



Inside the Papuan Resistance

by Bertil Lintner



THE INDONESIAN presidential election on July 8 seems likely to give Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono another five years in office. He is ahead of other candidates in opinion polls, and his Democratic Party emerged as the country's largest in the parliamentary elections in April. A high degree of normality and stability has returned to Indonesia after years of political and social turmoil. Only a decade ago, many feared that Indonesia would break up along ethnic lines and become a "Southeast Asian Yugoslavia."

In the end, only East Timor went its own way. But that was a special case, according to the official line from Jakarta and also foreign governments. When Indonesia was proclaimed an independent state in 1945, it laid claims to all the territories of the former Dutch East Indies, which did not include the then-Portuguese colony on the eastern half of Timor island. It was invaded in 1975 and formally annexed by Indonesia the following year—a move that was not recognized by the international community. East Timor remained on the United Nations' international list of territo-

ries that still had to be decolonized, which made it possible for the world body to intervene in 1998 and supervise a referendum on independence in 1999. East Timor became a fully independent republic in 2002.

Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra had a far more complicated, internal insurgency. But, in August 2005, an accord was reached between the Indonesian government and the previously separatist Free Aceh Movement, or Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, ending decades of strife in that troubled territory by granting it autonomy. Less powerful centrifugal forces as well as sectarian violence in other parts of Sumatra, in the South Moluccas, or Maluku, Borneo and elsewhere, appear to have faded away.

Only one major separatist issue remains a thorn in President Yudhoyono's side: the long-simmering conflict in the western Indonesian part of the island of New Guinea. Since 2003, the area has been divided into two provinces—Papua and West Papua, but referred to by the resistance only as "West Papua"—and is almost constantly rocked by

~ Mr. Lintner is a journalist based in Thailand.

antigovernment protests, and the hoisting of the “Morning Star” independence flag, which is a crime in Indonesia.

In the most recent incident, demonstrators and security forces clashed in Nabire on April 6, just a few days before Indonesia’s parliamentary election. According to the Australia-based NGO Institute for Papuan Advocacy and Human Rights, nine people were shot by security forces and at least one policeman was injured by traditional arrows fired by the protesters. In April 2008, several hundred demonstrators took to the streets of Jayapura, the capital of the province of Papua and previously of the entire Indonesian-held New Guinea. And in January this year, hundreds of protesters, some armed with machetes and other crude weapons, besieged a police station in the coastal Papuan town of Timika after hearing that a man had been shot during a fight between off-duty officers and local tribesmen. The police opened fire wounding at least four people.

The Indonesian English-language daily Jakarta Globe reported in its January 28 issue: “The (Indonesian) National Human Rights Commission has been monitoring the Timika police because of numerous cases of officers as well as military personnel allegedly shooting civilians, many of which remain unresolved. Last year, a 40-year-old man was shot and killed while attending a festival said to have been linked to the outlawed Free Papua Movement.” The report continued: “Pro-independence sentiment in Papua has increased in recent years, fueled in part by discontent that profits from its natural resources are being siphoned out of the province with the assistance of the central government. US-based Freeport McMoran Copper and Gold Co. operates mines in Papua.”

Also in January this year, 11 West Papuans were found guilty of subversion and sentenced to three and three-and-a-half year prison sentences. In March last year,

they had taken part in a demonstration in the town of Manokwari, where the Morning Star flag had been displayed. According to a report from the Institute for Papuan Advocacy and Human Rights: “The panel of judges led by Elsa Mutiara Napitupulu said that the men had posed a threat to the integrity of the Indonesian state in seeking the separation of West Papua. The judgment said that there had been an increase in separatist activities in the recent past throughout the whole of West Papua which were being organized from abroad.”

In today’s world, that is not far-fetched. The Free Papua Movement, Organisasi Papua Merdeka, maintains an office in Stockholm, Sweden, from where they are in regular e-mail contact with activists in the territory, halfway around the globe. And for the exiled leaders of the anti-Indonesian movement in West Papua, there is only one way forward for their struggle: total independence. They reject a negotiated autonomy deal, similar to what GAM has achieved for Aceh. “Autonomy is not a lasting solution,” Ruben Maury from the OPM office in Sweden said. “The people want independence, not autonomy. We’ve already made up our minds.”

What the people of Indonesian New Guinea actually want is impossible to ascertain—but the OPM did indeed unilaterally declare independence on July 1, 1971. Yet while international rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have expressed concern over human-rights abuses in the area, the OPM’s plea for independence has found few sympathizers among foreign governments. The only exceptions are small Pacific island states such as Vanuatu—where the OPM maintains another liaison office—and Nauru. No major powers, it seems, wants to see the dismemberment of Indonesia’s sprawling archipelago, which many thought possible after former strongman Suharto fell in 1998 and liberal decentralization mea-

asures were passed. The buck stopped at East Timor.

