

Indonesia's Reign of Violence in West Papua

Violence, intimidation and unlawful detentions by Indonesian security forces are common in West Papua, writes DR CAMELLIA WEBB-GANNON, the coordinator of the West Papua Project at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Sydney.

Last June I hung up the phone after a conversation with my West Papuan friend Victor Yeimo with a heavy heart. Victor is the spokesperson for a popular student organization called KNPB (West Papua National Committee) that organises peaceful protests for independence from Indonesia.

Victor was very worried for his own safety and that of his friends. The deputy of KNPB, Mako Tabuni, had just been assassinated in broad daylight by the Indonesian police, for lobbying for an independent investigation into the spate of killings that had taken place in West Papua over May and June 2012.

Several other KNPB members had been murdered, as had a German tourist in West Papua just one week after Germany had criticized Indonesia's human-rights record in West Papua in the UN periodic Review of the Human Rights Council.

The Indonesian security forces apparently scapegoated KNPB members as suspects for the killings. This was a somewhat illogical move – as Victor had asked, why would the KNPB be shooting their own members? Several KNPB members had been arrested.

Five members' names circulated on a most-wanted list, and five were allegedly detained by forces from Densus (Detachment) 88, Indonesia's counter-terrorism squad, trained and partly funded by Australia.

In addition to these killings, which took place in West Papua's largest city, Jayapura, soldiers from a battalion stationed in the highlands town of Wamena had run amok in early June, lighting fires, shooting into crowds, and vandalizing property, in retaliation for the killing of a soldier who hit a West Papuan child on his motorcycle.

The Indonesian president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, chided the soldiers for their "inappropriate actions" but called the violence "small-scale" compared to that afflicting the Middle East.

Up to 500,000 West Papuans have died as a result of Indonesia's occupation of the territory since 1962. This dire situation, paired with a characteristically inadequate response from Indonesia's leader, explains why West Papuans have had to take politics into their own hands. So, what kind of political leadership have West Papuans set up for themselves, and how has Indonesia reacted?

The Jayapura Five

I first met Forkorus Yaboisembut, the man recently declared by West Papuans to be their president, in 2008 in his home village near Sentani in West Papua. I had been driven out to meet the customary leader by some Papuan friends, in a car with tinted windows (they were afraid we would be followed), and was received warmly by both Forkorus and his wife and treated to refreshments on what was a hot and humid day.

His humility and his youthful appearance at that time were striking to me – he was a revered independence leader and a seventy-year-old man, tall, immaculately dressed, softly spoken and kind. He earnestly explained the importance to Papuans of their many indigenous cultures, which were in the process of dying, as the indigenous Melanesian population had slipped into a minority in West Papua.

My photos of that occasion are treasured, and mark a sharp contrast to the Forkorus that I see photographed now, five years later. A shock of white hair, a white beard, and deep lines of anxiety are carved into his face. I find it hard to recognize him in pictures now except for his trademark air of courage and dignity and a palpable passion for his cause. So what has happened to Forkorus that brought about these changes?

On October 19, 2011 around 5,000 West Papuans gathered near Jayapura, West Papua, for the third West Papuan National Congress – a meeting of historic significance. The previous two Congresses over the last 50 years had been held when hopes were high of impending independence for West Papua (it never eventuated).

This particular Congress had lasted for three days, and was wrapped up by Forkorus with the reading aloud of the 1961 Papua Declaration of Independence, a re-declaration of independence, and the announcement of the people's choice of a Papuan government that included Forkorus Yaboisembut as West Papua's president, and Papuan lawyer and academic Edison Waromi as its prime minister.

Two hours after formal proceedings had concluded, several hundred people remained mingling in the Congress field when Indonesian security forces commenced firing into the crowd. Up to seven people were killed and hundreds were beaten and tortured, despite the

Congress' leaders having obtained a permit to hold the event. Hundreds, including Forkorus and four other Congress leaders, were arrested. Forkorus was allegedly kicked in the chest by police and suffered beatings to his head with a rifle butt, for exercising his right to freedom of expression, association and peaceful protest.

