

# 2. Internationalisation of the 'hidden' West Papua issue

## A regional media matter for Melanesia and the Pacific

**Commentary:** Auckland University of Technology's Pacific Media Centre marked its tenth anniversary with a seminar discussing two of the wider region's most critical media freedom crises. The 'Journalism Under Duress' in Asia-Pacific seminar in November 2017 examined media freedom and human rights in the Philippines and Indonesia's Papua region, otherwise known as West Papua. In the discussion about West Papua, the PMC seminar heard that access to the Indonesian region for foreign journalists, while still restricted, remains critical for helping Papuan voices to be heard. The plight of West Papua is of major concern among Pacific people, especially Melanesians, and it is becoming a growing geopolitical and media issue.

**Keywords:** advocacy, geopolitics, human rights, media freedom, Melanesia, Melanesian Spearhead Group, press freedom, West Papua

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IT IS a great paradox how, despite the natural resource abundance of their home region, Papuans are among the worst-off people in the Indonesian republic. With the worst human development outcomes, parlous access to health services and limited opportunities in education and business, Papuans' indigenous culture is rapidly losing ground in Indonesian-ruled Papua region. The region is known widely as West Papua, and is officially divided into two provinces named West Papua and Papua. Its indigenous Melanesians are dominated by Javanese and other non-Papuans, and have long been subject to violent abuses, torture and intimidation by the military and police who have been largely able to do this with impunity.

The plight of West Papuans in the face of this simmering tension is of deep concern to other Pacific peoples, especially Melanesians. This concern

has galvanised regional support for the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) which has been lobbying fervently in the Pacific for greater representation by Papuans in regional fora, and for an internationalisation of the Papuan plight, arguing that the many years of seeking dialogue with Indonesia's government has not helped forge a solution to persistent rights problem faced by Papuans. The ongoing cordon around foreign access to Papua—be it for humanitarian, research, cultural or other interests—has entrenched the sense of despair for West Papuans.

Five decades under Indonesian rule have been tough on West Papuans as a people, even despite the democratic reforms that the wider republic has gone through. West Papua's controversial incorporation into Indonesia in the 1960s was not a fair self-determination process, especially because Papuans were not consulted about it. Now they are steadily on track to becoming a minority in their own land, a territory where security forces rule and Indonesia extracts significant wealth from abundant natural resources, such as minerals, gas and forestry. The giant Freeport gold and copper mine in Papua's Highlands is the single largest source of revenue for the Indonesian state and an ongoing source of environmental destruction, land alienation and human rights problems that Papuans struggle with.

It is now more than three years into the tenure of current Indonesian President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo, who declared one of his aims was to lift West Papuans out of poverty and made big commitments regarding major infrastructure projects in Papua. However, major problems remain in Papua. Human rights workers indicate that abuses in both West Papua and Papua provinces are persistent, many of them about infringements of the right to freedom of expression. However, a notable thing Jokowi did at an early point as president was to announce that he was lifting restrictions on foreign journalists visiting Papua. My colleague, Koroi Hawkins, and I were then able to enter Papua in 2015, although not before a complicated and testing application process (Blades, 2016).

### **Media coverage**

Jokowi's move was a step in the right direction, but restrictions and significant pressures remain in place for the few foreign journalists who get in to Papua (Leadbeater, 2018, pp. 233-235). Earlier in 2018, Indonesian officials deported BBC's Indonesia editor, Rebecca Henschke, an Australian, from Papua after she travelled there to cover the state response to a deadly measles outbreak in remote Asmat district in January. She was expelled because her social media posts had 'hurt the feelings of soldiers' (Harvey, 2018), with officials later claiming that photos and comments that she tweeted had misrepresented the actions of military in its response to the related malnutrition outbreak.

The issue of ongoing rights abuses and killings associated with the suppression

of the independence struggle in West Papua has gained traction in recent years on social media. But most mainstream media continues to be a void on this front, in Indonesia and abroad. Indonesia touted its media freedom credentials as it hosted World Press Freedom Day in May 2017, but on the margins of the event were warnings about the ‘shocking press and human rights violations’ that were ongoing in Indonesia’s far eastern Melanesian region of Papua (Robie, 2017a).

