

Strategic Analysis Paper

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Perspectives on Papua: Will Indonesia Loosen its Grip?

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Key Points

- The coming months will likely see the issue of West Papuan independence reignite due to the expiry of special autonomy laws and independence developments in Bougainville.
- The potential economic output of West Papua for Indonesia and a lack of international support will continue to work against the independence movement.
- In the current geopolitical climate, concerns over China's regional influence will heighten sensitivities surrounding the potential vulnerability of an independent West Papua.
- While Indonesia may face increased pressure from Pacific Island countries over West Papua, Jakarta can adopt a number of strategies to counter that pressure.
- For the foreseeable future, the Indonesian Government will continue its strategy of exerting military control while promising economic development to suppress calls for independence.

Summary

The issue of independence in West Papua¹ is likely to come to the fore again in coming months as the 2001 Law on Special Autonomy in Papua is set expire in November 2021.

¹ In this paper, the term West Papua is used to refer to all of western New Guinea, which incorporates both of the provinces of Papua and West Papua.

After a discussion among its own ministers, the Indonesian Government has already made its position clear and will continue providing special autonomy funds and extend the timeframe of West Papua's special autonomy laws. That decision drew the ire of Benny Wenda, Chair of the United Liberation Movement of West Papua, [who wrote](#):

In 1969, after the fake "vote" to legitimate Indonesia's colonisation of West Papua, Indonesia promised we would be an autonomous region within Indonesia. As an "autonomous" region for the next 30 years, hundreds of thousands of West Papuans, including most of my family, were killed by the Indonesian military and police. From the brutal military operations in the Papuan highlands of 1977-81 ("Operation Koteka" and "Operation Clean Sweep") to the mass killing, rape and torture of hundreds on Biak Island in 1998, this fake "autonomy" for us meant one thing – genocide.

Violence between the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and a number of West Papuan groups is a frequent occurrence, with a number of clashes taking place in 2019 resulting in at least 15 casualties. Widespread protests also took place in August 2019 following an incident in the Javanese city of Surabaya, where 43 Papuan students were arrested by police over claims they had slandered the Indonesian flag while onlookers hurled racist insults and chanted for the Papuans to be kicked out or slaughtered. The subsequent protests saw a number of government and commercial buildings destroyed or set alight.

This paper will examine the Indonesian Government's perspective of the West Papua independence movement and its interests in maintaining sovereign control over the territory, despite growing tensions and escalating violence.

Analysis

Experiences with Timor-Leste

Some parallels can be drawn between the situation in West Papua today and Indonesia's past experience with Timor-Leste. While occupying Timor-Leste, the Indonesian Government faced a campaign of resistance from groups of Timorese fighters; arbitrary arrests with sham trials were conducted and allegations of human rights abuses surfaced. Indonesia's approach to the current West Papua situation shares a number of similarities. In both cases, the Indonesian Government has responded with military force, while simultaneously trying to appease the populace by contributing to the region's economic development. Given those similarities, it is perhaps striking that Indonesia has continued to maintain control over West Papua long after it lost sovereignty over Timor-Leste.

There is a crucial difference between West Papua and Timor-Leste, however, which has led to two very different outcomes for both regions: Timor-Leste was never included within the boundaries of the former Dutch East Indies which forms Indonesia today. Rather, it was a colony of Portugal and, when Timor-Leste declared independence in 1975, Indonesia soon invaded and occupied the country for the next 24 years. West Papua, on the other hand, was always included within the boundaries of the Dutch East Indies and, while it was initially

withheld from Indonesia during the handover in 1949, it was later incorporated into Indonesia, in 1963. Due to those differences, the argument of Indonesian sovereignty has held much more weight in the eyes of the international community than it did in the case of Timor-Leste. Consequently, Indonesia will likely continue to hold on to West Papua with as much fierceness as it did with Timor-Leste, if not more.

