monetary policy, and the supreme court. Papuan advocates of Special Autonomy hoped the law would facilitate extensive self-government within Indonesia. Special Autonomy supporters in the Jakarta government envisaged that the law would diminish support for independence. That Special Autonomy has failed is one of the few issues the Jakarta Government and Papuan politicians agree on, even if for different reasons and attributions of responsibility.

Although the Special Autonomy Law is considered a failure, together with the proliferation of new district governments and the division of Papua into two provinces - Papua and West Papua - administrative structures have been transformed. The number of district governments has grown from 12 to 42, with many of the new districts created in remote and impoverished regions in the highlands, including Nduga, which was established in 2008. The political elite has become more reflective of the plurality of Papuan society, in comparison with the mostly coastal Papuan elite, which dominated both the PDP and provincial government in the immediate post-Suharto years. In the provincial parliament in Papua elected in 2014, members from the central highlands occupy 59% of the seats, roughly the same as the portion of highlanders in the Papuan population. In elections for legislatures, Papuans compete with each other and with candidates from the Indonesian settler communities, who were successful in winning 25% of the seats. Under the provisions of the Special Autonomy Law, the Governor and Deputy Governor have to be indigenous Papuans. As will be discussed further, the demographic and electoral dominance of highlanders was reflected in the re-election of Lukas Enembe as Governor of Papua. Enembe commenced his political career as head of Puncak Jaya, one of the newly created local government districts in the central highlands.

The demographic transformation Papua has experienced under Indonesian rule is one of the factors that fuels support for independence. Papuans consider that they have been dispossessed and marginalized in their own land. In the last census of the Netherlands administration in 1960 Papuans constituted over 97% of the population. According to the 2010 census there were 66.26% or 2,409,670 Papuans out of a total population of 3,612,854 in Papua and West Papua provinces.

As important as the overall demographic transformation is, the geographic distribution of Papuan and non-Papuan populations as well as the economic inequalities between them is critical. In Papua province over 84% of the non-Papua population is concentrated in the urban areas of Jayapura, Merauke and Nabire, Keerom, between Jayapura and the border with Papua New Guinea, and Mimika around the Freeport mine. In these regions non-Papuans constitute a majority. In contrast, Papuans make up majorities of over 90% in the 14 districts of the central highlands.

There are inequalities between urban and rural areas throughout Indonesia. In Papua they are stark and politically salient because they are aligned with and reinforce the differences between the predominantly Papuan highlands and the Indonesian settler majority urban areas. Taking the UNDP’s Human Development Index (HDI) as a broader measure, Jayapura, the capital of Papua, and Sorong, the major economic centre in West Papua, have an HDI of 78.3 and 76.73, respectively, which are not out of place in comparison with other urban areas elsewhere in the archipelago. In the central highlands of Papua HDIs are in the 40s and in West Papua in the 50s. Nduga had the lowest HDI at 27.87. Despite the relatively generous allocation of government revenue under the Special Autonomy Law, Papua and West Papua have the lowest HDI in Indonesia at 59.09 and 62.99, respectively, compared with the national figure of 70.81.
President Jokowi has shown more interest in Papua than any of his predecessors. He campaigned in Papua as a candidate in 2014. He won a strong majority of the vote in both Papuan provinces, with levels of support among the highest in the country. As President, Jokowi has visited Papua more often than earlier Presidents and he has visited Papua more frequently than any other province outside Java.

There was little in his background in business or as Mayor of Solo and Governor of Jakarta to suggest why President Jokowi should show an interest in one of Indonesia’s most intractable issues. During a visit to New Zealand in March 2018, Fransiscus Orlando, a Papuan student, asked the President what motivated him to make so many visits to Papua. Jokowi related how Papua had been neglected for far too long, but it was part of the Unitary State of Indonesia (NKRI) and had to be paid attention. He recalled his visit to the highland district of Nduga in December 2015.

“At the time the head of the military had advised against the visit because Nduga was the most dangerous region. I flew there by helicopter because from Wamena to Nduga required 4 days and nights travel through the jungle. In the Nduga district there was not one meter of sealed road. This made me very sad. This is my motivation to develop the infrastructure and human resources to the same level as other provinces.”