Restrictions on what the media can cover in West Papua seem to exacerbate the problem in New Zealand where there is a lack of media coverage about most of Melanesia. It is a similar situation with Australia. Media outlets in the metropolitan countries are accustomed to getting their foreign news handed on a plate from a small pool of networks, mainly covering two regions, the US and Europe. There is little news about Asia, Africa and our own Pacific Islands region. It is probably a mix of things. Some international media outlets, such as AFP and Al Jazeera, have established Indonesian offices whose coverage includes Papua. But the whole region of Melanesia, and the Pacific Islands, is largely a media black hole. Only one foreign media organisation has a journalist permanently based anywhere in Melanesia: the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in Papua New Guinea. When it comes to Papua, that is another level of remoteness and difficult access altogether. RNZ Pacific, *Vanuatu Daily Post* and *Asia Pacific Report* do what they can from afar. But mainstream media outlets have mostly appeared disinclined to bother trying (Robie, 2017b).

Despite the lack of coverage, social media discourse about West Papua is highly active in the Pacific Islands region, especially New Zealand. I am witnessing many New Zealanders becoming aware of the situation in West Papua, where they previously had no interest. It is of particular importance to those who see Papuans as a fellow Pacific people. Social media activism has played no small part in the spread of the Free West Papua Campaign ([www.freewestpapua.org](http://www.freewestpapua.org)), and has energised more young people into taking up the issue these days, in the spheres of universities and activism, particularly Māori. Discourse on Papua has picked up among New Zealand lawmakers, and has also been intensifying in the international diplomatic realm. The independence struggle of West Papuans and the human rights situation have become a leading regional cause that governments of Melanesia are involved with. In Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, the issue of West Papua is important in their own domestic politics. For the past two years, it is also an issue that has been taken up at the United Nations by countries in other parts of the Pacific, including Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Tonga and Tuvalu. The statements on West Papua made by leaders of these countries at the UN General Assembly gained some international headlines. In their replies, Indonesian diplomats attacked Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, in particular, over human rights abuses in their own backyards.

## **Development**

So much of Jakarta's response to criticism, and scrutiny over Papua, is framed in terms of the development paradigm that has unfolded since the introduction of the rather flawed special autonomy status introduced in Papua region in 2001. In its drive to foster economic development, the Jokowi government is pursuing big infrastructure projects such as the Trans-Papuan Highway, railways, hydropower, and mega markets. Jokowi himself has made far more visible efforts than his presidential predecessors have done to understand West Papua, visit the region, and to improve living conditions. However, his focus on development seems unlikely to quell discontent with Indonesian rule among West Papuans. They have a sense that the kind of development on offer will further entrench the system that has marginalised them for the past few decades. Who will be using these roads, the power and trade networks? In Papua, 'development' has so often meant cutting earth, chopping trees, uprooting their traditional ways. This is similar on the Papua New Guinean side of the border.

This boundary has been a stark division, but the line is becoming blurred. Much alike Papua New Guinea and Indonesia's relationship as neighbouring nations, the neighbouring provincial governments of Indonesia's Papua province and PNG's West Sepik have a growing relationship forged through trade and infrastructure links. Sepik people increasingly travel to Papua for better services: health in particular, but also the markets. It is so close, and according to some Sepiks, the services on offer so much more efficient and cheaper than in Papua New Guinea. The difference in quality of the roads on each side is stark, but so too are the political differences. Papua New Guinea cannot help but be affected by what happens in West Papua. Their cultural links mean people hurt for their Melanesian kin on the other side in times of disaster and struggle. There is a shared pain. Look no further than the environment. That season when Hawkins and I travelled across the border into West Papua, there was significant toxic haze from fire used to clear land for oil palm plantations. A well-established regional problem in Southeast Asia had spread to Papua with a vengeance. The haze was having an impact on border area communities on the Papua New Guinean side too. Children in the border village of Wutung had acute asthma problems. Deforestation has already done massive damage to the ability of Melanesians to access food, traditional medicine and livelihoods from their forests, compromising their health.

