

## The Struggle for Self-Determination in West Papua (1969-present)

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Jason MacLeod  
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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance  
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**Conflict Summary:**

Located on the western rim of the Pacific, bordering the independent state of Papua New Guinea, West Papua is a Melanesian nation in waiting. Under the Dutch the territory was the easternmost limit of the far-flung Dutch East Indies. On May 1, 1963, after less than one year of transitional rule by the United Nations, power was formally transferred to the Republic of Indonesia. One condition of the transfer of administrative control was that there would be an internationally supervised act of self-determination. A sham “referendum” known as the “Act of Free Choice”, and supervised by the United Nations, took place between May and July 1969. On 19 November 1969 the United Nations General Assembly formally “took note” that the results of the Act of Free Choice did not accurately or democratically represent the will of the people, however it still proceeded to recognise Indonesian government rule in West Papua. Since then the territory has been the scene of one of the most protracted, complex and volatile conflicts in the Pacific. After the fall of former Indonesian President Suharto in 1998 the struggle for self-determination and independence underwent a transformation from a poorly armed and decentralised network of guerrilla groups fighting in the mountains and jungles to a popular nonviolent civilian-based movement in the cities and towns.

Five mutually reinforcing grievances animate West Papuan resistance (Tebay 2005; MacLeod 2007a):

1. The contested view of history. Papuans believe the transfer of sovereignty from the Netherlands to the Indonesian government was fundamentally unjust;
2. State sanctioned human rights violations;
3. Economic injustice and disadvantage characterized by socially and environmentally destructive development projects;
4. Migration of Indonesians from other parts of the archipelago into West Papua, resulting in conflict and competition over land and resources between the migrant and indigenous populations;
5. Institutional racism and indigenous disadvantage and marginalization in the economy, education sector, security forces and bureaucracy.

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The Indonesian government has vigorously resisted efforts to broker some kind of internationally mediated third-party dialogue, which is what the overwhelming majority of Papuans, including those in government, are calling for. Papuan leaders from the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation and Papua Consensus – two coalitions of resistance groups – are calling for dialogue without conditions over the political status of West Papua. For most Papuans the desired goal is an independent state.

The state is sensitive to perceived foreign intervention and tries to restrict efforts by journalists, diplomats and non-government organisations wanting to report on the conflict. Peace Brigades International, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Dutch development and peacebuilding organisation CordAid have all been forced out of West Papua. Even diplomats are regularly denied permission to visit West Papua (MacLeod 2011a). Jakarta downplays the extent of discontent among West Papuans and repeatedly argues that the conflict is an internal matter for the Republic of Indonesia to resolve. Despite some partial success in 2001 when the territory was theoretically granted a greater measure of self-rule by the Indonesian government in Jakarta, conflict has persisted and core grievances remain unresolved.

### **Political History:**

The dominant Indonesian government view is that the 1969 Act of “Free” Choice was the last stage of a decolonisation process involving the transfer of a territory that was always meant to be part of the Republic of Indonesia, and that the result of the Act of Free Choice was officially and democratically endorsed by the United Nations. The dominant Papuan view, on the other hand, is that the whole decolonization process was fraudulent, fundamentally violated Papuans’ civil and political rights, and was backed up by state violence with the full knowledge and acquiescence of the international community. Comprehensive investigation of the evidence by both John Saltford and a separate investigation commissioned by the Dutch Government and headed up by Pieter Drooglever, reveals little doubt that the process was undemocratic. Less than 0.01% of the population participated in the Act of Free Choice and no Papuans participated in the 1962 New York Agreement that established the framework for the transfer of political power from The Netherlands to Indonesia. During the Act of Free Choice there was no universal suffrage. Instead, the Government of

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Indonesia hand-picked representatives while widely publicising that dissent would not be tolerated; a stance backed up by bombing, strafing of villages, disappearances, intimidation, arrest, imprisonment and killings. In open meetings closely monitored by the Indonesian military, selected Papuan representatives spoke of their desire to join the Republic of Indonesia. Those who agreed were asked to raise their hand. Not surprisingly, in an atmosphere of intimidation and repression 100% chose to do so (Saltford 2003).

