

West Papua - calling it a betrayal would be too generous

Saturday 3 March 2007, by [PEARCE Rohan](#) (Date first published: 22 February 2007).

February 23 marked the deadline for submissions to the federal parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Treaties (JSCT) on the new Australia-Indonesia "security" pact. If there is any uncertainty about the hypocrisy that underlies Australia's neo-colonial foreign policy, then this treaty — a "mending the fences" exercise after the federal government granted asylum to 43 pro-independence West Papuan refugees in 2006, and, before that, Canberra's reluctant 1999 intervention in East Timor — should end it.

The treaty was signed by the Australian and Indonesian foreign ministers, Alexander Downer and Hassan Wiryuda, on November 13 in Mataram, Lombok. It reaffirms "the commitment to the sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity of both Parties, and the importance of the principles of good neighbourliness and non-interference in the internal affairs of one another". The reaffirmation of "territorial integrity" — the phrase is repeated four times throughout the document — is a signal from the Australian political elite to their Indonesian counterparts that the interests of Australian capital will continue to predominate in relations with Indonesia, and crimes committed in West Papua will be almost certainly overlooked, occasional human rights rhetoric aside.

A February 2 submission to the JSCT by the Australia West Papua Association expressed particular concern about article 2.3 of the agreement, which states that the parties "shall not in any manner support or participate in activities by any person or entity which constitutes a threat to the stability, sovereignty or territorial integrity of the other Party, including by those who seek to use its territory for encouraging or committing such activities, including separatism, in the territory of the other Party". AWPAA believes that "this article is a direct reference to West Papua" and may lead to attempts to silence groups that campaign in solidarity with West Papuans. Another concern is that the treaty "could commit the various Australian intelligence organisations to pass on information to Indonesian intelligence about the activities of human rights organisations working on the issue of West Papua".

There is little question the treaty will be ratified. In a July 2000 speech to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia, a pro-business think tank, Downer emphasised: "We do not support independence movements in Aceh or in West Papua ... Australia is totally committed to the territorial integrity of Indonesia." He added it was "a point that we need to ram home over and over again. Not just so that the Indonesians know where we stand, cause some in Indonesia question this, but in order to get [the] broader international community consolidated behind the Indonesians in support of the territorial integrity of Indonesia." This has been reiterated by Downer and other members of the federal government.

The treaty will almost certainly receive support from Labor leader Kevin Rudd and his party. In April last year, Rudd told reporters that "whatever the points of view within the Australian community" on West Papua, "both the Liberal Party and the Labor Party have a view that West Papua is part of the Indonesian republic but we want West Papua to have effective autonomy. You can have West Papua

as part of the Indonesian republic, which we all support.”

This bipartisan backing for West Papua’s “integration” into Indonesia regardless of the views of its indigenous population has, of course, an antecedent in the form of Liberal and Labor backing for Indonesia’s 1975 annexation of East Timor. For decades politicians of both persuasions told the Australian public that the integration of East Timor into Indonesia was “irreversible” — as then Labor foreign minister Gareth Evans put it. According to a June 1994 Melbourne Age article, Evans “has declared that it is impossible for East Timor to regain its independence because this would create a precedent that could lead to the disintegration of Indonesia. Senator Evans said that the 1975 invasion of East Timor had distressed Australians but it was irreversible and it was quixotic for people to believe otherwise.”

In 1991, Downer, then part of the John Hewson-led Coalition opposition to Bob Hawke’s Labor government, told parliament: “We cannot walk away from the fact that Indonesia is a sovereign country. We do not want to fall into the trap of being neo-imperialist in our attitude to other countries.” He made the comment during a parliamentary debate over a motion moved by ALP MP Garrie Gibson in the wake of the November 1991 Dili massacre of East Timorese by the Indonesian military. Coalition MPs, including Downer and current attorney-general Philip Ruddock, wanted the motion watered down, though the motion’s threats to possibly reconsider military ties to the Indonesian dictatorship ultimately amounted to nothing.

Of course Downer’s warnings about being seen as “neo-imperialist” have only been trundled out when the villain of the piece is one of the “good guys”. “What do we do when these people are going around, certainly in the case of Saddam Hussein and Milosevic, slaughtering their people?”, Downer rhetorically asked during a March 2004 ABC Radio interview to justify Australia’s participation in the illegal invasion of Iraq. “How do we stop this? Is the notion of sovereignty so sacrosanct that we should stand by as the world did in Africa, in Rwanda during the 1990s ... should we just stand by and watch people being slaughtered?” That option is only applicable with causes that don’t find favour with the Australian government, the West Papuan struggle evidently among them.