## **Uneasy media reality**

To be independent as a Papua-based journalist is very difficult. Police and military forces apply pressure on Papuan journalists to not probe stories about military abuses, land and resources exploitation among other areas. Papuan journalists risk their lives in pursuing independent coverage of what is happening



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**Figure 1: An editorial meeting at the Papuan newspaper *Tabloid Jubi* chaired by editor Victor Mambor (right). ‘There are dozens of cases of journalists in the region being assaulted, threatened or arrested in the past five years.’**

in West Papua. There are dozens of cases of journalists in the region being assaulted, threatened or arrested in the past five years, according to the Civil Society Coalition for the Enforcement of Law and Human Rights in West Papua, while at least two have been killed since 2010 (Robie, 2017a).

In the wider Indonesian republic, there is a shortage of nuanced reporting on Papua. Because the Papuan issues do not really rate on the large national scale, they do not often make the news in national media. When reports of security flare-ups in Papua do make it to the daily newspapers, the state media can tend to blame Papuan ‘separatism’ or tribal fighting for the problems. Papuan freedom fighters are an easy scapegoat. Recently there has been a pattern of referring to independence fighters as ‘armed criminals’. This avoids mentioning the independence goal. Late in 2017, deadly violence flared in the region around the Freeport mine, as it has done sporadically for decades. A standoff emerged between the Indonesian military and a faction of the military wing of the Free West Papua Movement (OPM), which has been waging a long-running campaign against the Indonesian state and a campaign to close the troublesome Freeport mine. However, when police claimed the OPM (or so called ‘armed criminals’ as they call them, preferring not to mention them by name) held local villagers hostage, the Indonesian media largely ran with the claim without question (Anderson, 2017). The problem is, there was no hostage situation, but rather a roadblock

manned by the OPM. Yet mainstream media reports made it seem like the OPM was targeting Papuans. Such discrediting was a distraction from the genuine grievances that the local communities have around the mine, its controversial generation of wealth and the rights abuses associated with it.

Given the misleading reports, it is little wonder Papuans mistrust state media. A member of KONTRAS (Indonesia's Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence, which is the major independent Indonesian human rights organisation), recently told me that a lack of trust in both media and state agencies prevents West Papuans who are victims of rights abuses from reporting their cases. Therefore, he said, the cases of abuses coming across KONTRAS' desk tend to be relayed through agencies and media outside West Papua and Indonesia. This is a core reason why coverage of Papua by foreign media is important.

### **Indonesia's Pacific outreach**

Indonesia has become increasingly sensitive to foreign media coverage of West Papua, Papuan diplomatic campaigns in international fora, and the growing solidarity movement. Seeking to quell support for Papua independence, Jakarta has undertaken a significant diplomatic outreach in the Pacific region. As part of that, Indonesia sent a new Ambassador to New Zealand (also to Samoa and Tonga) this year. Ambassador Tantowi Yahya is a household name in Indonesia as former presenter for the successful local version of the TV show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* He is also a country music singer with a string of slickly produced albums. Before he arrived in Wellington, he declared that his aim was to educate New Zealanders about 'improved conditions' in West Papua, in recognition of an intensifying debate about the region in New Zealand (Tama, 2016).

That he should single out this matter as a priority for addressing in Indonesia's relationship with New Zealand speaks volumes about Jakarta's sensitivity over coverage about Papua. An able diplomat with charisma and an effective communicator, Tantowi's appointment heralded a more forthright approach from the embassy about putting forward Indonesia's side of the story on Papua-related events and issues that we cover at RNZ Pacific. For their part, the officials at the embassy in Wellington have made it clear they believe Indonesia is misunderstood in New Zealand, and they seek to address this.

Jakarta's forthrightness was evident in the Pacific Islands region itself when Tantowi led a delegation to Samoa which hosted the Pacific Islands Forum leaders summit in September 2017. A group of local people held a protest outside the Forum venue, highlighting the plight of West Papuans and their support for an independent Papua. In response, Tantowi and his government's Papuan envoy, Franz Albert Joku, held a rather heated press conference, chiding the protesters and local journalists for talking about Papua and not sticking 'to the main agenda' of the Forum. 'We have seen our worst; where the hell were the Pacific Island

nations when we really needed that kind of expression and that kind of concern coming from them?’ an irate Joku asked (Feagamaali’i-Luamanu, 2017).

