

Indonesia Can't Quell West Papua's Growing Independence Movement

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Jokowi's approach to the restive province is fundamentally flawed.

When Joko Widodo, better known as Jokowi, became Indonesia's president in 2014, he [pledged](#) to improve social services in the restive Indonesian province of West Papua, where a pro-independence movement has been brewing since the 1960s. At the time, Jokowi [claimed](#) that once these improvements occurred, "the political tension [in West Papua] will drop."

That did not happen. In reality, tensions have only escalated since Jokowi's election, particularly after his reelection in 2019. Papuan pro-independence and anti-racism activism has grown, deepening rifts between the government and Papuans, along with their Indonesian allies.

Jokowi has tried to paper over Papuans' grievances through increased infrastructure development in the province and, unlike his predecessors, by regularly visiting West Papua. Earlier this month, for instance, he appeared at the opening of Indonesia's National Games Week, held this year in West Papua, where, in an undoubtedly carefully staged event, he played soccer with Papuan boys who were clad in red-and-white attire, the colors of the Indonesian flag. But these overtures can't hide the fact that Jokowi's second term has been marked by increasingly authoritarian policies toward West Papua, which will likely bolster a pro-independence movement that is already gathering momentum.

In 1949, when Indonesia formally gained independence from its colonizer, the Netherlands, the European country did not also relinquish control of its nearby colonial territory, West New Guinea (now known as West Papua). But Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, [considered](#) West New Guinea part of his country due to their shared experience of colonial rule as part of the Dutch East Indies. His administration thus [waged](#) a campaign to gain control of the territory.

Under pressure from the United States, in 1962, the Netherlands [undertook](#) negotiations with Indonesia without the involvement of Papuans. The New York Agreement was thus born, whereby the Netherlands pledged to transfer control of West New Guinea to the United Nations and then to Indonesia.

Once Indonesia gained control of the territory, in 1969, it held a sham referendum to determine whether Papuans wanted West Papua to be integrated into Indonesia or to be independent. Ironically named the Act of Free Choice, the referendum [involved](#) less than 1 percent of Papuans, who were coerced into voting in favor of integration.

Since then, Papuans have fought for independence through both peaceful protests and armed struggle, although Indonesia has often made little distinction between the two. Pro-independence Papuans view Indonesian rule over West Papua as a form of [colonialism](#) and argue that West Papua should be independent due to ethnic and religious differences: While Indonesians are predominantly Muslim, Papuans are largely [Christian](#). They also [identify](#) as Melanesian, unlike most Indonesians.

The independence movement is also [motivated](#) by the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Indonesian army and other security forces in West Papua since the 1960s, including killings, torture, rape, and imprisonment. Many members of the army and other security forces have not been tried for their involvement in these human rights violations.

Jokowi's first term as president was marked by some promising developments for West Papua. His government released at least [32](#) Papuan political prisoners, including key independence activist Filep Karma, who had served 10 years of a 15-year sentence for raising the Morning Star flag, the banned flag of the Papuan independence movement. During his first term, Jokowi also [pledged](#) to remove long-standing restrictions that limited foreign journalists' access to West Papua.

Yet after Jokowi's May 2019 reelection, in a disturbing sign of his lack of concern about human rights in West Papua, he appointed his opponent in the election, former Lt. Gen. Prabowo Subianto, as defense minister that October—despite the fact that Prabowo had been [implicated](#) in multiple human rights abuses, including killing civilians in West Papua in 1996.

Three months after Jokowi's reelection, in the Indonesian city of Surabaya, Indonesian nationalists and soldiers were filmed [referring](#) to Papuan students in the city as *monyet* (the Indonesian word for monkeys), a racist term long used by Indonesians to [frame](#) Papuans as primitive and backward. Footage of this incident made the rounds on social media and, in response, large anti-racism and pro-independence protests [held](#) by Papuans and attended by Indonesians broke out across West Papua and other parts of Indonesia. Many were peaceful, but in some cases protesters [damaged](#) infrastructure.

Jokowi's administration then [sent](#) 6,000 soldiers into West Papua, cut internet in the province, [banned](#) foreign nationals, and [blocked](#) requests by foreign diplomats and the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit West Papua. The administration claimed that these measures were necessary to enable Indonesia to [restore](#) "security and order" in West Papua and to ensure that foreigners were not [harmed](#) as a result of the "security situation" in the province.