After the Indonesian government formally took administrative control of the territory on behalf of the United Nations in 1963, West Papuans have been subject to ongoing security operations carried out by the TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia – the Indonesian National Army). In recent years the pattern of direct violence perpetrated by the state has shifted from large-scale military operations to human rights violations by the police (particularly Brimob, the paramilitary mobile police brigade, whose members include few indigenous Papuans). Since the end of the DOM (Daerah Operasi Militer – Military Operations Area) period in 1998 the number of killings appears to have fallen sharply but military operations, intimidation and harassment of political activists and generalised violence towards West Papuans by the security forces is a regular feature of the socio-political landscape.

Torture in particular is systemic. Former Director of the Catholic Office for Justice and Peace in Jayapura, Br. Budi Hernawan OFM, argues that torture in West Papua is something that is not hidden. Nor is it used under the premise of extracting information from ‘captives’ in the way that it has been used in Guantanamo Bay, for instance. Torture, says Hernawan, has become a kind of “public spectacle”. It is meted out against poor Papuans and carried out in public in order to assert Indonesian state hegemony and enforce submission by terrorizing and controlling the Papuan population through fear (Hernawan 2011). The current Indonesian President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, or SBY as he is popularly known, has shown little willingness to tackle the problem. When footage of Indonesian soldiers torturing two Papuan civilians, including burning an elderly man’s genitals with a stick, was leaked on YouTube in 2010, igniting Indonesian and international outrage, SBY did little. He called the act an “incident”. In reality it was part of a culture of brutality, discrimination and impunity in the security forces. When the soldiers did go

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to trial they received sentences totaling 8-10 months. All were charged with disobeying orders, not with crimes against humanity.

This 'incident' is part of a pattern that Papuans call "memoria passionis", a collective memory of suffering. Over 100,000 West Papuans are believed to have perished since 1963 (Singh 2008). In addition there is chronic indigenous disadvantage in the areas of health, education and welfare. Conflict caused by economic exploitation is made worse by the Indonesian military's predatory role in the economy. Some seventy to eighty percent of the Indonesian military's budget comes from the TNI's involvement in legal and illegal business, including the provision of security to transnational corporations, giving the military a vested interest in maintaining conflict (King 2004; Tebay 2005; Fernandes 2006). West Papua's abundant natural resources and an Indonesian state transmigration program has altered the demographics of West Papua. Migration by Indonesians to West Papua has intensified conflict and competition over land and economic opportunity (McGibbon 2004). Institutional racism further exacerbates indigenous exclusion from widespread participation in the structures of the society. It also is used as an excuse for direct violence by the security forces, many of whom hold the view that all West Papuans are separatists. These prevailing historical causes and the direct, structural and cultural forms of violence in West Papua are mutually reinforcing, making the conflict extremely resistant to resolution (MacLeod 2007a).

Contemporary nonviolent resistance in West Papua dates back to oppositional movements against colonial rule by the Dutch and Japanese. One of the most well-known was a 30,000 strong unarmed insurrection on the island of Biak during the 1940s led by Angganita Menufandu that included tax resistance, refusal to participate in forced labour and defiance of bans of traditional singing and dancing (MacLeod 2007b). In 1965 armed resistance began. Later this was organised into the pro-independence TPN (Tentara Pembebasan Nasional – National Liberation Army) (Singh 2008). Despite the popular myth of West Papuans resisting the might of the Indonesian army with bows and arrows, overwhelmingly resistance to Indonesian rule in West Papua has been through the cultural sphere and popular nonviolent civilian based struggle.

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One of the antecedents for more mass-based nonviolent resistance is the work of the cultural music group Mambesak established by West Papuan anthropologist and musician Arnold Ap in the 1970s and 1980s. Ap's project of cultural revitalization and cognitive liberation was far-reaching at a time when to refer to oneself as Melanesian or West Papuan was considered politically subversive. Through collecting and performing traditional West Papuan songs and dances, Mambesak and Arnold Ap helped create the consciousness of a shared national identity that was other than Indonesian before he was assassinated in 1984. The most popular expression of nonviolent resistance to Indonesian rule has been the raising of the Morning Star flag, the banned symbol of the West Papuan independence movement and a symbol of national and cultural identity. There have been countless actions of this type since the 1960s, many of which have resulted in harsh repression by the security forces (MacLeod 2007b).