The Apia press conference demonstrated how Jakarta appears to want to restrict foreign journalists from talking about West Papua even on their own patch. But beyond the sensitivities of the Papua problem, elements of the Indonesian government are working with the genuine aim of improving conditions in Papua. There is also a bid to better understand Pacific mindsets, if not to lure regional governments from any support for Papuan independence aspirations.

As well as the now regular pro-West Papua demonstrations in numerous cities around the world, including in other parts of Indonesia, in the past couple of years there have been big mobilisations in Papua itself calling for independence. Mass arrests took place in 2016 in relation to the largest of the demonstrations in the Papuan cities. Some of the big demonstrations were in support of the ULMWP which, soon after forming in 2015, was given observer status in the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). The concurrent elevation of Indonesia’s position in the MSG, and its increasing influence on the group, has proved divisive among leaders of the free Melanesian states.

At the time of writing, the MSG’s five full members were divided over the thorny issue of whether to grant full membership to the West Papuans. While Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and New Caledonia’s FLNKS (Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front) have supported the Liberation Movement’s application, Papua New Guinea and Fiji have been opposed, reluctant to upset their relationships with Indonesia. It is unclear whether the new leadership in Solomon Islands (Rick Hou replaced Manasseh Sogavare as prime minister in November, and Sogavare is now the deputy) will continue to advance the West Papua human rights and self-determination causes. But so long as the Charlot Salwai-led government remains in place, Vanuatu can be expected to continue to speak out.

### **Regional matter**

Jakarta has put considerable resources into countering the Liberation Movement’s diplomatic forays in the Pacific. Indonesia’s aid relationships with Pacific countries are growing. It was no coincidence that after hosting the Forum summit last year, Samoa’s government came away with a bolstered relationship with Indonesia in a raft of new assistance packages. In early 2018, cabinet minister Wiranto (who has a single name) led an Indonesian delegation on a quick diplomacy circuit of some Pacific states, including two nations which had recently spoken out at the UN on their concern about Papua.<sup>1</sup> His trip was a success for Jakarta in that it resulted in about-turns by Nauru and Tuvalu whose leaders then declared their support for Indonesia’s efforts in Papua, pledging commitment to non-interference in Indonesia’s domestic matters, and abandoning their lofty statements of concern just a few short months earlier at the UN.

From a regional security point of view, it is in Australia and New Zealand's interests to follow West Papuan affairs and do what they can to ensure against regional spillover from the security and environmental crises. The Indonesian military has long made incursions into Papua New Guinean territory, ostensibly in pursuit of Free West Papua Movement members, and it undermines PNG's security forces. New Zealand and Australia are concerned about PNG's poorly resourced military and police and their inability to quell the type of violence triggered by the 2017 general election in the Highlands. A general ongoing lawlessness in PNG, including abuses by police and disciplinary forces, as well as worsening sorcery accusation-related attacks, has been central to the rationale for Australia and the United States getting closely involved in the security arrangements for APEC summit in Port Moresby in November 2018, the biggest event the country has ever hosted.

Papua New Guinea has a growing defence relationship with Indonesia, which is also helping out with APEC. This sort of arrangement troubles the Australian government: the prospect of losing influence in the Pacific to other countries, China in particular. The security problems in Papua New Guinea are New Zealand's concern too. It has a good reputation among Pacific Island countries, and is seen as an honest broker with a history of helping resolve conflict in Melanesia, having facilitated the process which brought peace to the protracted Bougainville civil conflict. The potential to play a role in a solution, or improvement in West Papua, is where New Zealand could display its leadership to Pacific Island countries.

In the past five years, the internationalisation of the Pacific region's hidden conflict has been significant. The key theatres in this process are the media and international diplomacy. Both are avenues which can be used to ensure the stories of Papuans are brought out from behind the veil. For now these stories remain too much of a fringe story. Independent journalism remains highly relevant to the wider region's understanding of West Papua, to be able to wade through the foginess of reports about unrest, or the spin of every government claim about accelerating development. Yet the pressures on West Papua-based journalists, and on independent coverage of the region, can be expected to continue, perhaps even to increase.

### Note

1. As a former Indonesian military general, Wiranto is accused by human rights groups of playing a significant role in severe rights abuses as Indonesian forces withdrew from the occupied territory of East Timor in 1999.

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