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This argument is highly questionable. The government's actions constitute an attempt to prevent international scrutiny of the human rights situation and to justify curtailing Papuans' freedom of expression and restricting the press in West Papua.

Additionally, Indonesia's attorney general's office spearheaded the [prosecution](#) of seven Papuans for participating in the protests. The government sought jail terms of up to 17 years for the individuals, some of whom belong to the key pacifist Papuan pro-independence organization, the United Liberation Movement for West Papua. In 2020, an Indonesian court [sentenced](#) them to up to 11 months in prison for treason.

Those protesters are just a handful of the 48 Papuans who, as of last December, were [jailed](#) for engaging in nonviolent resistance against the Indonesian state. Although Jokowi [pledged](#) to release all Papuan political prisoners in 2015, it seems ever more unlikely that he will do so, as his approach to West Papua has become increasingly uncompromising.

Similarly, Jokowi's pledge that foreign journalists would be able to freely access West Papua has not materialized. Journalists still face difficulty in entering the province. Those who do manage to enter have their movement [restricted](#) and are monitored by Indonesian forces that limit their ability to report on human rights abuses.

Alarmingly, earlier this year, Indonesia's coordinating minister for political, legal, and security affairs, Mahfud MD, [designated](#) all armed Papuan separatists and individuals affiliated with them as terrorists under Indonesia's counterterrorism laws, which [allow](#) individuals to be jailed for up to three weeks without charge. When he made this announcement, Mahfud [argued](#) that using violence that causes "damage or destruction" also constituted terrorism. This designation is significant. It will likely be used to detain Papuans for engaging in nonlethal civil disobedience—notably the destruction of infrastructure—or even just advocating for independence. It also helps Indonesian security forces in their attempts to justify extraordinary and extreme measures they use against pro-independence Papuans on the grounds that they ostensibly pose a security threat.

During his second term, Jokowi has thus doubled down on a securitized policy, responding to Papuan activism by further [militarizing](#) West Papua and perpetrating widespread violations of Papuans' civil and political rights. These actions, which seek to quash the Papuan pro-independence movement, will likely backfire. They will only strengthen the movement and exacerbate Papuan hostility toward the Indonesian government.

Even Jokowi's nonmilitaristic attempts at stamping out pro-independence sentiment won't be enough to quell the movement. For instance, his administration is trying to [accelerate](#) economic development in the territory—a policy that was also pursued by his predecessors—by building infrastructure and providing microfinance. Despite West Papua housing the world's [largest](#) gold mine and second-largest copper mine—which is run by Freeport-McMoRan, a U.S. mining company and the largest taxpayer in Indonesia—West Papua is the [poorest](#) province in Indonesia. Still, Jokowi's focus on economically developing the province is unlikely to curb demands for Papuan independence, which run much deeper than Indonesia's economic policies toward the territory.

In the international arena, Jokowi's administration has responded to allegations and cases of human rights violations against West Papuans and their Indonesian supporters by denying these abuses. For example, in 2019, in response to U.N. criticism of the government's persecution of Indonesian human rights lawyer Veronica Koman, Indonesia's permanent mission to the U.N. [argued](#) that information that Koman posted online about human rights abuses and racism against Papuans was "false news." Similarly, at a U.N. General Assembly session in 2020, after Vanuatu requested that Indonesia address allegations of human rights abuses in West Papua, Indonesia's U.N. representative, Silvany Austin Pasaribu, [lambasted](#) Vanuatu for discussing "artificial human rights concerns."

Vanuatu, however, is one of the few nations that supports the Papuan independence movement. The United States, Australia, countries in Southeast Asia, and many other states [support](#) Indonesian rule over West Papua and are hesitant to [condemn](#) these human rights abuses, because they prioritize their relationship with Indonesia as the world's fourth-most-populous country and Southeast Asia's largest market.

Early in his presidency, Jokowi stated that he [wanted](#) "the approach in Papua to change" and no longer be a "repressive security approach." Despite this rhetoric, Jokowi chose a repressive path that is well trodden by most of his predecessors—and that he will likely continue to follow for the remainder of his presidency, unless he decides to finally abide by the pledge he [made](#) during a visit to West Papua in 2014 to "listen to the [Papuan] people's voices."

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