

# The need for understanding Papua's history, grievances

Saturday 3 December 2005, by [BUDIARDJO Carmel](#) (Date first published: 21 July 2005).

It has been asserted in your columns this week (Local Elections and Papuan Politics, July 11, 2005) that because the majority of West Papuans participated in general elections in 2004, they were therefore participating in an internal referendum. The writer also claims that they participated in an external referendum, known as Pepera (the so-called Act of Free Choice) which took place in 1969.

He did not dispute the fact that only one thousand Papuans participated in Pepera but alleged that because the result was endorsed by the United Nations, the Indonesian government was justified in "relying on the results of Pepera" for its claim that West Papua is a legitimate part of the Indonesian Republic.

In the first place, to liken general elections to a referendum shows the shallowness of this analysis. Elections are about choosing representatives of different political parties which in today's Indonesia consist of nearly fifty parties. Whereas a referendum is the occasion for the electorate to choose between two or more options, and opinions often cross party lines.

Whether or not people participate in elections relates not only to making choices about party programs but may also be generated by fear or anxiety that by not participating, they could face accusations of separatism or sedition.

Recent events in West Papua, such as the military operations underway in the Central Highlands district of Puncak Jaya, which forced thousands of villagers to take refuge in the forest, abandoning their homes and gardens, suggest that fear of the authorities still plays a role in people's decision about participating in political events.

Now that Indonesia has entered an important new political era in which democratic rights are recognized as one of the basic rights of the population, it is strange that someone who presumes to have the expertise to hold forth about political affairs fails to recognize that the Act of Free Choice conducted by the Indonesian authorities in the Soeharto era was anything but democratic.

At the time of the Act, the population of Papua was estimated as being a little over 800,000, yet no one disputes the fact that only one thousand persons (to be precise, 1,022), not even one per cent of the population, participated in that Act.

The Act was conducted following the New York Agreement of 1962 which was concluded as the result of intervention from Washington which feared that Indonesia, then under President Sukarno, was getting too close to the Soviet bloc. The agreement was concluded between Indonesia and The Netherlands, without Papuan participation or consultation.

As a result of Dutch insistence, it included a clause providing for an Act within six years that should be held in accordance with "international practice" This can surely only mean one thing, namely the principle of "one man, one vote".

The issue of West Papua was discussed in the House of Lords last December. On that occasion, the

Bishop of Oxford asked the British government for its views about the Act of Free Choice which he had described as being an occasion when a thousand representatives “were coerced into declaring for inclusion in Indonesia”.

Replying for the government, Baroness Symons said: “He is right to say that there were 1,000 handpicked representatives and they were largely coerced into declaring for inclusion in Indonesia”. One can hardly disregard the views of the British Government, stated in the country’s highest political forum.

As we know here in the UK, the British government is closely following events in West Papua, not least because a major British company, BP, has decided to invest massively in the exploitation of West Papua’s vast reserves of natural gas. While seeking to promote this investment, the government has not refrained from acknowledging that the way in which the territory was incorporated into the Indonesian Republic was seriously flawed.

West Papua has now been officially part of Indonesia for more than thirty years, or even longer if you include the six years following the Dutch withdrawal in 1963, yet the sense of grievance still runs deep.

When President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono made a visit to West Papua last December, shortly after his inauguration and after saying that the resolution of the conflict in West Papua was “one of his top priorities”, the leaders of all the churches there decided to boycott the visit. As far as we know, not even during the worst days of the Soeharto era did such a thing ever happen.

No one should make the mistake of disregarding the views of the churches in West Papua which have always played a prominent role and have always acted in the best interests of the largely Christian population.

There are many serious problems in West Papua, not least the confusion created by the government’s decision first to establish Special Autonomy, and then to split the territory into three or perhaps even into five provinces. Allegations are being made that money intended for running the special autonomy administration is being used to cover the cost of ongoing military operations.

There is also concern that the continuing influx of migrants from other parts of Indonesia is turning the Papuans into a minority in their own homeland. In some of the major cities such as Jayapura, this is already true.

It may be true that events in West Papua are too infrequently reported in Indonesia’s national media which perhaps accounts for a great deal of misunderstanding about conditions there. We can only hope that this will be speedily remedied.

In particular, commentators should play closer attention to the events in the 1960s which lie at the root of the grievances of the people of West Papua.

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**P.S.**

\* Published on Tapol’s website.

\* “Jakarta Post” article by Carmel Budiardjo of TAPOL. The writer is the founder of TAPOL, the Indonesia Human Rights Campaign, set up in 1973.