

West Papua: Students lead escalation of struggle

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Max Lane — On April 5, the Papuan People's Assembly (MRP) issued a resolution calling for the closure of the huge Freeport mine, a demand that had been raised by student protesters at a March 15-16 demonstration and at protests earlier in the year in both Papua and other parts of Indonesia.

It is student activists and community groups that have been spearheading the deepening political struggle in Papua. They accuse Freeport of damaging the environment, being involved in human rights abuses, collaborating with an abusive military and of not channelling any of the wealth generated by the mine to people in Papua.

The MRP was formed under a 2001 Autonomy Law and is representative of the broad Papuan bureaucratic, business and social elite that developed during the Suharto years.

The April 5 MRP memorandum was framed in moderate terms, calling on the Indonesian government to begin negotiations with the US government and Freeport over the mine's closure. It called for negotiations with the traditional owners of the area if closure could not be achieved, and for the withdrawal of Indonesian security forces from around Freeport and the institution of a community-based security system.

According to the Papuan National Student Front (FMNP), at least 24 students were injured during a March 15-16 anti-Freeport demonstration at the University of Cendrawasih. Five suffered gunshot wounds. Five Indonesian security officers were killed at the protest.

The demonstration was initiated by the Parliament of the Streets of West Papua (Parjal) and leaders of the United West Papua Popular Struggle Front (PEPERA), which is probably the broadest activist coalition in Jayapura.

The protest began on March 15 when about 300 students gathered outside the University of Cendrawasih in the town of Abepura, near Jayapura. According to an FMNP report, the elite mobile brigade police were on hand but no clashes took place.

The next day students began preparing to blockade the two-lane road in front of the university using tyres and tree branches. At 9am, the police arrived again. Around noon, after negotiations with student leaders, additional security forces arrived.

There were no incidents until 1pm, when the police began tearing down the street barricades, firing tear gas to clear away the students. Students retreated while throwing stones back at the police. When the police started detaining some student leaders, protesters went on the offensive, using bottles, rocks and sticks.

The police responded by throwing rocks back at students and firing. At around 3pm, police entered the university compound and charged at the students. It was during this clash that the security officers were killed and scores of others, both police and students, were injured. At 4pm, army units arrived and managed to force the students to retreat, some fleeing into the mountains behind the university.

During the evening, police units roamed the streets beating up young people they suspected of being students. By the following day the streets had calmed down, however there are still reports of police and army units hunting for students they believed were involved in the protests, and protesters were still in hiding. According to a statement by the Papuan Students Alliance (AMP), those detained include Selfius Bobi, PEPERA secretary-general.

The University of Cendrawasih demonstration followed other anti-Freeport protests in Timika (a town near Freeport) and at the mine itself. For a few days in February, the mine closed due to a protest blockade and solidarity demonstrations were held in several Indonesian cities.

On March 16, the People's Democratic Party (PRD) issued a statement supporting the Papua protests. The statement supported the "Papuan people's demand for the closure of Freeport" and said that the mine should not be re-opened without permission from the Papuan people. It also called for full transparency

in all legal procedures after the demonstration and laid full blame for the incident on the police for violently dispersing the student demonstration. The Indonesian environmental organisation, WALHI, an affiliate of Friends of the Earth International, has also supported PEPERA.

In a statement issued on March 17, the AMP issued three demands: the closure of Freeport and a full audit of its record in the realms of democratic rights, environment and human rights; a full investigation of those responsible for the attacks on the student protesters; and a national and international dialogue to "resolve the Papuan and Freeport problems". PEPERA, together with Parjal, issued a similar statement and also called for the withdrawal of all Indonesian army soldiers from the area around Freeport.

There are now many activist groups in Papua struggling around a range of issues, most under the slogan of Papua Merdeka (Free Papua). PEPERA has emerged as one of the most militant groupings. Student groups such as FMNP and AMP are part of PEPERA, as are other activist organisations.

The group was formed on September 30. It was the product of a process that began in October 2004, when students mobilised against a military operation in the mountains trying to capture a Free Papua Movement (OPM) guerrilla commander.

The militarisation of the province was accompanied by wide-ranging human rights violations against the civilian population in the Puncak Jaya area. Students radicalised through a series of street protests and formed Parjal.

Later, other organisations developed, including the Papuan Students Association, the Papuan Students Committee and the Coalition for the Struggle of the Fundamental Rights of the Papuan Civilian People (KPHARSP).

These organisations continued protesting, especially against the Autonomy Law passed in 2001, throughout 2005. As the protests drew in more people, the idea of a coalition gathering all of these forces together was discussed and a conference was held in September at which PEPERA was formed. Later, however, some of these organisations, including Parjal, left the front.

Elite opinion in Papua is channelled through the Papuan Presidium Council (DPD), established by the 2001 Papuan People's Congress, the Papuan Customary Law Council (DAP), also established by the People's Congress, and through mainstream parties and community groups elected or appointed to the provincial parliament or the MRP.

On August 12, the DAP called a demonstration that symbolically handed back the Autonomy Law and the MRP to Jakarta. Called with the authority of traditional leaders, it attracted tens of thousands of people. All of the organisations that later formed PEPERA participated. However, while it rejected the Autonomy Law, the DAP was criticised by the students for proposing no next steps for the movement.

After PEPERA formed, it issued a statement with its own demands that summed up the views of the militant wing of the movement:

- The holding of a broad, democratic and open "national dialogue" to be prepared by the Indonesian president and ministers for the purpose of resolving the Papuan political issue.
- The formation of a special commission on Papua by the Indonesian House of Representatives.
- The repeal by the House of Representatives of the Autonomy Law and the regulations regarding the formation of the MRP.
- The disbanding of the Papua House of Representatives parliamentary committees on the Autonomy Law and on the MRP.
- The statement declared that the Autonomous Government of Papua was no longer valid, as the Papuan people handed back autonomy at the August 12 protest.

PEPERA argued that the Autonomy law had been a failure, pointing to the continuing miserable economic condition of the Papuan people, 90% of whom are categorised as poor, and continuing military repression. At that time PEPERA threatened to call for a general strike and occupation of government offices as part of a preparation for a campaign to demand a referendum if these demands were not met.

If repression and refusal to negotiate on the demands raised by PEPERA, including the demand for a closure of Freeport, and by demands from the more moderate

elite for a renegotiation of the region's status continue to be rejected, the current struggle may escalate to a campaign for a referendum on the region's future. Even the moderate MRP raised the possibility of moving in that direction, if only in passing, in a memorandum it sent to Jakarta at the beginning of this year.

At the moment, both moderate and radical wings of the movement are supporting the call for an open dialogue on the future of Papua, the withdrawal of the TNI (the Indonesian army) either from Papua altogether, as with PEPERA, or from around Freeport and the closure of the Freeport mine. These are also demands being supported by most of the radical democratic forces in Indonesia.

P.S.

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