

Interview: Indonesia's Repression Hasn't Broken the West Papuan Freedom Struggle

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Since 1963, the Indonesian state has occupied West Papua against the will of its people with the full backing of Australia and the US. Despite decades of brutal repression, Papuans are still rising up to demand their national liberation, at home, in Indonesia and internationally. An interview with Jason MacLeod by Bruce Knobloch.



Papuan activists shout slogans during a rally in Jakarta, Indonesia, on August 22, 2019. (Green Left Weekly)

The Indonesian occupation of West Papua has been in place since 1963, claiming at least 100,000 lives in a country whose total population is 2 million, around half of whom are indigenous Melanesian Papuans. West Papuan Independence Day, which fell on December 1 in 2020, inspired protests by Papuans in eight cities across Indonesia, despite the threat of state repression. Meanwhile, the main resistance coalition in exile has declared a provisional government. To gain a better insight into the ongoing struggle for West Papuan independence, Jacobin spoke to Jason MacLeod, cofounder of the Make West Papua Safe campaign.

Bruce Knobloch (BK)

How long has West Papua been occupied by the Indonesian state?

Jason MacLeod (JM)

It was first occupied in 1961. Under Indonesia's then-president Sukarno, there was a small-scale invasion. But it was quickly ended when Papuans rounded up Indonesian paratroopers and handed them over to the Dutch colonial authorities.

That triggered US involvement. In August 1962, the Kennedy administration brought representatives from the governments of Indonesia and the Netherlands to New York to work out an agreement. There were no West Papuans involved in those talks — it was totally undemocratic. The one positive feature of the 1962 New York Agreement was that it stipulated there must be an “act of free choice,” a referendum, based on universal suffrage, to determine the will of the people.

Before that referendum took place, the New York Agreement called for a United Nations-led

transitional administration — the first time that the UN played such a role. They stepped in during the second half of 1962 and stayed for nine months. On May 1, 1963, the UN handed over administrative responsibilities to the Indonesian government. Indonesia was meant to administer West Papua on behalf of the UN in the run-up to the agreed referendum. But from that point on, they basically became the occupier.

BK

Why wasn't West Papua part of the Indonesian state from the 1940s, during the uprising against Dutch rule? And on what basis do the people of West Papua claim self-determination or independence?

JM

Yes, Indonesia waged a war of national liberation against Dutch colonialism. When the Indonesians declared independence on August 17, 1945, West Papua was not included — it remained under Dutch control. So, when Indonesia became independent, its territory included the whole of the Dutch East Indies, except for West Papua.

The Dutch government argued that the Indonesian government had no historical claim over West Papua. They also insisted that the Papuans were totally different, culturally, from Indonesians. They argued that Papuans were Melanesians, while Indonesians were Asian.

On the basis of these arguments, the Dutch retained control of West Papua. Interestingly, a number of Indonesian independence leaders did recognize that the Papuans should be able to rule themselves, and that the Indonesian government had no legitimate claim to West Papua.

BK

The island we refer to as New Guinea is divided by a straight line that really has no meaning, ethnoculturally.

JM

The line that runs down the 161st meridian divides indigenous people. All along that line, on either side, there are people who have their houses on one side of the border and their food gardens on the other side. It's a totally artificial border with no relevance at all to the realities of Papuan people's lives.

In the run-up to what Papuans call the Act of No Choice, the Indonesian government said the Papuans weren't ready or able to vote. The rest of the world basically capitulated to the Indonesian government's pressure.

On the other side of the border, for all its faults and problems, the Australian colonial administration [in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea] accepted that the people had a right to universal suffrage. This was an absolutely vital part of their transition to independence as Papua New Guinea [in 1975]. So, yes, the two halves of the island of New Guinea have had quite different political histories.

BK

You mentioned the "Act of No Choice," or, to use its official Indonesian title, the Act of Free Choice. What did it entail?

JM

The so-called Act of Free Choice happened in 1969, over the course of several weeks between July and August. Going back to 1962, the Dutch and Indonesian states had agreed to hold a referendum. However, by the mid 1960s, West Papua was in a state of rebellion, waging open warfare against Indonesian rule. The Indonesian government launched aerial bombardment of villages. In response, Papuans formed the OPM (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, Free Papua Movement), an armed paramilitary force.

The Indonesian government then backed away from any kind of democratic transition and simply said: "No, it's ours." For a while they withdrew from the UN over the conflict. After some pressure, they returned to the UN and agreed to allow some kind of expression of the people's will. But the Indonesians proposed their own system, which basically involved a large-scale process of consultation. The UN, shamefully, agreed to that.

What this meant was that the Indonesian authorities selected 1,026 people to represent different parts of the island — less than 0.01 percent of the population, which was around 800,000 at the time. In the end, four representatives were sick or didn't participate for other reasons, so the total number of Papuans who participated in the Act of No Choice was just 1,022, according to research by the academics John Saltford and Pieter Drooglever. We know the names of everyone who participated in those sham consultations.