### **Strategic Actions:**

Following the fall of Suharto in 1998, popular civilian resistance to Indonesian rule in West Papua erupted. After years of military rule under Suharto it was as if the lid was taken off long-repressed desires for freedom. Dissent took the form of raising the Morning Star flag, large demonstrations, and the formation of human rights and pro-independence organisations. Despite decades of military rule and the appearance of passivity created by widespread repression, the movement quickly gained popular support. Following a series of informal meetings in West Papua and Jakarta in 1999, FORERI, (Forum Rekonsiliasi Rakyat Irian Jaya [the Forum for Reconciliation of the People in Irian Jaya], an organisation established in August 1998 by a broad cross-section of Papuan civil society leaders) organised a team of 100 civil society leaders to travel to Jakarta to meet Indonesian President Habibie (Chauvel 2005).

In the meeting with Habibie the leaders of Team 100, a group widely considered to represent the best and brightest of Papuan society, announced they wanted independence from Jakarta. As soon as the word "independence" was mentioned, however, dialogue stopped right there. Stunned and clearly misinformed about the depth and extent of discontent in West Papua, Habibie put aside his prepared response and appealed to the Papuan delegation to reconsider their desire to separate from Indonesia.

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Although there was no clear outcome from the meeting, the Papuan struggle had exploded onto centre stage and the team returned home to a hero's welcome (King 2004; Chauvel 2005).

After the Team 100 meeting, the movement for merdeka (freedom and for many Papuans, independence), divided into two parts: a parallel government wing and a nongovernmental civil society wing. Political activists formed the Dewan Presidium Papua (Papua Presidium Council, which went by the acronym PDP), a parallel government consisting of a 500-member panel representing geographic areas and a 31-member executive representing key social constituencies. Most of the executive was based in Jayapura, the capital. The PDP emerged at a time of openness under the Indonesian president, Habibie and his successor, Abdurrahman Wahid, and when the central government had not consolidated its power after the fall of Suharto. The PDP formed after two popular consultations involving tens of thousands of Papuans, some of whom walked for a month to attend the gatherings. For the first time the long-banned Morning Star flag flew free. At the same time, members of the churches and civil society organisations active in human rights advocacy established Elsham (the Institute for the Study and Advocacy of Human Rights). Elsham, which was based inside West Papua, immediately began creating and mobilising a well-connected domestic network of investigators who were linked into an international network of advocates (MacLeod 2007b).

West Papuan moderates and Indonesian allies who lived in West Papua took advantage of the political space that had opened up and began drafting a far-reaching Special Autonomy package that incorporated many Papuan aspirations for change and could be realized within the framework of the Indonesian state. By 2001 Special Autonomy had become law. By then the Indonesian state had begun to re-consolidate power. Many in the central government felt that Special Autonomy conceded too much to the independence movement, so while some Papuan demands were embraced, repression was renewed by the new Indonesian government led by Megawati Sukarnoputri against the more hard-line independence activists. Five prominent civil society activists were jailed and later released. In November 2001, one of the five previously arrested, the chair of the PDP, Theys Eluay, was assassinated.

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These attempts by the state to weaken the independence movement were largely successful. In the face of state repression, the PDP collapsed with no clear substitute. The capacity of Elsham to continue its advocacy declined after the Indonesian military won a defamation court case and the organization's charismatic international spokesperson, John Rumbiak, was forced into exile and suffered a stroke.

In recent years the underground movement has begun to reorganize. Civil society groups continue to find room to work for change but their political space to do so has been greatly reduced. Ex-PDP activists have eschewed overt politics and instead formed the Dewan Adat Papua (DAP – the Council of Customary Leaders) under the rubric of indigenous rights and recognition. However, many within the DAP see themselves as pursuing an agenda for change through strengthening indigenous governance and promoting indigenous rights. The churches (both Catholic and Protestant) have played a leadership role through developing the “Papua Land of Peace” campaign calling for dialogue, demilitarization and respect for human rights. The churches are one of the few organisations since 1996 that have persistently and consistently raised a collective critical voice.

### **Ensuing Events:**

The 2001 Special Autonomy package was designed to support greater Papuan self-rule but within the framework of the Indonesian state. Under Special Autonomy tax revenue generated by resource projects that previously went to the central government in Jakarta was supposed to be returned to the provincial government in West Papua. The legislation also allowed Papuan symbols, like the Morning Star flag, previously associated with the independence movement and banned by the government, to be displayed. Structural mechanisms like an indigenous senate (known as the MRP – Majelis Rakyat Papua) were instituted to facilitate a measure of Papuan self-rule. However, in recent years this success has been undermined, partly by lack of capacity within the civil service, but mostly because of a failure by the provincial and central governments to implement the various legal mechanisms that would enable policy to be operationalised. Progress towards self-rule and democratic transition has been further hampered by disunity in the movement, endemic corruption by local Papuan leaders at the level of local regencies and provincial governments, a culture

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of impunity and ongoing human rights violations by the Indonesian police and military, and a confusing and contradictory policy mix that has seen Jakarta divide the territory into two separate administrative areas. The nonviolent movement for self-determination and independence continue but competition and factionalism among resistance organisations has mitigated against success.

