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After Jokowi's First Term

The Papuan Riots: Flash in the Pan?

By Made Ayu Mariska

SYNOPSIS

While Jakarta is busy with the plan to move the capital to East Kalimantan, riots have broken out throughout Papua over two weeks. Is it an isolated incident, or is it a part of a larger problem?

COMMENTARY

THE CONFLICT which began with an incident involving a group of Papuan students in Surabaya and Malang, East Java, has now turned into an island-wide protest with riots. On 16 August 2019, police and military personnel, followed by hardline Muslim group members, attacked a Papuan student dormitory. They accused the students of damaging the Indonesian flag on the 74th anniversary of Indonesia's independence.

During the attack, the word 'monkeys', was reported to be repeatedly chanted by the group. The situation escalated quickly from a protest with a racial element into full-blown riots demanding a referendum. What are the factors behind this string of events?

Multi-Dimensional Problems

The Papuan Conflict has been raging since The Act of Free Choice in 1969 and the riot was just one episode of many for Papuans. Illustrating the multi-dimensional problems that they have been facing for years in terms of racism, human rights violations, military operations, along with a failed implementation of special autonomy.

The incident with the students may have been the trigger for the recent unrest. However, to understand why this single event can end up in a genuine threat of insurgency, we have to see this conflict from in all its dimensions.

Over the years, Papuans experienced countless human rights violations. The most recent event was the [Nduga Massacre](#) in December 2018 which killed 20 people by the West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB). Tens of thousands of residents had to evacuate their homes in Nduga to Wamena, but there was not enough attention from Jakarta to solve the problem and to take [better care of the refugees](#).

Thousands of Papuans have been living in fear because of the Free Papua Movement (OPM). However, the presence of the Indonesian Army exacerbates that fear because both sides are armed and either of the two could cause casualties during conflicts. Until today, there has not been any other approach to resolve this separatist conflict other than sending troops to Papua.

More than Gold

Papua is famous for the Grasberg mining site, the biggest gold mine and the second-largest copper mine in the world. For over 50 years Indonesia only owned 9.36% of the Freeport mining stock while the rest went to US-based Freeport McMoRan. Only by the end of last year, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) succeeded in taking over 51% of the stock in the name of Indonesia.

As Wiranto, the Coordinating Minister for Politics, Legal, and Security Affairs said, Papua province contributes 26 trillion Rupiah per year. It is not a secret that Papua is one of the biggest contributors to Indonesia's inland revenues and the government also implements a special autonomy policy in Papua since 2001.

Despite this, Papua and West Papua are still the [poorest provinces in Indonesia](#). That raises a question of where the tens of trillions of funds disbursed by the central government for development in Papua went.

Papua's problems are more complex than just isolation and economic poverty. Although Jokowi's focus on welfare and development-oriented policy in Papua is important, money is not enough. The fact that the central government is disinclined to recognise the political and historical grievances of the conflicts, leaving the Papuans in constant unrest over the years, undermines the efforts to make Papuans feel like the government is serious about their welfare.

The Papuans have the same right as any other Indonesian citizens. As citizens, it is their right to demand justice, to feel safe, and to be able to fulfil their basic needs. People cheered when Freeport was taken over by the Indonesian government, but it seems that not enough people are paying attention to the people living around the massive gold mining complex. Indonesia must stop seeing Papua as merely a land of natural resources and start focusing on the Papuans because the province is much more than just Grasberg.

Never Too Late

Jokowi generally has received a positive response from Papuans. He [won](#) a whopping 90.7% of the vote in Papua and 79.8% in West Papua. For the first time, the Papuans feel that there is a president who paid attention as he visited the region 12 times over his five-year presidential term.

However, the Papuans' perception of Jokowi is disconnected from their perception of the central government. It should become the government's priority therefore to expand on Jokowi's approach towards the people by encouraging dialogue to build trust between Papua and Jakarta.

If Indonesia wants to keep Papua and West Papua as a sovereign part of the country, and not face another situation like Timor Leste's successful independence movement, the Indonesian government has to find a way to tackle all the problems holistically. The local population needs to feel like the government represents them and their interests, and does not just rule over them, or they will understandably not feel Indonesian. So far it seems like Indonesia is determined to keep the land of gold but treats the people living on it as an inconvenience.

Wiranto said that a Papuan referendum or any other separatist movements are intolerable, as the unity of the Republic of Indonesia is final. Therefore, the government must balance their infrastructure development efforts with commitments to solve the human rights problems, along with welfare and safety problems in Papua, or else the threat of insurgency will always haunt Papua.

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