The five leaders (the Jayapura Five) were convicted of treason in March 2012, despite Indonesia's alleged democratic credentials. The five men remained silent in response to questions from the prosecution, and maintained that they did not need to answer to an Indonesian court that had (in their view) no legal jurisdiction over them as Papuans. The trial was heavily guarded by the military.

The Papuans' lawyer was threatened for defending them, and there are serious doubts about the judge's independence. While the five were sentenced to three years' prison for treason, the only action taken against the police officers and military personnel responsible for the violent crackdown was a written warning for disciplinary infraction.

So why are events, such as the one just described, happening? Papuans are resisting Indonesian oppression for two main reasons. First, they are reacting to the violence they have been subjected to for 50 years as a result of the Indonesian occupation. Second, the resistance is also a proactive movement pursuing West Papuans' right to self-determination and hopes for freedom. In other words, the independence movement is both a reactive and a proactive one.

This is important, because it underscores the fact that even if Indonesian violence had not been inflicted on Papuans to the current extent, Papuans would still be struggling for their right to self-determination. The question is, why is it that Indonesia will not relinquish Papua or at least grant Papuans a referendum on self-determination? How is the occupation maintained? And what constitute West Papuans' aspirations?

A history of violence

Indonesia invaded West Papua in 1963, using its formidable special forces, Kopassus, as the Dutch were preparing the Papuans for independence. The appendage of West Papua was seen as a boon by

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Dr Camellia Webb-Gannon and Forkorus Yaboisembut, Jayapura 2008. PHOTO: Courtesy of the author.

Indonesia, given Papua's vast expanse of land and relatively sparse population compared to the overcrowded islands of Indonesia.

A government sponsored program of transmigration with associated cultural indoctrination programs, followed by continued spontaneous migration, has not only served to make West Papuans a minority in their own land, but has suppressed West Papuan indigenous cultures and languages. It forcibly removed West Papuans from their land, destroyed sacred environmental landmarks, cornered West Papuans out of business and other career opportunities, and persecuted them for cultural, religious and political practices.

Apart from nationalist beliefs among many Indonesians that West Papua and Indonesia are a single political entity due to a shared Dutch colonial heritage, West Papua is also the home to one of Indonesia's biggest revenue earners, the US-owned Freeport McMoRan gold and copper mine.

That is why Indonesia refuses to countenance West Papuans' independence aspirations and continues to run the territory with an iron fist. This is despite apparent concessions such as the 2001 Special Autonomy Law that provided better economic and political conditions for Papuans on paper, but had been pronounced a failure by Papuans in less than a decade due to a marked lack of results and political commitment.

The Indonesian occupation of West Papua depends to a large degree on its redoubtable exercise of "PSYOPS", or "PSYWAR" – psychological warfare techniques that it has used for almost five decades in its largely covert war against the West Papuan people.

In response, West Papuans have launched a relentless counter-struggle using methods such as guerilla warfare, international diplomacy, non-violent resistance and mass political action, prompting further coercive measures from the Indonesian government and security forces. Methods used by the occupying forces include torture, ever-expanding military deployments, including of Densus 88, and other terrifying psychological warfare – to contain the resistance through fear.

An independence activist, Markus Haluk, whom I came to know during a visit to West Papua in 2008, issued a report in 2009 on security forces attempts to dissuade him and other activists from their resistance

activities.

Haluk and his friends had been sent numerous SMS threats and phone calls and received nasty "souvenirs" such as blood-soaked letters. They witnessed staged hostage takings in supermarkets intended to strike fear into activists, and were continually followed and spied upon.

Ardiansyah Matra, a journalist in Merauke, West Papua, who was reporting on the controversial Merauke Food Estate Project near local election time, and who was found dead in a river in 2010, had also received a number of SMS threats regarding his work. One of his colleagues subsequently reported that he too had received an SMS death threat for investigative articles.

