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On Papuan Nationalism

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ABSTRACT

This article sheds light on the political and cultural dimensions of the ongoing conflict between the government of Indonesia and the people of the Papua region. The study has been organized into three sections to unravel the contradictory perspectives of the Indonesian government and Papuan separatists on Papuan problematique. First, it critically observes the political and security priorities of colonial and post-colonial governments to hegemonize the Papuan region in the name of national, regional, and international security. Second, it analyzes the genesis of Papuan nationalism with emphasis on the diverse and complex tribal culture of the Papua region against increasingly repressive Indonesian state centrism. Finally, it examines the strategic move of the Indonesian government to promote transmigration through the policy of Indonesianization or Javanization in the Papua region to assimilate the indigenous Papuans with the mainland.

Keywords: Papua; Cold War; Transmigration; Indonesianization; Self-Rule; Sovereignty

INTRODUCTION

There has long been a struggle over Papua: between the Dutch, German, and British colonial powers in the 18th and 19th centuries; between Indonesians and the Dutch from 1945 to 1962; between Australia and Indonesia from 1950 to 1962; and between the Papua Liberation Army and Indonesia from 1962 till date¹. It is fact that the Papua region has tremendous geopolitical and economic importance associated with its territory, but what has been neglected so far is the security dimension of the unresolved conflict². It is enthralling to note that what initially kept Papua on the global map was not its abundant natural resources but its security and strategic significance. Validating this argument, Richard Chauvel observed that the Dutch had pressed hard to keep Papua under their control and surveillance, driven by political reasons³. Purely on security grounds, Australia also extended support to the Dutch to deny Papua to Indonesia

between the late 1940s and early 1960s. Here, Australia intended to establish a strategically significant security corridor between a fragile Indonesia and itself through the Papua region to avoid sharing a land border with Indonesia in its colony, Papua New Guinea⁴.

Later, the USA entered the Papua region with specific geo-strategic interest. While Papua was under the Dutch control, Indonesia has also sought the US, the British and the Australian support to back Indonesia's ownership of Papua, again principally on grounds of security. This move could well be understood with cold war environment where US wanted Indonesia to keep aloof from the Soviet camp and denying Soviet Union an easy access to Indonesia⁵. Since then, considering the cold war driven insecurities, Australia and Southeast Asian countries have supported Indonesia's hold of Papua. Indonesia under the reigns of all Presidents including Sukarno, Suharto, Baharuddin Jusuf Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati Sukarnoputri,



Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Joko Widodo, the same security priorities were continued. This was because of the fear that a fragmented Indonesia would be worse for all. Thus, the security factor has been considered as pivotal and uppermost reason which has single-handedly determined Papuan issue thus far.

Reasserting the significance of the security milieu at the backdrop of understanding Papuan issues, Balveer Singh highlighted majorly six factors. First, the historical injustice that the Papuans had been undergone due to the Cold War priorities of external forces. Second, continuous human rights violations of the Indonesian government in the Papuan region. Third, the incapability of the government of Indonesia and unwillingness to resolve the conflict. Fourth, the security situation in Papua has been deteriorating, with opportunities for the secessionists to operate and terrify Indonesia. Fifth, the conflict is increasingly threatening the interests of the key external stakeholders, be it the economic and strategic interests of the United States and China or the United Kingdom, or the security interests of Australia and Papua New Guinea as well. Finally, the emergence of Papua within Indonesia as a potential source for regional instability¹.

SPECIFICITIES OF PAPUAN CULTURE AND PAPUAN NATIONALISM

The crux of the Papuan political demands and how they have come to be viewed by Papuans would only be understood by interrogating their sociocultural and economic attributes. Geographically, Papua is the largest province of Indonesia, and it occupies a land area of 421,981 square kilometers, which constitutes 21.9% of the total land area in the country⁶. The 2020 Census revealed a Papuan population of 4,303,707, but the official estimate for mid-2022 was 4,418,581⁷. Indonesian Citizenship and Civil Registry data in the year 2022 shows that 70.15% of the Papuans demographically identified themselves as Christians, 29.56% are Muslims, and less than 1% are Hindus and Buddhists. What is clearly evident is the dominance of the Christians, namely, the Protestants and Catholics, combined with the Muslims as a dominant minority⁸.