But West Papua is still a borderline case. When the Dutch finally left Indonesia in 1949—four years after the declaration of independence—they held on to their western half of New Guinea. They argued that the territory was culturally different from the rest of the old colony and, if ceded to Indonesia, the Papuans would be exploited by the more politically and economically sophisticated Javanese. The new Indonesian nation, however, saw it differently. One of the catch phrases of independence leader Sukarno was of Indonesian sovereignty “from Sabang to Merauke,” from Sabang on a small island off the northwestern tip of Sumatra to the town on Merauke in southeastern Papua, i.e., the entire length and breadth of the former Dutch East Indies.

The Dutch initially ignored such sovereignty slogans and throughout the 1950s initiated several moves to make their part of New Guinea an independent state. Basic education was improved, a naval academy was opened, Papuans began to serve in the military as well as civil services and local elections were held in December 1961. The territory even adopted its own national anthem and flag with the white Morning Star, symbolizing the hope for a new day era.

All this happened at a time when Southeast Asia was in deep turmoil. Communist movements were strong throughout the region and especially in Indonesia, where it was a powerful and legal political party. The United States warned the Netherlands against trying to defend its New Guinean possession if Jakarta attempted to use force to extend its writ to Merauke. “We’re victims of Cold War politics,” says Daniel Kafiar, who, together with Mr. Maury, heads

the OPM’s Stockholm office. “No one ever asked us what we wanted. It all happened above our heads.”

Among the many documents Mr. Kafiar carries in his briefcase is a copy of a secret letter from former U.S. President John F. Kennedy to then Dutch Prime Minister J E de Quay dated April 2, 1962. In that document, Kennedy warned that “this could be a war in which neither the Netherlands nor the West could win in any real sense. Whatever the outcome of particular mili-

tary encounters, the entire free world position in Asia would be seriously damaged. Only the communists would benefit from such a conflict.” The document continues: “If the Indonesian Army were committed to all-out war

against the Netherlands, the moderate elements within the Army and the country would be quickly eliminated, leaving a clear field for communist intervention. If Indonesia were to succumb to communism in these circumstances, the whole non-communist position in Vietnam, Thailand and Malaya would be in grave peril, and as you know these are areas in which we in the United States have heavy commitments and burdens.”

The Netherlands gave in and, on Aug. 15, 1962, signed an agreement in New York with Indonesia according to which the United Nations would assume temporary control over the territory. It would then be transferred to Indonesia—but on the condition that the Papuans would have the right to decide their own future. On May 1, 1963, Indonesia took full charge of the territory and first renamed it West Irian and later Irian Jaya. In mid-1969, the promised “referendum” was eventually held, but The Act of Free Choice, as it was called, was open only to 1,025 handpicked

President Yudhoyono may be forced to take a fresh look at the Papuan resistance—as it is not likely to go away.

delegates, which predictably all voted in favor of integration with Indonesia. On Nov. 19, 1969, the U.N. General Assembly accepted the results and Western countries turned a deaf ear to local protests over the dubious circumstances of the vote.

By 1965, the OPM had already been established along with an armed wing, the National Liberation Army, or OPM-TPN, and hit-and-run attacks were launched in the highlands. Mr. Maury joined the OPM in 1970, abandoning his family and a job as a pharmacist in Jayapura. He had been sent to study in the Netherlands in the 1950s as part of preparations for independence from the then Dutch colony. A better-educated middle class, it was thought, was needed to run an independent state and Mr. Maury was one of the well-schooled candidates.

In 1962, he and five other Papuans were invited to visit Indonesia, where they met President Sukarno and other state leaders. But the Papuans made no promises to Jakarta: "We told them we were on a study tour," Mr. Maury says. "They sent beautiful girls to our hotel rooms, but I didn't give in to the temptation, or to their suggestion that we should join Indonesia."

Mr. Maury spent eight years in the jungles and highlands of West Papua before he and some of his ill-equipped followers crossed into independent Papua New Guinea in 1978. But the newly independent state did not want to antagonize its powerful Indonesian neighbor, and promptly arrested the OPM fighters. In 1979, they were all released and four of them were accepted as political refugees in Sweden. Among them was Jacob Prai, one of the founders of the OPM, and John Otto Ondawame, who now represents the movement in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Mr. Kafiarr arrived in Sweden a year later and the OPM established an information office in Stockholm.