Some of the political factors that led to Timor-Leste's successful independence are also not present in West Papua's struggle. The occupation of Timor-Leste took place under a single leader, President Suharto, a strongman who seized power from his predecessor and ruled Indonesia under the New Order dictatorship. Motivated by his drive to dismantle communism, Suharto initiated the occupation to prevent Timor-Leste from turning into a communist state. After being embarrassed by international exposure of the Dili Massacre and the resignation of Suharto six years later, the post-New Order government of B.J. Habibie no longer had the political will to maintain control over Timor-Leste. Eight months into his presidency, Habibie announced that there would be a referendum on independence later that year. The notion of Indonesian control of West Papua, on the other hand, has been upheld by all of Indonesia's seven presidents.

What is at Stake

There is one major factor behind Indonesia's interest in maintaining sovereignty over West Papua: the economic value of the land. West Papua, which includes both of the provinces of Papua and West Papua, has a land mass of 450,000 km², accounting for almost one-quarter of Indonesia's total land mass. That land is also rich in resources and contains vast mineral deposits, especially of gold and copper, and large fields of oil and gas, as well as large swathes of rainforest suitable for producing palm oil, Indonesia's largest commodity export.

According to [2019 figures](#), the combined provinces of Papua and West Papua accounted for 1.7 per cent of Indonesia's Gross Regional Domestic Product and the value of exports from ports in those provinces made up 0.7 per cent of Indonesia's total export value. Those figures are surprisingly small given that, in terms of production, the Grasberg mine in Papua is one of the world's largest gold and copper mines. In fact, the contribution of both provinces to Indonesia's economy is similar to that of West Sumatra, which is a much smaller province in comparison and does not contain the vast amount of mineral resources seen in West Papua. There are many factors which contribute to West Papua's low economic output, including poor infrastructure and the [exploitative nature](#) of resource extraction that has seen little return for the local populace.

Despite its low economic output, the value of West Papua to Indonesia should not be understated. There is still significant potential for the region to become a major contributor to Indonesia's economic growth. The Grasberg mine alone is likely reason enough in Jakarta's eyes to maintain firm control of Papua province. For most of Grasberg's operation, the state-owned aluminium smelting company, Inalum, only held a 9.36 per cent share, while the remainder was held by US mining company Freeport-McMoRan. After pressure from President Joko Widodo, Freeport inked an agreement in 2018 that saw Indonesia's stake go up to 51.23 per cent, which includes a ten per cent stake owned by a Papuan mining company. The Indonesian Government, therefore, clearly sees Papua as a source of

potential long-term economic benefit, and is unlikely to loosen its grip, especially after fighting for its stake in the Grasberg mine.

Fears of Balkanisation

As discussed in a previous FDI [Strategic Analysis Paper](#), separatism has been a major security concern for the Indonesian Government. In the case of Timor-Leste, there were concerns that by granting independence, other separatist groups across Indonesia would be inspired. In a sense, those concerns were validated. The 1999 referendum in East Timor, which resulted in the withdrawal of Indonesian forces, did inspire secessionist movements in the economically strategic provinces of Aceh, Riau (which produced half of Indonesia's oil), and Papua (then known as Irian Jaya).

In the case of West Papua today, those concerns are still felt within the Indonesian Government. Ross Taylor, President and Founder of the Perth-based Indonesia Institute, [spoke to Future Directions International](#) about those concerns previously:

For Indonesia, it's not just about Papua; it's exactly that existential fear of Balkanisation. The concern among Indonesians is that if it happens in Papua, where next? What about Aceh? What about Riau? And it goes from there. At the expense of the Papuan people, who want to have their independence, the regional geopolitical implications of some future Balkanisation or breakup of Indonesia would be immense.

Regardless of whether or not that fear of balkanisation is realistic, it will continue to shape Indonesia's approach to the West Papua issue.