Papua, despite being the 4th richest region in terms of minerals after Jakarta, East Kalimantan, and Riau, continues to rely on primary industries and agriculture for livelihood. Mineral industries are completely state-centric, where local Papuans are neither given any job opportunities nor any shares in mineral extraction. The contract for extraction of copper, oil, gold, and gas has been given to transnational and multinational mining groups. Agip, Amoco, Esso, Conoco, Union Oil, Phillips, Mobil, and Shell are prominent among them. The majority of the mining concessions are located in the Grasberg and Ertsberg mountains, the Wissel Lakes region, the Bird's Head western tip, the Baliem Valley, and areas near the Papua New Guinea border⁹. Mt. Carstenz and

Freeport's Mt. Ertsberg mine of the Papua region are known for their huge gold and copper reserves.

Following peculiar ethnic and linguistic traits, tribal culture has always been molding the genesis of Papua nationalism. Papua is a diverse and complex society where tribal culture has always been forming the basis of Papua nationalism. The national data depicted that Papua is essentially home to 250 ethnic subgroups. Arfak, Asmat, Afiat, Amungme, Auwyu, Amberbokem, Biak, Dani, Ekari, Karabra, Kebar, Mey Brat, Jagai, Nimbora, Marindanin, Mandobo, Moi, Sarmi, Segel, Sentani, Waropen, Tobati, Segel, and Yahray are commonly spoken languages¹⁰. In his ethno-cultural analysis of the Papua region, Don Flassy has identified 7 major areas in Papua where various cultural traits are followed. These are Bomberai, Doberai, Ha-Anim, Me-Pajo, Saireri, Tabi, and Lani-Paqo¹¹.

Each sub-tribe has its own unique features and tends to be inward-looking with a lifestyle premised on traditional practices and various rituals. In fact, they maintain a simple approach towards external ideas and even authority. The unstated code of conduct of all Papuans is a simple one: "Asal jangan gangu ketenangan kami" or "as long as you do not threaten our peace"¹. Even though there are sharp cleavages among the Papuans, all of them developed a sense of belongingness to the idea of Papuanism. Failing to appreciate this will lead to a failure to understand the Papuan worldview and will amount to nothing more than touching the superficial aspects of Papuan society. Irrespective of the spatial and cultural differences, together they follow a peculiar traditional political culture based on a hierarchy of 4 power structures—the heads of tribes, the big man, the patriarchal system, and the royalty system. These structures perform administrative roles in the society. It is to be noted here that the Papuan culture thrives on the assimilation and integration of these 4 aspects to obtain a political equilibrium.

INDONESIANIZATION THROUGH TRANSMIGRATION

From 1963 onwards, the whole process of Indonesianization of the Papua region aimed at political and cultural control over the lives of Papuans. In the same year, looking at the strategic and security significance of the issue, the United Nations had intervened and established a Temporary Executive Administration for Papua, through which a referendum, the Act of Free Choice, was arranged to decide the future of Papua. But the referendum did not democratically represent the will of the Papuan people, as there was no universal suffrage, and it was closely monitored by the Indonesian military. Moreover, the Indonesian government chose anti-Papua activists from the region while publicizing that dissenting voices in the referendum would not be tolerated. This threatening was also backed up by strafing of villages, intimidation, arrest, and imprisonment



of local Papuans¹². Only selected Papuan representatives were given a chance to speak, and not surprisingly, in an environment of surveillance and intimidation, 100% decided to join the Republic of Indonesia¹³.

One of the elements in the Indonesianization program was transmigration, which attracted mainlanders to the Papua province, and it, in turn, made the Papuans a minority in their own homeland. Transmigration is basically a state-sponsored program intended to change the demographic characteristics of the region. In addition, Indonesia incentivized migration of non-Papuans to the region, and that resulted in a migrant population of 770,000 by the year 2003¹⁴. Due to which the province has witnessed the fastest growth in demographic figures. It is evident that through transmigration government wanted to promote homogenization, where all are obliged to adopt Indonesian culture and speak the national language, so that it is easier to exert central control and preserve centralism. Coupling with the transmigration project, the government had started plantation and new development-induced activities that have led to vast environmental destruction. Such homogenizing practices destroyed the indigenous customs, traditions, and cultures in Papua.

The Indonesianization of the Papua region has brought in severe cultural and political implications for Papuans. Since the inception, relations between the people of Papua and mainland Indonesia have revealed a large-scale cultural gap, making it difficult for Papuans to assimilate. Therefore, cultural and social gaps have resulted in cultural antagonism and disintegration, which gradually developed into political disintegration. The whole idea of demands for independence has grown from this phase, and Papuan separatists have been strongly voicing it through several channels. To be precise, cultural divisions driven by homogenization policies of the national government sparked separatist movements across the West Papua region. Coalitions of two resistance groups - the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation and Papua Consensus - have been emphasizing dialogue without conditions over the political status of Papua. It is clear that the desired goal for all Papuans is a free state.

