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TENSIONS IN PAPUA: THE MELANESIAN DIMENSION

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Two recent developments –rising communal tensions in Indonesia’s province of Papua and the establishment of a Secretariat for the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) funded by China – point to the importance of careful and sensitive management of this troubled province by Indonesia, as well as diplomatic care and restraint from Indonesia’s neighbours and the MSG.

A **RECENT** report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) has highlighted rising tensions between Muslim and Christian communities in Indonesia’s province of Papua. Major causes are attributed to continuing Muslim migration from other parts of Indonesia and the emergence of extremist groups in the province, both Muslim and Christian.

The ICG report claims that Christian Pentecostals and charismatics are gaining ground in Papua while the presence of hardline Islamic groups in response, such as Hizbut-Tahir, exacerbates the problem. The hardline Islamic groups claim that the Christian movements are supported by similar movements and pro-independence activists in Australia and the United States in an effort to separate the province from Indonesia. In turn, the Christians in Papua claim they are often discriminated against in local regulations. Ethnic Papuans also claim that the Indonesian government has not honoured undertakings about allowing them a degree of autonomy.

Conflict could easily erupt unless the situation is carefully managed. As Sidney Jones, ICG’s Senior Adviser has observed: “The potential for communal conflict is high in Papua because both sides consider themselves aggrieved”. Lurking behind this problem is the presence of active pro-autonomy indigenous Papuan and ethnic Melanesian groups, and the moral support these groups receive from other Melanesian communities.

The Melanesian Dimension

The Melanesian dimension to the problems in Papua is often overlooked. The Melanesians are a major ethnic group in the Pacific islands. The Melanesian countries are Papua New Guinea (PNG), the

Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji. The indigenous people of Indonesian Papua and French New Caledonia are also Melanesian. The island of New Guinea, which comprises Papua and the most thickly populated part of PNG, contains the main concentration of Melanesian people.

Back in 1969, the UN administered plebiscite that confirmed Indonesian sovereignty over West Papua (later Irian Jaya and now Papua), was subject to strong questioning at the UN, particularly by some African countries. It is probably fortunate for Indonesia that the Melanesian countries were not independent at the time as they might have added strongly to pressures against Indonesian sovereignty.

Unlike the other two major ethnic groups in the Pacific, the Micronesians and Polynesians, which have not sought separate formal identity, the Melanesians have established the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) as a separate sub-regional and ethnically-based organization. Partly this is because Melanesians feel they are the “poor cousins” of the Pacific islands, but it is also because they feel strongly about the situation of their Melanesian kinsfolk in the non-independent territories. The MSG was established in March 1988 at a time when there was an active struggle for independence by New Caledonia’s Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak Socialiste (FLNKS).

The “sleeping” situation with the Melanesian dimension is that of the French territory of New Caledonia. Just as Indonesia has pursued an active programme of transmigration to resettle mainly Javanese people in Papua, French governments have encouraged people from mainland France to settle in New Caledonia. Provided they meet residential requirements, these people might be expected to vote for the desired French outcome when the referendum is held between 2013 and 2018 on the final political status of New Caledonia.

The 2008 MSG Leaders’ Summit

Recent developments with the MSG could have implications for the situation in Papua. This group had a Leaders Summit in Port Vila, Vanuatu, in May 2008. This coincided with the opening of the MSG Secretariat in Port Vila in a headquarters built with funds from China, which is also paying the salary of the MSG’s first director-general.

The Summit agreed to a study to examine the costs and benefits of establishing a Melanesian intervention force to respond to security situations in the sub-region. This is not a new idea. It has its origins in the intervention by the PNG Defence Force in 1980 to restore order in Vanuatu, and the general idea has periodically surfaced at previous MSG meetings.

The FLNKS had observer status at the Summit but when Vanuatu proposed similar status for the Free West Papua movement at the recent meeting, this was strongly opposed by PNG. The PNG position carried the day despite other Melanesian countries supporting the proposal. In opposing the motion, PNG’s Foreign Minister Sam Abal reportedly said: “The issue of Papua for PNG, that is an issue we don’t consider as an issue that should be brought into the MSG. It’s something that is an internal issue that has a lot of ramifications, implications on it. So we would wish that it should not figure as part of the MSG discussion.”

Implications and Outcomes

The ICG in its recent report points to the importance of Indonesia’s national and provincial governments avoiding support for faith-based activities in Papua with an overly political agenda. Constructive inter-faith dialogue should be encouraged at the grass-roots level and government support of religious activities should be even-handed and transparent.

Papua is a major problem for PNG as it tries to steer a middle course between maintaining good relations with its large neighbour while showing solidarity with other Melanesian countries. Similarly

it is a difficult situation for Australia, which can be caught between “a rock and a hard place” in managing relations with Indonesia on the one hand, and the Melanesian countries on the other. The last time this occurred was in January 2006 when 43 refugees from Papua arrived in northern Australia. These people were later issued three-year temporary protection visas to remain in Australia. This provoked an angry response from Indonesia.

Financial support from China will breathe new life and energy into the MSG. Chinese interest in Melanesia primarily flows from the desire for favourable access to the resource-rich islands of Melanesia and competition with Taiwan for diplomatic recognition. Unlike most other Pacific island countries, the Melanesian countries are relatively well-endowed with natural resources on land. China has diplomatic relations at present with all MSG members with the exception of the Solomon Islands. The Solomons have tended to switch relations between China and Taiwan but China’s support for the MSG may help bring them back into the Chinese fold.

There is little doubt that the MSG and its members will be watching the situation in Papua closely. The Melanesian peoples are predominantly Christian and many follow Pentecostal and similar movements. Any perceived oppression of Christians in Papua would likely produce a strong reaction from Melanesia. Strong leadership at the MSG will be required from PNG if this forum is not to “rock the boat” in Papua. This situation was only narrowly averted at the recent MSG Leader’s Summit. The granting of observer status to independence movements from Papua at that Summit would have angered Indonesia and been destabilizing for the province.

Similarly, Australia, as a key stakeholder in security and stability in the archipelagic countries that surround it to the north and northwest, will face challenges in maintaining an even-handed approach to the problems that might arise. An outbreak of communal conflict in Papua, with calls for action from the MSG, would pose a difficult diplomatic problem for Australia.

Unfortunately the Melanesian dimension to the problems of Papua will mean that these problems do not go away in the short-term. Indonesia will need to recognize this dimension to its problems in Papua and handle the situation with care and sensitivity.

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