

Autonomy, Federalism or the Unthinkable? Indonesian Debates and the Future of West Papua

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Abstract

The Melanesian people of the Indonesian province of Papua/Irian Jaya have never accepted rule from Jakarta since they were forcibly incorporated into the unitary republic of Indonesia by President Sukarno during 1962-1963. However after the collapse of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998 it became possible for the Papuans to openly criticize Indonesian rule and for Indonesians to discuss forms of autonomy and federalism which would in principle moderate Papuans' hostility to their inclusion in the republic. Debates in Jakarta have produced a consensus in favour of offering "special autonomy" (not yet defined) to Papua-- and also to Aceh-- in addition to the "regional autonomy" which is being extended to all Indonesian provinces and regencies from January 1, 2001. Even this "ordinary" autonomy should entail a generous boost to Papua's provincial revenue and budget. However Indonesian debates and Jakarta's policy offerings have done little to reassure the Papuans, who continue to suffer violations of their rights at the same time that their new post-1998 leaders, who support a peaceful resolution of Papua's grievances, are being arrested and silenced. The Papuans remain intent on achieving independence—and with good reason.

Key Words: Papua, Indonesia, autonomy, federalism, secession

Introduction

The Dutch withheld sovereignty over West New Guinea when the rest of the Netherlands Indies was transformed into the republic of Indonesia during 1949-50. But by 1963 they no longer felt able to resist the multiple international pressures to relinquish sovereignty which they faced in New Guinea as President Sukarno stepped up a military campaign to forcibly "liberate" the territory, and Washington concluded that continuing Dutch sovereignty would radicalize Indonesian politics to the benefit of the *Partai Komunis Indonesia* and its external supporter at the time, the People's Republic of China. Thus it was that the Dutch broke their promise of a separate self-determination for the Papuans and, together with Indonesia, signed the New York Agreement of 1962, which provided for a transitional UN authority in West New Guinea leading to Indonesian control of the territory in 1963 and for a so-called Act of Free Choice in 1969, which proved to be "free of choice" in practice. From that year West Papua became the 26th province of Indonesia, first as Irian Barat (West Irian), later as Irian Jaya ("victorious Irian"). And thus it was that Papua's strongly aroused desire for independence of the early 1960s was flouted

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