The advent of the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM), a separatist group popularly known as the Free Papuan Movement, has had adverse impacts. But it attracted thousands of Papuans to the OPM because of its intense resistance to migrants and the ire it maintains towards the transmigration program of the Indonesian government. The OPM constantly waged day and night assaults on the migrants. This has again created a cultural and political rift between indigenous people and the transmigrant population. The evolution of OPM from a protest platform to violent separatist groups has also made the government tighten its grip over Papua. Over time, the relationship between the two groups has grown more contentious. The Papuan resistance, collectively known as the West Papuan

opposition, has been seeking answers to 5 core questions, including i) the historical injustice. Opposition groups think that the handing over of Papuan to Indonesia from the Dutch was fundamentally unfair, ii) state-sponsored human rights violations, iii) socially and environmentally disastrous development projects, iv) transmigration, and v) marginalization of indigenous people and institutional racism¹⁵.

Responding to the grievances, the government of Indonesia set up a special autonomy package in 2001 to support greater Papuan self-rule but within the framework of the Indonesian state. Another provision in the package was the establishment of autonomy on tax revenue. According to this financial grievance, the tax revenue generated from the Papuan region should be returned to the provincial government in West Papua. Moreover, the package allowed Papuans to use symbols like the Morning Star flag, which they treat as the guiding light of the Free Papua Movement. A structural mechanism like Majelis Rakyat Papua, an indigenous senate, was also established to facilitate self-rule for the Papuans. However, these progresses have been undermined, partly by a lack of cooperation between both parties and partly by a lack of capacity within the civil service, which, in fact, makes the issue remain unsettled for decades.

SUMMARY

The Papua region of Indonesia, which includes the provinces of Papua and West Papua, has experienced ongoing tensions stemming from historical annexation disputes, political exclusion, economic stagnation, and violations of human rights¹⁶. Achieving a sustainable resolution requires a multifaceted approach that includes political reforms, inclusive development, respect for human rights, and authentic dialogue. It is crucial to engage in a national dialogue that incorporates Papuan representatives, including those who support independence. Previous initiatives have frequently marginalized significant voices or have been merely symbolic in nature¹⁷. Such dialogue should occur under unbiased mediation and focus on rebuilding trust. The legitimacy of Indonesia's claim over Papua, established through the 1969 "Act of Free Choice," remains contentious and is regarded by many Papuans as invalid¹³. Recognizing this grievance without necessarily reopening territorial discussions could facilitate reconciliation. The Special Autonomy Law (Otsus), enacted in 2001, granted Papua increased autonomy; however, its implementation has been inadequate and poorly supervised¹⁸. Amending Otsus to enhance local governance and resource control, coupled with robust accountability measures, can help restore trust. The significant military presence in Papua often results in allegations of misconduct and heightens tensions¹⁹. A gradual demilitarization strategy, accompanied by enhanced civilian oversight and human rights monitoring, is essential. Despite its wealth of natural resources, Papua faces high



levels of poverty and low human development indicators.

Economic strategies should prioritize education, health-care, and infrastructure that serve local communities instead of merely focusing on extractive industries²⁰. It is crucial to respect and promote Papuan cultural identities to foster social cohesion. This entails incorporating indigenous languages and histories into educational curricula and acknowledging customary land rights²¹. Establishing capable and corruption-free local institutions is essential. Emphasis must be placed on training, resources, and transparency mechanisms to empower local governments¹⁸. Civil society organizations, including religious groups and youth organizations, are vital in peacebuilding efforts. Their active participation in the planning and oversight of development programs is essential²². Engaging neutral international entities to monitor human rights and facilitate discussions can enhance credibility and mitigate concerns of bias¹⁷. To confront historical injustices, truth and reconciliation processes can aid in healing. This involves documenting past atrocities and providing reparations to victims²³. Addressing the Papua issue necessitates Indonesia's ability to reconcile national integrity with democratic values and human rights. By tackling both the symptoms and underlying causes of unrest—political exclusion, economic inequality, and cultural marginalization—Indonesia can progress towards a peaceful and equitable resolution for Papua.

In addition to all such suggestions, it is to be understood that over the years, Papua region has been transformed into an internal colony where the indigenous traditions and culture are undermined, migrants are targeted by the separatist groups, its rich resources are voraciously exploited, economically marginalised, environment degraded, and the people are politically underrepresented. The possible two ways to resolve the ongoing Papuan crisis are, first, the involvement of international community to pressurise Indonesia to arrive an international consensus to end its continued human rights violations in the region and to revisit the self-determination process as happened in East Timor. Second, government of Indonesia and separatist groups must develop a peaceful environment in the region to effectively implement packages mentioned in the Special Autonomy.

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