

Jakarta and Papua: Where There are No Risk-Free Choices

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Recent events in Papua underscore the fact that there is no solution that is entirely free of risk for Jakarta. Instead, the choice is between separate sets of risks.

On 29 April, Mahfud MD, the Coordinating Minister for Politics, Legal, and Security Affairs, formally labelled the West Papua National Army-Free Papua Organization (TNPB-OPM) as a terrorist organisation. This decision will allow counter-terrorism security forces to undertake operations against the TNPB. Counter-terrorism units, such as Densus 88, can pre-emptively [arrest and detain civilians](#) on suspicion of supporting a terrorist group.

The decision follows the 26 April shooting of Brigadier General I Gusti Putu Danny, the head of the State Intelligence Agency (BIN) in Papua, by TNPB forces. There had been several earlier armed clashes. Before this series of incidents, the TNPB was already designated an “Armed Criminal Group”, denying the political character of the TNPB.

Most of the political players in mainstream Indonesian and Papuan politics supported the decision. However, Papua Governor Lukas Enembe publicly opposed it. He urged Jakarta to engage in [“exchanges in words and ideas, not bullets.”](#)

Enembe’s call may be a cry in the wilderness, which sums up the nature of the current dead-end in Papua – an impasse that has its origins in history. West Papua became a part of Indonesia flowing from negotiations between the Republic of Indonesia and the Kingdom of the Netherlands between 1949 and 1962. As West Papua had been part of the Netherlands East Indies, it was accepted by all state parties that negotiation of the decolonisation process would be between Jakarta and Den Haag.

In 1961 Papuan political figures issued a statement calling for recognition of their rights to become a nation and to be able to participate in the decolonisation process. Neither Jakarta nor Den Haag took notice of this. Between 1961 and 2021, with a too-short Papuan Spring between 1998-2000 during the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid, there has never been any process whereby Papuans could openly debate the various possible futures.

Open discussion of all possible futures, especially separation from Papua or the need for a referendum on this subject, is deemed illegal in Indonesia. This makes even peaceful campaigning on the issue against the law. This potential has now been strengthened with counter-terrorist units able to make preemptive arrests. The illegality of peaceful political campaigning has been highlighted by the arrest of Victor Yeimo, the international representative of the West Papua National Council (KNPB), a campaign organisation. Based in West Papua, the entity employs a peaceful mobilisation strategy that is distinct from TNPB-OPM.

The deeper problem here is that Jakarta is trapped by a 60-year old history of denying open debate by stakeholders, foremost the “orang asli Papua” (indigenous Papuans), about possible Papuan futures, whether independence or some form of existence within

Indonesia.

[Yeimo was arrested](#) on 9 May and accused of “makar” (treason or rebellion). Security forces allege that he was involved in organising a large-scale mobilisation of people in 2019 protesting racism against indigenous Papuans. He is [accused](#) of disrespecting state symbols, such as the national flag, and giving a pro-independence speech. He was accused of orchestrating demonstrations that led to rioting, [which does not appear to be factual](#).

The occurrence of the two developments in quick secession — the designation of TNPB as a “terrorist” organisation and the arrest of Yeimo — has, in turn, elicited one of the broadest joint statements of protest so far over this issue. On 16 May, 31 civil society organisations, including church, student, intellectual and human rights groups in Papua, issued a statement calling for Yeimo’s immediate release. This follows several statements issued by Jakarta-based groups, including the statutory body, the [National Human Rights Commission](#) (Komnasham), criticising the “terrorist” designation of the TNPB.

Komnasham urged a prioritisation of transparent implementation of existing laws rather than moving to a situation where there may be more violence. This fear may turn out to be well-founded, as the [OPM issued a statement](#) on 2 May. It said: “If Indonesia pursues a program of terror and genocide against the West Papuan civilian population (as has been happening for almost 60 years) and the international community does not intervene, the TNPB-OPM freedom fighters will announce a campaign to kill not only (members of) the Indonesian military which is occupying (Papua) illegally, but also Javanese and other illegal Indonesian residents who are increasingly stealing the holy land and resources of the West Papuan people”.

The deeper problem here is that Jakarta is trapped by a 60-year old history of denying open debate by stakeholders, foremost the “orang asli Papua” (indigenous Papuans), about possible Papuan futures, whether independence or some form of existence within Indonesia. Understandably, an open debate would run the risk of pro-independence sentiments proving dominant – to the detriment of Indonesia’s national interests, as during the Papuan Spring. At that time, however, very little effort was made to win an argument with pro-independence Papuans; instead, Jakarta preferred to close down the debate as soon as Wahid was removed from office.

As of 25 May, [demonstrations continue](#) in Papua, demanding Yeimo’s release. Firefights between the TNPB and the Indonesian military continue. These activities highlight the risks of current policies: the possibility of an escalation in violent conflict, the emergence of more victims, and consolidating the deepening perceptions of Jakarta as a coloniser, both among ordinary [demonstrations continue](#) and within the Papuan elite. For Jakarta, there is no risk-free solution. Rather, the choice is between different risks: the risk of having to argue against pro-independence sentiment in open debate and the possibility of losing the debate, versus the risk of worsening violent conflict, the hardening of all positions and increasing international responses and then “losing the debate” in another form – possibly a calamitous one.

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