They are not the only Third World revolutionary movement to have sought sanctuary in Sweden. Hasan di Tiro, the leader

of the Acehnese independence movement who was able to return to Indonesia following the 2005 accords, also arrived there in the 1970s, as did representatives of the Muslim separatists in Southern Thailand and cadre from the insurgent Communist New People's Army in the Philippines. Later, even members of Peru's radical Maoist Shining Path movement took refuge in Sweden. They were all drawn by Sweden's then liberal refugee policy and it was difficult for Swedish authorities to check the background of some of the less attractive armed groups' members. That has helped fuel a popular backlash against political-asylum seekers there, which, in recent years, has led to electoral gains by anti-immigrant groups.

But as Sweden's welcome cools, the Papuans may fare better than others. Although they look as foreign as other refugees, there is plenty of interest in New Guinea in Sweden. This is largely thanks to a Swedish aristocrat and explorer, Sten Bergman, who in the 1950s spent several years in western New Guinea. His best-selling book, *My Father is a Cannibal*, has been translated into several languages, and helped preserve a somewhat romantic image of life in territory's remote villages. Bergman was indeed "adopted" by a village chief who once had eaten human flesh and was dressed in little more than a penis-sheath.

For their part, the OPM delegates do not wish to capitalize on this romanticized past, but rather are trying to reach out to governments all over the world to promote their cause. In 1987, Mr. Kafiarr went to Vanuatu where he met Walter Lini, the country's first prime minister. At the time, Lini and Vanuatu provided some support for the Kanak indigenous independent movement in French-held New Caledonia and was then the only country in the region to support East Timor's quest for independence.

Mr. Kafiarr remained in Vanuatu for two years before returning to Sweden, and the

Vanuatu office has been taken over by Mr. Ondawame and Andy Ayamiseba, who the Stockholm-based representatives see as closet moles for Indonesia. That's in part a reflection of the deep-seated factionalism within the OPM, which is bidding to forge a unified state from an area with hundreds of different languages and clans, many of which have historically been at war with each other.

In comparison, the Aceh movement was fairly unified and many feel the OPM would find it difficult to establish a coherent sense of nationhood among the Papuans. They just need look across the border into Papua New Guinea, which many observers consider a nearly failed state with rampant crime, murder rates among the world's highest, and severe environmental degradation driven by an economy almost entirely dependent on the export of raw natural resources. Still, the OPM's Stockholm representatives see separation from Indonesia as just the first step; the next would be a union with Papua New Guinea. "Historically, our ties have been with Oceania. Our connections have always been eastwards, not westwards," Mr. Kafiar says. "The border between western and eastern New Guinea was drawn up in Europe in the late 19th century, with a pen and a ruler," he asserts. "It's a straight line. People have relatives on both side of the frontier."

But before independence or unification with New Guinea could happen—if that ever materialized—the western half would have to deal with fundamental demographic changes that have taken place over the past few decades. Between 1975 and 1995, a government-sponsored migration program resettled tens of thousands of people, mainly from Java, in Irian Jaya. In addition, many people from other, more densely populated parts of Indonesia moved to the territory, attracted by business opportunities and the search for new lands to cultivate. In a July 2007 document titled "West Pap-

uan Churches' Deepest Concern and Appeal to the International Community," local church leaders stated: "The current composition of the West Papuan population is 30 percent native and 70 percent migrants. The native West Papuans have been marginalized in all aspects of life."

Even if exaggerated, the statement reflects the new demographic composition and cause for potential conflicts in Papuan society. The native Papuans are mostly Animist or Christian, while the new migrants are predominantly Muslim. Groups of Islamic extremists are also known to have visited the territory, leading to fears that the kind of sectarian fighting that tore apart the Maluku islands from 2000 to 2002 could one day erupt in Papua and West Papua. The delicate demographic and religious balance in Indonesia's two easternmost provinces is perhaps the reason why outside powers seem to prefer a continuation of the status quo rather than advocate the OPM's separation from Indonesia. The Papuans may be victims of Cold War politics, as Mr. Maury and Mr. Kafiar argue, but two generations later the situation has become more ethnically complicated.

As such, unrest in the area is likely to continue, even if the OPM these days lacks the forces to resist Indonesia's mighty military. However, recent demonstrations in Manokwari, Jayapura and elsewhere could serve as warnings for more conflict and resistance to come in one of Indonesia's most remote and strife-torn provinces. The OPM's armed struggle in the highlands has been succeeded by a civil movement in urban areas, and that could be even more difficult for the central authorities to contain than jungle guerrilla warfare. After decades of mismanagement and dubious policies, President Yudhoyono, if re-elected, may be forced to take a fresh look at the Papuan issue—because it is not likely to go away like other, more easily solvable ethnic conflicts in the Indonesian archipelago. ■