The Indonesians brought together these representatives to meeting places in seven areas around the country: Merauke, Wamena, Nabire, Fakfak, Sorong, Manokwari, and Biak. They could only deliver their speeches under heavy Indonesian military guard. The military officials then said to those in attendance: "If you favor integration with Indonesia, raise your hand." So, there was no free or popular vote, and a lot of intimidation, with many people interred, killed, or disappeared.

I have spoken with a number of survivors from those days, and all of them confirmed that the process was totally manipulated. They all told me that they feared for their lives and the lives of their families. They saw that anyone who dissented or protested was rounded up and taken away.

BK

They voted for integration with Indonesia unanimously, at the barrel of a gun?

JM

Yes. But there was no ballot or anything like that. The Indonesian military guards literally said: "Raise your hand if you want to be part of Indonesia." There are pictures of this. The Australian journalist Hugh Lunn was there at the time. If you look at these pictures, you can see sullen faces with hands raised, surrounded by Indonesian police and military. It was a totally orchestrated, shameful affair.

BK

Who led the resistance? What have its main structures and activities been?

JM

There has always been resistance against colonial rule. In fact, West Papuans have survived three colonial occupations — first the Dutch, then the Japanese during World War II, and now they are occupied by the Indonesian government. Prior to the Dutch, Papuans fought against incursions by

the Spanish and the Portuguese. When the Dutch arrived, they resisted them, too. They resisted the Japanese. And now, they are resisting the third wave of attempted colonization.

Initially, the OPM led the most overt, armed resistance. But recently, the resistance has transitioned away from waging an armed struggle in the jungles and mountains of West Papua, toward a popular uprising that mobilizes civilians in the cities and towns. A much younger generation often leads this fight. The armed struggle does continue, particularly in the mountains. But overwhelmingly, the resistance is now a civilian, nonviolent, popular one.

BK

It's a similar trajectory to what we've seen in the Palestinian resistance, for example.

JM

Absolutely. That's a very good comparison. Recently, my colleagues and I have been facilitating dialogue between Palestinians and Papuans. The hypocrisy of the Indonesian government is immense — they support the Palestinian right to self-determination and have even set up an embassy in Ramallah. But at the same time, they rigorously maintain a colonial occupation in West Papua.

In addition to the combination of small pockets of armed resistance in the countryside and a powerful civilian uprising in the cities and towns, there are two other dynamics. The first is that many independence leaders are based outside the country, where they are much freer to speak their mind and to move around. They formed a coalition in Vanuatu in December 2014.

I was there for that meeting. It established the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, an umbrella group that has brought together three large coalitions, all with roots inside the country. The current chair of that organization is Benny Wenda, who is based in Oxford, England.

As well as that, there's the Free Papua Movement-West Papua National Liberation Army (OPM-TPNPB). Both groups insist that West Papua is a sovereign nation, and both want their country back. They want independence.

The other dynamic is really interesting, I think. Nothing this significant occurred during the East Timor liberation struggle. There's a newly formed group of Indonesian solidarity activists who go by the acronym FRI-West Papua, which means the Indonesian People's Front for West Papua (Front Rakyat Indonesia untuk West Papua).

They have bases in more than a dozen cities and provinces across Indonesia. They are all Indonesians, and are mostly university students, but they've also got links with civil society organizations and mass-based organizations from around Indonesia. They include Muslims and Christians, so it is multiethnic, multireligious, and they support the right of West Papuans to self-determination. There was no similar Indonesia-wide organization supporting East Timorese independence during their struggle under the Suharto dictatorship.

The FRI-West Papua activists show great courage. They have faced tear gas and water cannons. They have been beaten up by the Indonesian police or thrown in jail. Their members have been expelled from universities for organizing protests on campus, and they work very closely with West Papuans living in Indonesia, like the Alliance of Papuan University Students (Aliansi Mahasiswa Papua).

So the struggle is being waged over three domains: inside the occupied territory of West Papua,

inside the territory of the occupier, and outside the country, led by Papuans in exile, and backed by a growing network of solidarity groups.

BK

How many people are estimated to have died in the occupation and resistance?

JM

We don't know for sure. But everyone I have ever spoken to from West Papua has lost family and friends. You regularly hear the figure of 100,000. Some Papuan leaders I know say half a million Papuans have been killed.

BK

Why is the Indonesian state so keen to maintain its domination of West Papua? There's extensive mineral wealth underneath West Papua's forests — is it about economic imperialism? Or do they fear that independence will impact on the unity of Indonesia?

JM

Tragically, the Indonesian state has transformed in the space of a couple of generations from an anti-colonial force into a colonial occupier. Yes, there are massive natural resources in West Papua. You've got the world's largest gold and copper mine, Freeport. You've got oil, gas, and uranium. You've got incredible timber reserves and fisheries.

The Indonesian police and military elite largely control all of those industries, along with an extensive network of illegal businesses like gun-running, prostitution, and trade in wildlife. They use them to enrich themselves. Several key figures in the government also control resource extraction — they run palm oil and logging businesses and hold shares in mining as well. It is a classic case of extractive colonialism.