There are signs, however, of an emerging unity. In October 2010 the two previous competing coalitions, the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation (made up of some 20 resistance groups) and Papua Consensus (comprising the West Papua National Authority, PDP, and DAP) formed the office for the Papuan Nation (Sekretariat Bangsa Papua or SeBaPa) to facilitate greater communication and coordination between the two coalitions. The reconciliation of the two coalitions was facilitated by the work of Father Neles Tebay, a Catholic priest and journalist who has set up the Papuan Peace Network (Jaringan Damai Papua or JDP). However, at the time of writing in April 2011 the Churches, some student groups, and a new group, ForDem (Forum Demokrasi – Forum for Democracy) remain outside SeBaPa. Regardless of the remaining differences among the multitude of groups comprising the West Papua movement, all resistance groups and the churches, which together represent the overwhelming majority of Papuan opinion, appear united around a single intermediary goal: to reject Special Autonomy (known in West Papua as Otsus). To this end, DAP organised the first mass action in 2005, mobilizing ten-thousand people to hand back Otsus, which was symbolized by a coffin carried through the streets of Jayapura. In 2010, a reinvigorated movement organised by ForDem brought networks of groups together to return Otsus to Jakarta. The campaign culminated with a march of some 25,000 Papuans and a two-day occupation of the local provincial parliament by several thousand. This occupation represented a new target of civic pressure, because instead of demanding Jakarta or the international community do something, Papuans were getting their own house in order by demanding their own elected leaders hold a special session of parliament to debate whether Otsus had failed or not (MacLeod 2010). Tangible change, however, has been slow, and after a mass occupation of parliament it was difficult for Papuan leaders of the civil resistance to escalate the struggle. The churches have called for members of the all-Papuan MRP to resign and for the international community to withhold funds for Special Autonomy. The central government in Jakarta

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responded by replacing the current members of the MRP with those loyal to the state. At the time of writing the former chair of the MRP, Agus Alua died in circumstances deemed “strange” by key Papuan leaders close to him.

Civil resistance by Papuans has yielded some limited overtures from the Indonesian government, notably the formation of UP4B (the Unit for Accelerating Development in Papua and West Papua) as well as talk about ‘Constructive Communications’ between Jakarta and the Papuans, but there is little indication that Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhuyono has the political will to pursue genuine democratic reform in West Papua. Although the President Yudhuyono was able to successfully broker dialogue with the Achenese, represented by GAM (The Free Aceh Movement), he has not embarked on talks with West Papuans. Furthermore, if political negotiations were to occur over the future of West Papua, they would need to look very different than they did in Aceh. The Peace Agreement in Aceh was precipitated by the 2004 Asian tsunami and Jakarta’s dialogue partner was GAM, a hierarchical military organisation with a leadership living in exile. In the case of West Papua there are two key differences. For a start Papuan culture values talking and mutuality, so any talks will need a much higher degree of transparency if they are to be accepted by the majority of the people. Secondly, unlike Aceh there is not one dialogue partner in Papua, there are several. The movement in West Papua is poly-centric (Kirksey 2011). The West Papua National Authority, for instance, has widespread support in places like Biak, Manokwari and Sorong, but not in the Highlands. The National Committee for West Papua has a strong base in the highlands but not in the south of the country. Other Papuan groups have similar disparate sources of support. Any dialogue therefore will need to include multiple dialogue partners. The Papuan Peace Network led by Fr. Neles Tebay is supporting coordination amongst these different groups.