In March 2005, Ed McWilliams, a member of the board of directors of the US-based Indonesia Human Rights Network, testified to a subcommittee of the US House of Representatives’ Committee on International Relations that it is “estimated that over 100,000 Papuans died in the years following the forced annexation of West Papua” by the Suharto regime in 1969.

Australian complicity in this slaughter stretches back to at least 1962, when Canberra prevented two pro-independence activists who had crossed the border into Papua New Guinea, then governed by Australia, from travelling to talks on the New York Agreement, the US-sponsored negotiations between Indonesia and the Netherlands that led to the so-called “Act of Free Choice” — the July-August 1969 farce during which just over 1000 Papuans, chosen and intimidated by Jakarta, voted for the integration of West Irian (as it was called) into the republic.

The outcome of the sham vote was never in doubt, and all parties to the agreement (no West Papuans were involved in the New York negotiations) knew it. A confidential October 4, 1968, message from Washington’s embassy in Jakarta to the US State Department praised Fernando Ortiz Sanz, the UN official sent to Indonesia to “assist” with the vote. He “has established [a] close rapport and a commendable degree of mutual understanding” on the implementation of the New York Agreement with Suharto and the dictator’s foreign minister. “He is ... attempting to devise a formula for an ‘act of free choice’ in West Irian which will result in affirmation of Indonesian sovereignty but which will also represent a fair reflection of the people’s desires and will stand the test of international opinion.”

A message from the US embassy in Jakarta sent in May 1968 reported on a consular trip to the province: "It is the opinion of most observers in the area that Indonesia will not accept independence for West Irian and will not permit a plebiscite which would reach such an outcome ... All but one Westerner contacted were persistent in the belief that Indonesia could not win an open election ... It is generally believed that the separatists will not accept permanent union without a struggle.

"The missionaries, UN employees and apparently some of the indigenous separatists assume that Indonesia will not give up West Irian willingly, and will arrange a form of plebiscite which will ensure a 'vote' for union ... According to most missionaries, virtually the entire population of the developed areas should be counted as anti-Indonesian ..."

"Regarding the magnitude of the opposition to Indonesian rule, probably a decided majority of the Irianese people, and possibly 85 to 90 percent, are in sympathy with the Free Papua cause or at least intensely dislike Indonesians", a cable from the US embassy sent on July 9, 1969, noted.

Documents released by the Australian foreign affairs department to SBS's Dateline program in 1999 revealed the depth of Australian backing for Indonesia's takeover of West Papua. In the August 26, 1999, Melbourne Age, SBS's Antony Balmain wrote that the documents revealed Canberra "maintained a secret military and intelligence relationship with Indonesia, aimed at eliminating armed pro-independence sentiment. The documents show Australian military officers collected evidence of Indonesian atrocities, including rapes, beatings, lootings and torching of villages."

Since 1969, the attitude of Australian capital — and therefore the policy of Australian capitalist governments — towards West Papuans' plight, as with the broader approach towards Indonesia since 1965, has remained consistent. The guiding factors in Australian policy have been maintaining the continued existence of a stable, capitalist Indonesia with a government generally willing to accommodate itself to the dictates of imperialism (a key factor in Australian support for the bloody overthrow of Sukarno's nationalist regime by Suharto and the subsequent massacre of more than half-a-million people) as well as the direct economic interests through trade and investment — trade between the two nations was \$10 billion in 2005-06 and around 400 Australian companies operate in Indonesia.

But despite the near unanimity regarding policy towards West Papua on the part of "our" politicians, most Australians support Papuans' right of self-determination. By February 21, only two of the eight submissions to the JSCT posted on the committee's website supported the treaty — that of the "Australian Patriot Movement" and a submission from Malcolm Cook of the right-wing Lowy Institute for International Policy who bemoaned the fact that "the Australian public seems largely unaware of how far democracy has advanced in Indonesia". According to an April 7-9, 2006, Newspann poll over 76% of Australians support self-determination for West Papua — a mere 5.5% oppose it.

Whether West Papua's future lies in remaining part of Indonesia or as an independent nation, Papuan discontent with Jakarta's rule will likely continue unless the region's ongoing economic, environmental and social problems are solved, and repression of Papuan discontent, including expressions of nationalism, is ended. This will almost certainly mean at some point redressing the fundamental injustice of the "Act of Free Choice", yet, with this latest treaty with Indonesia, the Australian government seems eager to cut off any possibility of this.

P.S.

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