When President Jokowi related this story he could not have envisaged that Nduga, its poverty, isolation and support for armed resistance groups, would come to represent many of the problems his government confronts in Papua.

Early in his presidency, President Jokowi made commitments to resolve human rights abuses, remove restrictions on the access of foreign journalists and release political prisoners. While political prisoners, including Filip Karma, have been released, little progress has been made on resolving human rights cases, and the pattern of abuses by the security forces is little changed. Foreign journalists still must negotiate Papua-specific regulations administered through a “clearing house” process by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Foreign journalists also have to obtain a permission letter (surat jalan) from police intelligence, like other foreigners visiting Papua. President Jokowi’s approach to Papua has increasingly been focused on economic development, particularly infrastructure, seemingly in the belief, like President Yudhoyono before him, that, if material welfare can be improved, the difficult political, human rights and historical issues, which Papuans consider important, will somehow fade away.

During 2017 and 2018 Amnesty International Indonesia (AlJI) and the International Coalition for Papua (ICP) produced detailed and highly critical reports of ongoing human rights abuses. The scope and focus of the two reports is somewhat different, but the analysis is consistent, showing the continuation of a long-established pattern of human rights abuses, frequently involving the security forces. Both reports argue that the pro-independence activities have grown in influence and scale. Human rights abuses, restrictions on freedom of expression and organisation are an integral part of Indonesian governance in Papua. The government restricts freedom of expression and assembly as a means to control peaceful political activity, particularly related to support for independence. The AlJI report observed that Papua is the only region of Indonesia where there is both a peaceful and armed struggle for independence. It notes that while abuses by the security forces continue in Papua, they have declined elsewhere in Indonesia. The ICP
report argued there was an increase in peaceful political civil society activity resonating with international pro-independence campaigns, while the government attempted to shrink the permissible political space in Papua.

The Cycle of Violence in Nduga

The killing of construction workers in Nduga and the Indonesian security force’s subsequent military operations impact quite differently on the politics of the conflict in Papua. It is contested whether the 16 construction workers were unarmed civilians or members of the security forces, but the event on 2 December 2018 marked a departure from the predominantly peaceful, political struggle for independence developed since 2000. In terms of numbers of those killed, it was the largest attack in recent years.

However, the attack was not unprecedented. Between 2010 and 2014, armed resistance groups were responsible for some 122 deaths, and most of the casualties were members of the security forces. In Nduga, in June and July 2018 at the time of local elections, there was conflict between the armed resistance, West Papua Liberation Army (TPNPB) and the security forces on four occasions. Just as would occur after the violence in December 2018, some local figures asked the head of Police to withdraw the Brimob (Police Mobil Brigade) forces as the villagers had been traumatised. Samuel Tabuni, a Nduga youth leader, was cited as saying the government had provided special funds, but money would not solve the political conflict that dated from the 1960s.

Over the past two decades the narrative of human rights abuses by the Indonesian security forces in Papua has been one of the most effective strategies of the independence movement, both within Indonesia and in international diplomacy. The killing of the construction workers weakens this narrative. The military operations since the killings in early December fall into the more familiar pattern of security force operations against the pro-independence groups and the communities in which they live.

The construction team attacked in early December was engaged in President Jokowi’s signature infrastructure development project of
the Trans Papua Road. The targeting of this project was not a coincidence. It represented Indonesia’s development program in Papua and the military’s involvement therein. Lukas Enembe understood that the armed pro-independence groups in Nduga associated the road-building project with the military, seeing it as part of the campaign against them.13

Following the killing of the construction workers, President Jokowi ordered the military and police to seek out and destroy the armed resistance in the remote and poverty-stricken highland district of Nduga. The President had previously identified Nduga as the focus and motivation of his commitment to develop Indonesia’s poorest province. He affirmed that the killings will not deter him from the commitment to develop Papua.14

