

Indonesian Government Needs New Approach to Resolve Papua Issue, Experts Say

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Indonesia's easternmost provinces of Papua and West Papua still suffer from a persisting separatist stigma and the government's security-centered approach to addressing grievances in the region. Civil society movements including the dominant lay Moslem movement Nahdlatul Ulama, emphasize a humanitarian approach and 'winning hearts.'

During his 2014 election campaign, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo made several promises to the people of Papua, including developing the region's infrastructure and resolving cases of past human rights violations.

Since then, Papua has seen massive development of roads and bridges, which the government hopes will improve access and connectivity, thus paving the way for development in other areas also.

However, according to Imam Aziz, executive chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, the emphasis on infrastructure development must be in line with the aspirations of ethnic Papuans.

"The current approach is inadequate to address issues in Papua thoroughly. I think they are on track with this path, but it's not enough. You must steal the hearts of Papuans; that's most important," Imam said during a recent public discussion in Jakarta.

He said the Jokowi administration focuses on security rather than a cultural approach, which emboldens the assumption that Papuans are inherently separatists.

"There's this assumption that every Papuan is a separatist, unless proven otherwise," Imam said.

In a [report](#) published this week, Amnesty International claims that Indonesian security forces have committed nearly 100 extrajudicial killings in Papua and West Papua between January 2010 and February 2018.

Most perpetrators, which comprise members of both the police and military, have been let off with little to no accountability. None of them has been taken to a civilian court.

Through the years, officials have used the anti-separatist argument to justify the excessive use of force in security operations in Papua, but Amnesty's report reveal that most unlawful killings took place in nonpolitical settings.

Imam believes the Jokowi administration must step up its game and improve its understanding of the people and social environment in Papua.

"Infrastructure is good, it's one way to do it. But the approach must be more convincing, that they

are indeed developing Papua; not only the physical aspects, but also the people and their culture,” Imam said.

Speaking during the same event, Sylvana Apituley, an expert on politics, law, defense, security and human rights at the Presidential Office, said the current approach has actually prioritized the anthropological aspect.

Sylvana cited a 2017 presidential instruction on Papuan development, which she said was a product of comprehensive discussions involving the people of Papua, as part of an effort to ensure that the final result reflected the needs of the people in the region.

“Our priorities are to save Papuans through education, health facilities and economic empowerment,” Sylvana said.

The government’s focus on infrastructure is seen as the best option to support economic development in Papua, she added.

The Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) said in a report last year that the government miscalculated its policies in Papua, which were largely based on the assumption that economic intervention alone can address deep political grievances.

‘Blood Bond’ With Violence

In 2014, police fired shots during a protest in Paniai, killing four people and injuring 11 others. According to witness accounts, police officers shot a protester at close range after he fell to the ground.

The incident sparked a response from Jokowi, who was recently elected at the time, who said he would bring those responsible to justice as soon as possible.

Latifah Anum Siregar, director of the Papua Democracy Alliance, said similar incidents occur more often than otherwise in Papua, and every member of the citizenry in the two provinces will likely have their own memories as victims, or being related to one.

“There is disappointment, sadness and anger, and they express it in a variety of ways, sometimes through music or other artistic performances. Across Papua, everyone has a blood bond with violence,” Anum said.

She stressed the importance of a judicial process to address these cases in order to stop the ongoing cycle of violence.

Furthermore, the stigma against ethnic Papuans continues to pose a challenge.

“There is this stigma that if we talk about Papua, it’s always a matter of independence. But what is the government doing to make Papuans love Indonesia?” Anum said.

There are many layers to the ongoing issues in Papua, including health, education and land rights, which require new approaches that are in tune with local contexts, she added.

Sylvana said the Jokowi administration keeps an open ear to the ongoing issues in Papua and tries to carefully address any conflicts that arise.

“There should be no doubt that Jokowi’s heart is in Papua. Just look at how many times he’s visited,

with a spontaneous approach toward the people. This is our biggest capital to continue discussion on more serious matters,” she said.

However, the government cannot do the work on its own and requires support from relevant stakeholders, Sylvana added.

In spite of Jokowi’s annual visits to the country’s poorest region, Papua continues to face a variety of struggles. Those who were affected by the extrajudicial killings for example, are still demanding justice and due process.

Usman Hamid, executive director of Amnesty International Indonesia, believes Jokowi is aware of what is happening in Papua, but unable to create policies at the central level to improve the situation.

There is a slip in commitment towards Papua despite initial progress at the beginning of his presidency, Usman said.

He said this was largely due to the position of chief security minister, which at the beginning of Jokowi’s administration was held by Luhut Pandjaitan and later handed over to Wiranto. Both are retired army generals.

“The role of the same minister replaced by Wiranto, has changed so much the state of willingness [and] commitment of Jokowi’s administration [to Papua],” Usman said.

Though the human rights agenda may not seem like a priority at the moment, Usman said he believes international coverage and more public attention on Papua can encourage Jokowi to reprioritize.

However, the lack of progress thus far is yet another barrier that must be addressed effectively.

As Indonesia heads toward a presidential election next year, NU’s Imam said it could be a golden opportunity for the people of Papua to voice their aspirations.

“This is a chance for the people of Papua to forge some kind of a political contract with Jokowi – if he’s running for president, what will he do [for Papua]?” Imam said.

Anum of the Papua Democracy Alliance warns that if the government continues to leave human rights violations in Papua unresolved, it will only further cement disappointment towards the country.

“At this point, there is a lack of trust. A step must be taken to establish goodwill and support to once again gain the trust of Papuans,” Anum said.

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