While the Papuans continue to pressure for change from within there have also been international developments related to the West Papuan conflict. In October 2010 U.S congressman Eni Faleomavega (representing American Samoa) facilitated a special Congressional hearing on human rights violations. Several Papuan leaders including some of the organizers of the July 2010 mobilization attended. The hearing took place in the context of a subtle but significant shift in international norms in relation to the post-colonial immutability of state boundaries. In recent years East Timor,

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Kosovo and now Southern Sudan have all gained their independence. Although the international community and the International Court of Justice, in particular, have not gone as far as recognizing the right to self-determination, they have affirmed the right of populations to secede, particularly when faced with genocidal violence, a collapse of government, and failure of distinct ethnic groups to integrate (Matsuno 2011). Whether and how the Papuans can press home the reality of what they call a “slow motion genocide”, combined with the fact that after nearly 50 years of integration with the Indonesian state the demand for independence grows, and the near total failure of government particularly in the fields of health and education, remains to be seen.

At the time of this writing – April 2011 – Indonesian power in West Papua appears stable. As recent events in the Middle East have shown us, however, situations that appear “stable” to external observers can sometimes change quickly, particularly given the deep underlying discontent amongst ordinary Papuans. For Papuans to transform the political landscape they will need to target the ways the Indonesian government maintains power in West Papua. The Indonesian government has nine key sources of power. Firstly, and most importantly, it relies on the Indonesian security forces – the police, intelligence services and the military – whose presence in West Papua is ubiquitous. Force substitutes for political legitimacy. Secondly, the internalised beliefs of West Papuans themselves help maintain Indonesian rule. As a result of disunity, competitive Melanesian “big men” politics, internalised self-limiting beliefs such as a belief that Papuans are stupid or not capable of affecting change, tribal divisions, state neglect in education, and lack of indigenous leadership and a type of widespread conservative Christian evangelism (with close links to the United States and Jakarta) that has focused on the hereafter rather than working for “heaven” on earth, West Papuan efforts for change have faltered. Thirdly, the Indonesian government has closed West Papua off to sustained international scrutiny, and thus has kept the violence and exploitation of the indigenous population in West Papua largely hidden from the outside world. As stated, in recent years Amnesty International, the International Committee for the Red Cross and other international nongovernmental organizations have been banned from West Papua. Fourthly, West Papua occupies a central place in Indonesia’s national imagination. A determination to retain West Papua “at all costs” unifies Indonesian opposition to West Papuan claims for

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independence. Fifthly, West Papua is resource rich and the Indonesian Government controls large-scale economic development in the province, particularly in the mining sector. Sixthly, in addition to the use of repression as a tool of control, the Indonesian Government maintains its authority through a montage of confusing and contradictory policies that have functioned to undermine opposition by generating elite competition and by playing West Papuans against one another. Ruling through local political structures run by indigenous West Papuans is the seventh way the Indonesian Government maintains control of the territory. Eighth, the Indonesian government relies on external sources of power to rule West Papua: political, economic and military support willingly provided by the Indonesian government's elite allies (the United States, Australian, English, Dutch, and Japanese governments and other ASEAN governments, in particular) and their domestic constituencies (such as workers, arms manufacturers and investors) in the societies of Indonesia's elite allies (MacLeod 2007b). Lastly, institutional racism reinforces significant social and cultural distance between West Papuans and Indonesians from other parts of the archipelago. This distance works against the creation and maintenance of effective alliances and coalitions for change. It also frustrates West Papuans' ability to influence political, social and economic elites in Jakarta.

On the positive side, since the civilian-led overthrow of the Suharto dictatorship, democracy has spread throughout other parts of Indonesia. West Papuans are now in key positions of authority in West Papua. Unfortunately, this has created a culture of competition and corruption, where indigenous elites vie for favour from Jakarta and compete against each other for position and power. The depth of democracy in Indonesia, however, is uneven.

Democracy in West Papua has shallow roots. Richard Chauvel (2008) argues that two distinct, but overlapping, political realms exist in West Papua. There are the official government structures that work with Jakarta to maintain Indonesian government policy and rule in West Papua, even when that contradicts popular aspirations, and in spite of the personal views of those in power, who often support Papuan aspirations for freedom. These structures are the central government based in Jakarta; provincial governments (there are two provinces in West Papua: Papua and Irian Jaya Barat); the Kabupaten (Regency); and the Kecamatan (local government). Operating at the

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grassroots level is the clandestine political sphere, often invisible and regularly repressed, but striving for independence. In the overlapping space are political leaders like members of the MRP who criticise the provincial and central governments and civil society activists working on campaigns of economic, social and cultural rights and issues of civil and political rights. While core grievances remain unresolved there is little doubt that mobilisation and organizing for change will continue.

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