The killing of the construction workers and the military operations against the armed resistance highlight the cycle of violence that has characterized Indonesia’s administration of Papua. While there has been a cycle of violence, in military terms, the conflict between the armed pro-independence groups and the Indonesian security forces is highly asymmetrical, with the overwhelming predominance of military capacity being with the Indonesian security forces. For the most part, the armed resistance has been local, loosely-organized and sporadic. While it has never threatened Indonesian control, being faced with the deployment of much superior military forces, the armed resistance has never been eliminated. In 2013 Indonesian researcher, Antonius Made Supriatma, estimated that there are about 37,000 military and police deployed in the Papuan provinces, with a ratio of one soldier or police officer for every 97 residents. By comparison, in Indonesia as a whole, the ratio is one security personnel for every 296 citizens.15 In the context of the Nduga crisis, the former head of the National Intelligence Body (BIN), Sutiyo, estimated that there were 25 resistance groups in the highlands, collectively numbering 685 combatants with 232 weapons.16 The military are crucial in the maintenance of Indonesian control of Papua, its governance and development strategies.

John Martinkus and Mark Davis reported in the Saturday Paper that the Indonesian military was conducting a major military operation including the use of what appeared to be white phosphorus bombs, chemical weapons banned under international law.17 The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has vigorously denied this accusation: “The allegation highlighted by the said media is totally baseless, non-factual, and gravely misleading. Indonesia possesses no chemical weapons.”18

An independent military authority consulted for this article considered that the victims’ burns discussed and illustrated in the Saturday Paper article and in photographs circulated on social media are consistent with the use of white phosphorus bombs. He also questioned the explanation by the military spokesman in Papua, Colonel Muhammad Aidi, that, because these bombs are used over long distances and cause widespread devastation, the destruction would have been greater than depicted in the photographs had white phosphorus bombs been used. The same military spokesman confirmed the grenades in the photographs from Nduga were of the type used by the Indonesian military.

Colonel Muhammad Aidi’s statement to the Papua-based media provided insights into the difficulties the military confronted in its operations in Nduga. It is difficult to distinguish the ‘armed criminals’ – the pro-independence fighters in the military’s terminology – from ordinary members of the community. Few people have identity papers in Nduga. An ‘armed criminal’, he argued, could be dressed up as a local government official, member of the local council or a human rights activist.19
The military operations in Nduga have served to unite and mobilize different segments of the Papuan elite - elected politicians, community, human rights and church leaders and the independence activists - against Indonesia. The on-going operations in Nduga have stirred up the collective traumatic memories of earlier military operations, especially those in 1977 and in 1996, and have galvanized hostility in Papuan society against the military. It should be noted that President Jokowi’s rival in this year’s election, former General Prabowo Subianto, earnt his reputation for human rights abuse in the 1996 campaign in neighbouring Mapnduma.

Papuan church leaders go further than the Governor and Parliament to support the demand made by the pro-independence groups for the government to hold a dialogue to resolve the conflict in Papua. The Churches do not support the killing of the construction workers, but they do endorse an international dialogue with the involvement of the UN. Dr Benny Giay, the head of the Kingmi Church, which has significant congregations in Nduga, respects President Jokowi’s endeavors in Papua, but asserts that these do not address Papua’s basic needs. “We want the resolution of all the problems in Papua from 1962 to 2018, including the various forms of violence and human rights abuses that have not been resolved until now.”

Few of the pro-independence groups support the killing of the construction workers, but the demand for an international dialogue with the involvement of the UN is an objective that unites the churches and civil society leaders with the independence activists.

While the Governor’s call for the withdrawal of the security forces from Nduga was strongly supported by civil society, it was rejected by the military command in Papua. A spokesman for the military command, Colonel Muhammad Aidi, argued that the Governor, as the representative of the central government and the Indonesian state, has responsibilities to defend rather than oppose national policy. The governor had sought to ban the security forces from conducting what the military considered its duty to protect society and defend the unity of the state. Through the military’s prism, the Governor was viewed as a spokesman for the
Papuan independence struggle. Colonel Aidi’s arguments were echoed in Jakarta by Bahtiar Baharudin, a Ministry of Home Affairs spokesman, who described the Governor’s comments as “far-fetched and provocative. He argued Enembe should support the police and military’s endeavors “…guarding every inch of [the country] against armed separatists who committed crimes against humanity.”

