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Papuan unity and Australia-Indonesia relations

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THE decision by Australia to grant Temporary Protection Visas to 43 Papuans due to alleged human rights violations has created yet another diplomatic rift between Australia and Indonesia. In this group of refugees, the most prominent is pro-independence activist Hernan Wainggai, who had served time in jail for treason. His uncle, Tom Wainggai, a leading academic and independence activist, was sentenced to 20 years in jail for organizing a flag-raising event in 1988 and died in Jakarta's Cipinang prison in 1996.

The initial fallout saw Indonesia recalling its ambassador and Australia's embassy in Jakarta targeted by demonstrators. Tension was further exacerbated by the publication of tit-for-tat cartoons in the *Rakyat Merdeka* and the *Weekend Australian*. The former depicted Australian Prime Minister John Howard as a dog having sexual relations with Foreign Minister Alexander Downer with the accompanying caption, "I want Papua!" The latter depicted a grinning canine version of President Yudhoyono copulating with a glum-looking Papuan man telling him, "Don't take this the wrong way!"

Mr Downer was quick to issue a press release distancing the Australian government from the defamatory cartoon. In the South Sulawesi capital of Makassar, Islamic students threatened to "sweep" any Australian citizens out of the city.

Indonesia's exasperation

Indonesians are exasperated and wonder how the Australian government could offer asylum to the Papuans and still say that it believes in Indonesian sovereignty. President Yudhoyono had given his personal guarantee to Mr Howard that the Papuans would not face harm or be imprisoned if returned. His appeals however have fallen on deaf ears. Is the Australian response not a criticism of the way Indonesia manages that province, further implying that Dr Yudhoyono cannot guarantee that the Papuans will be safe if they go back to Indonesia?

To be fair, the Australian response is an implicit indication that Jakarta cannot exercise complete authority over the situation in Papua. It remains a military-controlled province. Such views are echoed within Indonesia. Prominent Indonesian political commentator Jusuf Wanandi in a recent *Jakarta Post* article expressed his lack of confidence in the government's ability to implement the President's guarantee.

Indonesia laid claim to the area in 1963, naming it Irian Jaya, and was granted sovereignty by the United Nations after a much critiqued plebiscite in 1969. Indigenous Papuans were not united in embracing their new Indonesian rulers. Since the 1970s, a low intensity armed

insurgency led by a small band of separatist guerrillas, the Organisasi Papua Merdeka, continues to operate near the Papua New Guinea border. The movement was smashed by the Indonesian Army in the 1970s and 1980s but armed struggle, while an irritant, does not pose as great a challenge as the clandestine resistance movement growing in strength within the cities and remote outposts supporting the activities of major mining corporations like Freeport McMoran.

The resistance movement feeds on local grievances. Papuans have long resented their treatment by the military; the exploitation of their resources by the central government while seeing minimal improvement in their lives; the polluting of their environment by foreign mining companies; and the resettlement of Javanese families in their province through the government's transmigration policy. The Papuan tribes with their forest-based culture and animist beliefs have little in common with the new settlers, many of them Muslim city dwellers.

Such resentment has been internationalized with the help of refugees based in Papua New Guinea and other parts of the western world like Australia. The public face of the movement, the Papua Presidium, has gone underground since the murder of its leader Theys Elauy by Indonesian Special Forces (Kopassus) troops but has been successful in placing its members in key roles in regional bodies.

The Indonesian military, ever vigilant over the threat of separatism, has been reinforcing its troops in the province since 2005. Reports allege that there has been significant disruption in the central highlands region due to military operations with incidences of arson, displacement of civilians and arbitrary detention increasing.

Less hawkish elements within the government have attempted to address such grievances through a Special Autonomy Law. But implementing the provisions of the law will be difficult unless sufficient Papuans are better educated and trained to ensure that increased revenues enjoyed under special autonomy would not be squandered. Failure in this regard will pave the way for factions within the establishment who would prefer taking the security approach instead.

Australia, the interested bystander

Australia will always be an interested bystander for reasons of history and geographical proximity. Australian interest pertains to the eastern half of New Guinea which it administered for a period with the United Nations until that part became the independent state of Papua New Guinea in 1975. The Menzies government in the 1960s did not advocate that West New Guinea (as Papua was then called) should become part of Indonesia. Explanations ranged from ethnic differences between the native-born inhabitants of New Guinea and Indonesia, coupled with fears that a radicalized Indonesia under Sukarno would gain a territory next to Papua New Guinea. The current Australian government supports the position that considerable autonomy for Papua is compatible within the context of Indonesia's unitary state framework.

Australia's acceptance of 43 Papuan asylum seekers however allows the government to placate its domestic constituency. With some justification it has been emphasized that Australian government policy towards Indonesia has often been out of step with the public perception of that country. Anti-Indonesian perspectives are just below the surface and

quickly aroused by events like the 1991 Dili killings, the Bali terror attacks, the public outcry over the sentencing of Schapelle Corby and the Bali Nine. Regardless of public perceptions within the country, the government reminded the Australian public to respect Indonesian legal processes.

Using the same argument, Australia's leaders have asked the people of Indonesia to understand and respect their different legal traditions and systems. In an interview with *Channel 10* Foreign Minister Downer emphasized: "We have our laws and they have their laws, and sometimes their laws impinge on Australians and we have to mutually respect each other laws." While sending a message to the Indonesian government about the sanctity of the rule of law, the act of granting asylum to the 43 Papuans has the welcome benefit of marginalizing the minority party views of Green Party Senators Nettle and Brown who support independence for Papua.

On June 26, 1985, five anti-Indonesian Papuans arrived on Thursday Island via Merauke by canoe to claim asylum. If an indiscriminate security approach continues to be applied by the Indonesian military, more of such "canoe people" will arrive on Australia's shores promising further strains in Australia-Indonesia relations. Domestic pressures make it difficult for both countries to work out an adequate compromise without losing face.

Such conflicts of interests between these two historically and culturally dissimilar entities will occur from time to time. The best policy option now would be for both countries to initiate a cooling off period, allow the situation to trudge along for a short period of time before gradually rebuilding communications. My expectation is that both countries will do some talking behind the scenes away from the public eye. In the interim Australia will continue to reinforce the point that the granting of refugee status to the 43 Papuans in no way abrogates Australia's recognition of Indonesia's sovereignty over Papua.

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