The threatening presence of Kopassus and other security forces is constantly made known to West Papuans through intimidating and intrusive surveillance. From the TNI (Indonesian military forces) houses that are wedged between Papuan houses in Papuan villages and TNI checkpoints at the entrance to villages, to the strategic placement of terrifying statues of troops in public places, West Papuans are made to feel the presence of Indonesian security forces in their everyday activities.

During my 2008 visit, I noticed that Indonesian troops even monitored church services and church-provided clinics, and asserted their presence by taking early morning runs and singing nationalistic songs loudly as they jogged, reminding West Papuans who controls the public space.

When visiting the highlands town of Wamena, I was witness to the sudden shut down of a lavishly planned church opening-ceremony by 20 police trucks and army troops parading through town and blaring sirens before dispersing crowds. It is easy to see why, in the face of such ubiquitous violence that pervades all aspects of West Papuans' lives, they have hopes for a different kind of future.

What do Papuans hope for?

Spending even a short amount of time with West Papuans produces the rapid realisation that the word merdeka, directly translated as freedom, is the mantra for the independence movement. Merdeka encapsulates the future for which Papuans hope.

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The word itself is controversial amongst non-Papuan scholars and some Papuan supporters of Indonesia who have an interest in seeing Papua remain part of Indonesia. This group claims merdeka does not mean political freedom but instead refers to basic everyday freedoms or spiritual freedom only.

According to the vast majority of West Papuans with whom I have come into contact, however, merdeka represents the whole package – political independence; freedom from direct, structural and cultural violence; spiritual freedom; and the ability to self-actualize and community-actualize.

One of the reasons merdeka does not just signify simple daily freedoms (such as the freedom to hunt and garden on traditional lands, or the freedom to have a stall at the marketplace rather than a floor space) is because the West Papuan struggle for peace with justice is not simply a negative or reactive one to Indonesian violence, but a positive one for fundamental political self-determination.

West Papuans are ethnically Melanesian and culturally have more in common with their Melanesian neighbours in Papua New Guinea than they do with their Asian Indonesian neighbours. This includes similar understandings and an appreciation of land and water, other resources, relationships, customs, family, food, song and dance.

The vast majority of West Papuans are Christian, and many resent what they see as the Islamisation of West Papua by Indonesian migrants who outnumber them in their homeland. Nevertheless, many Muslim West Papuans are firm supporters of West Papuan independence.

Even if Dutch colonisation of Indonesia had not ravaged West Papua with its military and transmigration programs, West Papua would not have been negatively predisposed to Indonesian nationalism, probably Papuans would have still crafted a "Melanesian" style nationalism, similar to its neighbours to the east, rather than an Indonesian nationalism as per the islands to its west.

Elements of merdeka are thus infused with Melanesian nationalism. Some proponents of an independent West Papua call West Papua "West Melanesia" to more closely tie Papua to its cultural heritage.

West Papuans hope that merdeka will bring safety

and security, employment and health facilities, cultural and linguistic protection, freedom of religious expression and freedom of association, environmental integrity and political freedom. All of which are limited or even nonexistent within the current Indonesian regime. Political independence cannot be separated from the goal of merdeka; it is its bottom line. This is one of the strongest political views currently uniting West Papuans.

Papuans are working hard to obtain their goal of political self-determination. They hope that a solution will be brokered by the UN or an international third party mediator, via a dialogue process or a referendum on independence.

The use of social media is remarkable, including the leaking of YouTube videos depicting torture. The development of global networks is strengthening and there are now campaigns such as International Parliamentarians for West Papua and International Lawyers for West Papua. Public protests within West Papua are gaining a critical mass.

When non-violent student leaders are assassinated, and political leaders are convicted of treason for exercising their democratic rights, it is little wonder that West Papuans insist ever more strongly upon independence from Indonesia. An indomitable spirit of resilience and hope amongst West Papuans at home and abroad

will overcome Indonesian violence and realise their human rights.

This spirit should be met by us as West Papua's nearest neighbours with solidarity and courage. We need to lobby the Australian government to stop training Indonesia's counter-terrorism forces. Densus 88 is meting out at least some of the current violence in West Papua. Let us match the Papuans' courage – this should not be too hard considering we have far less to lose. R

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