Lukas Enembe was caught awkwardly between the opposing pressures of his constituents, who expected him to protect them against the abuses of security forces, and the provincial military leadership, who asserted that the Governor’s principal duty was to defend national policy and the nation state.

Enembe is an important political figure in Papuan politics. He is the first politician from the central highlands to be elected as Governor. His first election as Governor in 2013 was heralded by one local newspaper with the headline: “Akhirnya Anak Koteka Pimpin Papua” (Finally, a highlander leads Papua). He is one of a younger generation of highlanders who have come to dominate electoral politics in the province. In July 2018, Enembe was re-elected as Governor with majority of 67.54%, a significant increase in support from 51% in 2013. Enembe won in 20 of Papua’s 29 districts/municipalities, including all but two of the districts in the highlands.

Enembe’s re-election as governor occurred despite evident ambivalence, if not opposition to his candidature in Jakarta. In September 2017, the heads of State Intelligence Agency (BIN) and the Police had tried to pressure Enembe, using the threat of corruption allegations, to accept senior Papuan policeman, Paulus Waterpauw, as candidate for deputy governor. This central government intervention was not designed to prevent Enembe’s re-election but rather to make him a more amenable and compliant governor. Enembe was persuaded to sign a 16-point statement that included a declaration of loyalty to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) and Pancasila and a pledge to give his support to President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo and the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) in the 2019 elections. The corruption investigations against Enembe would not be pursued. A year after signing the 16-point statement for BIN and the police, on the occasion of his installation as Governor by President Jokowi, Enembe delivered on one of his commitments by pledging that all of Papua’s 3 million votes would be given to Jokowi in the 2019 election because he alone of Indonesia’s Presidents understood Papua.

Jakarta’s suspicions about the loyalties of governors in Papua are not new. Enembe’s two immediate predecessors, Jacobus Solossa and Barnabas Suebu, were identified in a Ministry of Home Affairs intelligence document, along with well-known advocates of Papuan independence, as part of a “Papuan political conspiracy”. President Megawati Soekarnoputri’s instruction (Inpres 1/2003) to create a separate province of West Papua – a divide and rule strategy – reflected the intelligence community’s concern that special autonomy, if properly implemented, risked empowering a Papuan political elite whose loyalty was suspect.

As with Enembe’s call for the withdrawal of security forces from Nduga, some of Enembe’s earlier public statements may have raised concerns about his loyalties to Indonesia in nationalist circles in Jakarta.

Reflecting on the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the growing influence of radical Islam, Enembe said that the pro-independence National Committee for West Papua (KNPB) was preferable in a democracy to the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). If Indonesia were dominated by “radical Muslims”, he said, Papua would separate.
In this statement Enembe was appealing to Papuans’ identification with Christianity, in distinction to Muslim majority Indonesia. The majority of indigenous Papuans are Protestant or Catholic and, as is evident in the Nduga crisis, Church leaders are influential figures in matters of politics as well as religion.

In line with the Papuan nationalist interpretation of the history of Papua’s integration into Indonesia, Enembe recalled in 2016 that Papuans were promised their own independent state and the struggle for this state remains their objective. Enembe said that discriminatory policies have made Papuans feel that they are not Indonesians. Jakarta considers Papuans to be stupid, he said, and governs them in an arbitrary manner. But, he added, Papuans understand this and their history. “They are very clever.”

Most directly relevant to Lukas Enembe’s call for the withdrawal of security forces were the comments he made on a visit to Port Moresby in September 2018 to mark the 43rd anniversary of Papua New Guinea’s independence. He told Radio New Zealand: "Every day my people are being killed. That's why I think, the military of Indonesia, the police of Indonesia, they've stopped thinking about the humanity in Papua. Some people in the Highlands, and the coast, they come to me, they're crying, crying about what's happening in Papua. Humanity is very important."