Also, as you point out, the Indonesian state wants to maintain what it calls its territorial unity. The elite is still smarting over the loss of East Timor, and they don't want to lose any more territory, especially one as wealthy as West Papua. Ironically, Indonesia prides itself on being a multicultural and multireligious nation. At the same time, it is incredibly racist toward West Papuans.

BK

What position does the Australian government take toward the aspirations of West Papuans for independence?

JM

The Australian government actively supports the occupation under the 2006 Lombok Treaty. Australian politicians refuse to talk about the root political problem that drives the conflict — namely, the denial of West Papua's right to self-determination.

But worse than that, Australian politicians actively facilitate economic extractive colonialism by supporting mining companies. And, even worse, they are training and arming the Indonesian police and military. The Australian Federal Police (AFP) helped to set up Special Detachment 88 (D88), the counterinsurgency paramilitary police squad. It has summarily executed over a dozen leaders of the nonviolent resistance, including several of my friends.

Since 2004, the AFP have trained more than 21,000 Indonesian police at the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC). The AFP also bring in trainers from the Special Air Service (SAS) — possibly even some of the same soldiers involved in alleged war crimes in Afghanistan. We don't know because the AFP refuses to be transparent. The AFP was involved in setting up D88 and JCLEC with the support of the US government. US corporations have massive economic interests in West Papua, notably through the Freeport mine, which has its headquarters in Arizona.

BK

So there is no meaningful difference between the position of Washington and the position of Canberra?

JM

In fact, Washington looks to Canberra for leadership.

BK

What similarities are there between the Papuan independence movement and the ultimately successful struggle for independence by the people of Timor-Leste? What can West Papuan activists and those in solidarity with them learn from that experience?

JM

I think the first thing is hope. I remember being active in East Timor solidarity campaigns and talking to Jakarta lobbyists. They used to say that East Timor is a lost cause, and that you just have to make the best of a bad situation. The East Timorese never accepted that wisdom, just like the West Papuans.

BK

Or the Palestinians, or the Saharawis.

JM

Exactly. Or the Nagas, or the Kashmiris, or the Tibetans, or the Uyghurs. I think the big lesson is that nothing can stop a people who are determined to be free. I've been accompanying this struggle for over thirty years now, returning to travel inside the country most years, and sometimes several times a year. West Papuans are absolutely hell-bent on getting their country back.

They are not going to back down, and they don't care what political scientists in Canberra, Washington, Beijing, or anywhere else say. They want to determine their own future. There is power in persistence, in showing up day after day after day and not giving up.

The second thing is unity. The Timorese resistance movement went through a unification process. They brought nearly all parts of the struggle together. And they developed a unified strategy — most important, including the ability to make decisions together. It's hugely significant that the West Papuans are attempting the same thing. The work of developing a unified organization is still in progress. But in terms of unity of purpose, the West Papuans are clear: they want their country back.

The third thing we can learn is that self-determination struggles are notoriously difficult to win. The Timorese showed that you need to wage the struggle in three domains at the same time. First of all,

they waged the struggle inside East Timor. Second, they waged it inside Indonesia, building strong links with the pro-democracy forces who opposed the Suharto dictatorship. Third, they built solidarity outside of the country, not just in Portugal, the former colonial power, but right across the world.

Ali Alatas, the former Indonesian foreign minister, recalled traveling all around the world: everywhere he went, there would be a demonstration by Timorese people and their supporters. Eventually, he said that East Timor was like a pebble in the shoe: it makes it so painful to walk, it's better to just take off the shoe and take out the pebble.

BK

What is the Make West Papua Safe campaign asking supporters to do?

JM

Our goal is to disrupt and ultimately stop foreign governmental support for the Indonesian police and military. That's the focused contribution we can make to the larger political and human rights struggle being waged by West Papuans.

So, we are inviting people to join us. We are waging a focused and strategic campaign that targets the way that foreign governments prop up the Indonesian police, and the way arms companies supply the police and military. We also have a focus on ripping up the Lombok Treaty, the policy framework that commits Canberra to supporting Indonesian rule in West Papua.

BK

What other connections would you encourage readers, especially from the United States, to draw? Where should they go to demonstrate solidarity with the West Papua campaign?

JM

We've been working with Black Lives Matter organizers in the United States. One of them, Sarah Thompson, visited West Papua in 2015. The Papuans had their own anti-racist uprising last year, in August and September. The hashtag #papuanlivesmatter started trending, and for the first time, there was a conversation inside Indonesia about racism.

International solidarity will be critical because the US police, including the FBI, CIA, and US Secret Service, are also training the Indonesian police. The US government, along with the Australian government, sponsored and trained the militarized police unit called Special Detachment 88, which basically is a state-funded death squad.

Following the #papuanlivesmatter hashtag is a small way to connect with the West Papuan struggle, for folks who support the Black Lives Matter movement and oppose racist policing, in the United States and elsewhere.

P.S.

• Jacobine. 01.14.2021:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/01/indonesia-west-papua-colonialism-occupation>

- Jason MacLeod is a community organizer, educator, and researcher based in Australia. He is cofounder of Make West Papua Safe.

About the Interviewer

Bruce Knobloch is an activist and educator. He has a particular interest in labor movement struggles and class consciousness.