

Papuans

Close to 2 million Papuans live in Indonesia (1,460,846 according to the 2000 Indonesia census), mainly in the western segment of the island of New Guinea, in the two Indonesian provinces of Papua Barat (formerly West Irian Jaya and renamed in February 2007, though the name change still needs to be confirmed by government regulation) and Papua. Most of them are Christians, at least nominally, since many continue animist practices which are not recognized or acknowledged by Indonesian authorities under its policy of Pancasila. Having settled here as a result of a series of migration waves, they constitute numerous groups, many of which are quite small, representing perhaps over 200 distinct Papuan languages. The majority – though not all – of them live in rural areas, dependent primarily on subsistence agriculture with some cash cropping.

Historical context

The indigenous Papuans are thought to have inhabited the island of Papua for perhaps over 40,000 years.

That the western part of Papua is a part of Indonesia is a happenstance of colonial history. In 1828, in order to separate the Dutch East Indies from the British empire's holdings in the South Pacific, and to avoid leaving any unclaimed areas for the potential interest of the German latecomers to European colonialism, the Dutch proclaimed anything west of 141 degrees to be Dutch territory. The part of the island which lay to the east of this line, Papua New Guinea, was mostly administered as an Australian colony on behalf of the British empire.

The Dutch basically ignored Western New Guinea until the mid-twentieth century. But during the Indonesian independence struggle after the Second World War, the Netherlands refused to hand it over to the Indonesians directly, partly because of its presumed natural resources and partly because the Dutch envisaged the need for a refuge for their Outer Island collaborators after Indonesian independence. Under strong pressure from Jakarta, with the tacit backing of the United States, the Dutch agreed to hand over West Irian Jaya to temporary Indonesian administration in 1963, with the proviso that the United Nations be allowed to supervise a referendum on independence by 1969.

Large portions of the indigenous population may have been unaware of any of these developments, and the Indonesian-administered 1969 'Act of Free Choice' was widely considered to be such a charade that the UN only 'took note' rather than 'endorsed' the outcome. In the years before 1969, all expressions of pro-independence sentiment by the Papuans were brutally suppressed by the Indonesian military, and 1,025 'representatives' selected by Indonesia and kept under military guard conducted the actual vote. In 1967, two years before the 'Act of Free Choice', the government of Indonesia had signed an

agreement with US company Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold Inc. to open one of the world's largest open-cut mines. The agreement, extended in 1991, will expire in 2021.

From the 1970s, mainly through the Indonesian government's *transmigrasi* programme, perhaps as many as 1 million migrants from other Indonesia islands settled in the provinces of Papua Barat and Papua. Especially since the acceleration of the *transmigrasi* programme from the 1980s, it is these Indonesian settlers and migrants who mainly occupy the best civil service positions and technical jobs. The government resource exploitation and development policies started in earnest in the 1980s to reallocate land and resources away from the indigenous Papuans.

Free Papua Movement

Some members of the Papuan minority had from the early 1960s opposed Indonesian rule, despite apparent UN and Western sanctions of the so-called 'Act of Free Choice'. Many joined the Free Papua Movement (or OPM) which in 1971 proclaimed a Provisional Revolutionary Government of West Papua. The overwhelming strength of the Indonesian army ensured that the OPM did not make any military gains, yet the impact of the *transmigrasi* programme and the discriminatory exclusion of ethnic Papuans ensured that support for the rebel group continued.

From the 1970s, mining has become of considerable importance, especially at the Mt. Ertsberg gold and copper mine of the Freeport Corporation. New mines opened in the 1990s and mineral products (including oil) represented more than 90 per cent of the value of all exports from West Papua. Little of that income remained in the province and few Melanesians (less than 15 per cent at Freeport's mine) were employed in the mining industry, or in the public service or the commercial sector.

From the 1970s the OPM and other members of the Papuan minority began to target some of these mining, logging or palm oil plantation activities, which they saw as devastating their lands and serving only Indonesian interests. In 1977 Freeport's pipeline to the coast was blown up. There have been repeated outbreaks of violence since then between the OPM and the Indonesian army, which was also hired to protect the Freeport mine. Torture, extra-judicial executions, bombing of Papuan villages by the Indonesian forces and even the use of napalm took place during this period.

The fall of Suharto in 1998 and the ensuing 'Reformasi' movement raised hopes of a radical departure from previous Indonesian policies. In 2000 Papuans held a congress calling for independence: there was a violent response from the Indonesian military against supporters of independence. One of the most prominent pro-independence leaders at the time Theys Eluay, was murdered by Indonesian special forces (KOPASSUS) in 2001. However, Papua was granted 'special autonomy status' in 2000, though the implementation has remained not lived up to expectations. The region was also divided in 2001 into two separate provinces: Papua and Irian Jaya Barat. Even this limited autonomy may be too late, as

some population estimates suggest that Papuans now make up less than 50 per cent of the population of both provinces.

Current issues

In resource-rich West Papua, authorities continue to clamp down, sometimes violently, on indigenous peoples' activists peacefully seeking greater autonomy or independence. Many Papuans claim that the central government has failed to decentralize the full range of governance responsibilities to the region, and there has been little improvement in the delivery of basic services and rights as promised. In 2011, the Indonesian government announced that it would conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of Papua's special autonomy, but this effort received little traction.

Peaceful activists are being arrested by the thousands, amid regular reports of arbitrary killings, rapes and violence perpetrated by the Indonesian army and police. West Papua's independence movement is increasingly urban and educated, applying non-violent means to further their cause, with a growing number of youths using social media to campaign against the Indonesian occupation. Yet the official response to these activities continues to be characterized by violence. This included, in December 2015, the killing of four high school students when the military and police opened fire on a crowd of protesters in the eastern province. Jokowi was roundly criticized for his inefficient response to the incident.

In April 2016, Chief security affairs minister, Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, announced that a task force that included Komnas HAM and the national police would investigate eleven high profile cases of human rights abuses in the provinces. The cases included incidents in Wasior in 2001 and Wamena in 2003 where military and police crackdowns left dozens of civilians dead; investigations by Komnas HAM have already concluded that strong indications of crimes against humanity were committed through police torture, but the case had stalled with the Attorney General. Since the announcement of the task force, however, there were no details on how the investigations would proceed, and local human rights groups have publicly expressed their lack of faith in a government-led investigation, particularly as its formation involved no consultation with the community.

Papuans also remain vastly under-represented in economic and political terms. Land concessions for mining and logging and plantations have been granted without any compensation or concern for the consequences on the environment and local Papuan communities. Coupled with the deployment of many security and military personnel to push through these developments, the impacts have been devastating.

Updated January 2018.