Another element that can be added to that fear is the delicate struggle that Indonesia faces in balancing its economic relationships with countries such as China while simultaneously pushing back against foreign influence. In the case of Timor-Leste, China was the first country to formally establish diplomatic relations with Dili soon after its independence. Since then, China has based its relationship on an approach of goodwill, and has funded the construction of a number of buildings in Timor-Leste, including the Presidential Palace, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the military residential headquarters, while establishing military-to-military links through the provision of training. The case of China's influence in Timor-Leste has been the subject of [increasing concern from analysts](#) and likely faces similar scrutiny from Indonesian observers. In the context of Indonesia's balancing act with China, Jakarta will continue to be sensitive to the fact that an independent West Papua would be much more susceptible to China's influence than it is as a component of Indonesia. In the absence of significant external pressure, therefore, it remains highly unlikely that Indonesia will grant independence to West Papua unless circumstances change dramatically and it is effectively forced to do so.

Prospects for International Support

For the independence movement to succeed in West Papua, significant levels of international support are needed. Currently, support for the Free Papua Movement (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka*, or OPM) is scarce and limited to a few Pacific Island countries,

Senegal and a handful of politicians in countries that have yet to express support. The prospect that international support will grow in any significant way is also bleak. The United Nations has so far [refused](#) to support the independence movement, taking the stance that West Papua lies within Indonesia's sovereign borders, deeming the matter an internal dispute. As a result, much of the international pressure on Indonesia has been focussed on allegations of human rights abuses in West Papua, so any increase in international pressure will be felt on that front long before support for independence. Without UN backing, it is also unlikely that any of the more influential members of the UN will sacrifice their economic and strategic relationships with Indonesia for the sake of West Papuan independence.

If there does happen to be an increase in international pressure, it will likely come from Pacific Island countries. Such pressure will be of little concern to Indonesia, however, and will be easy to manage. While Indonesia has put a renewed focus on seeking closer engagement with the South-West Pacific, there are [limited benefits](#) to that engagement and Jakarta will be coming to the table as the bigger player. Consequently, some Pacific Island countries may eventually feel more inclined to withdraw their support for West Papua rather than continuing to agitate for the much less likely prospect of Indonesia agreeing to hold an independence referendum.

Part of the motivation behind Indonesia's interest in greater engagement with the South-West Pacific, however, is to counter the perceived growing influence of China in that region. While it could be said that the demands of the Pacific Island countries are given more weight because Indonesia does not want them to turn to China for economic support, it remains unlikely that any pressure that they can bring to bear will be enough to sway Indonesia, especially since concerns of foreign influence (particularly that of China), in an independent West Papua will significantly outweigh any similar concerns that Jakarta may have about it happening in the South-West Pacific. Additionally, if international pressure does grow in the long-term future, Indonesia could adopt a similar strategy to China's handling of Taiwanese independence. While Indonesia does not have the economic weight to exert such power at this stage, [predictions](#) that Indonesia could be the world's fourth-largest economy in 2050 could see that strategy become more viable in the future, especially towards smaller, poorer Pacific Island countries.

A Distant Dream

Under the current circumstances, independence seems like a distant dream for the Papuan people. Unfortunately for them, the Indonesian Government has too much at stake and does not face enough pressure to hold an independence referendum. That is not to say that such an event is impossible, however, and the factors that have hampered independence can change. For example, if the independence movement were able to overcome disunity and adopt a tactic similar to that used in Bougainville, that is to render the Grasberg mine completely inoperable through blockades or strikes, the region will be much less of an economic boon for Indonesia. That said, given that the Papuan Regional Government now has a stake in the mine through PT Indonesia Papua Metal & Mineral, such a move may actually end up being unpopular in the local community.

For the foreseeable future, the Indonesian Government will continue its long-held strategy of enforcing military control of the region while promising economic development to its people. While West Papuans may be inspired by Bougainville's successful push for an independence referendum, that alone will not sway Jakarta towards changing its stance.

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