These views are common among Papuans but when they are stated publicly by the governor, they become political, resonating with the governor’s supporters in Papua and raising suspicion in Jakarta.

Concluding remarks

The first section of this article touched on some of the trends in the Papua policies of the democratically elected governments since Suharto. Policies have vacillated between the accommodative and the repressive. The accommodative approaches have not been consistently applied, nor have they enjoyed the support of the military and intelligence community. The repressive approach is counter productive. While the use of the security forces serves to sustain Indonesian authority in Papua, the behavior of the security forces and the human rights abuses fuels Papuans’ desire for independence.

This article discussed how the military operations in Nduga served to unite various segments of the Papuan elite. The collective memories of the suffering associated with previous military campaigns since the 1960s were recalled to mobilize support for the Governor’s appeal to withdraw troops from Nduga. The influence of Church leaders through their congregations was crucial.

At the same time, the role of the Governor and other elected politicians has been critical. Elected politicians and senior officials are the principal Papuan beneficiaries of the Special Autonomy Law. As Lukas Enembe has demonstrated in the Nduga case and in many of his previous public statements, he and his elected politician colleagues have a Papuan constitutency to consider, which includes the poorest regions of Papua. Their interests and aspirations are not the same as the Government’s in Jakarta.

It is naïve to imagine, in the middle of Indonesia’s Presidential election campaign, that Governor Enembe’s appeal to withdraw the security forces from Nduga could be accepted in Jakarta, let alone lead to the sort of substantial withdrawal of Indonesian security forces from Papua that helped bring about peace in Indonesia’s other intractable regional conflict in Aceh. Nor is it likely, in the heat of
an election campaign, that the events in Nduga will prompt a fundamental rethinking of national policy towards Papua.

**Related articles**


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**Notes**

1 Reflecting its contested history, the western half of the island of New Guinea has had numerous names. In the last decade of Dutch rule it was known as Netherlands New Guinea. In 1961 the Dutch accepted the Papuan proposal that it be called West Papua. Under Indonesian rule it has been known as West Irian and Irian Jaya. In 2000 President Wahid accepted the Papuan preference for Papua rather than Irian. Since 2003 the territory has been divided into two provinces - Papua and West Papua - with capitals in Jayapura and Manokwari respectively. Following common Indonesian usage, in this article ‘Papua’ will be used to refer to both provinces, except where the reference is to only one of the provinces.


3 Netherlands Government Annual Report to the United Nations on Netherlands New Guinea,

4 Jim Elmslie, “The Great Divide: West Papuan Demographics Revisited; Settlers Dominate Coastal Regions but the Highlands Still Overwhelmingly Papuan”, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Japan Focus Volume 15, Issue 2, Number 1, Jan 15, 2017

5 Badan Pusat Statistik, Pembangunan Manusia, Data Nasional (https://bps.go.id/data/nasional); Pembangunan Manusia, Provinsi Papua (https://bps.go.id/data/provinsi/metode/baru/9400). The HDI figures are from 2017. HDI is useful as it provides a broader measure than economic development, by incorporating life expectancy and education indices as well as standard of living. HDI is also used in Indonesian government policy making.


9 Amnesty International Indonesia, "Don't Bother, Just Let Him Die": *Killing with Impunity in Papua*, 2018 P. 16

10 International Coalition for Papua (ICP), *Human Rights in West Papua 2017*, Section 5, p. 6


commitment to support Jokowi and the PDI-P in this year’s elections was that he is the Papua head of the Democrat Party, which does not support Jokowi’s campaign for re-election.


34 Badan Pusat Statistik, Sensus Penduduk 2010 - Penduduk Menurut Wilayah dan Agama yang Dianut | Indonesia (https://sp2010.bps.go.id/index.php/site/tabel?tid=321&wid=0). In the context of the Papuan provinces, it is important to note that there are long-established Muslim Papuan communities in west coastal areas, including Raja Ampat, Fakak and Kaimana. While the majority of the Indonesian settler communities in Papua are Muslims, there have been Christian communities from the neighboring Maluku islands resident in Papua since the Netherlands administration.
