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THREE NEW PROVINCES

Consolidating Central Control in Papua

*The Indonesian parliament has recently passed legislation to establish three new provinces in Indonesia Papua. While the stated intent is to improve the delivery of public services, a longer-term effort to consolidate central control over Indonesia Papua is afoot, argue **JEFFERSON NG** and **CAHYO PAMUNGKAS**.*



Near the Lukas Enembe Stadium in Jayapura regency. What kind of future can Papuans point to after the proliferation of new provinces? Photo by Asso Myron on Unsplash.

On 30 June 2022, the Indonesian parliament passed three laws for the proliferation (*pemekaran*) of new provinces in Indonesia Papua: South Papua, Central Papua, and Highland Papua. This carves out three new provinces from the original Papua province. What remains of the original province is retained as a rump along the province's northern coast, centred around the capital of Jayapura.

Most crucially, the new provinces divide the Central Highlands area, the most remote and underdeveloped interior of the Indonesian half of Papua Island where many native Papuans live, into different administrative and electoral units.

Regencies in the western half of the Central Highlands area, mainly populated by native Papuans, have merged with the coastal areas of Nabire and Mimika, where the majority of immigrants reside, to form the new Central Papua province. The eastern half of the Central Highlands area centred around Wamena, dominated by native Papuans, is now contained as the separate province called Highland Papua. For its part, the South Papua province is centred around the more urban Merauke regency, where some [70 per cent](#) of the population are immigrants.

Thus, the net effect of the creation of the new provinces appears to be the redistricting of the original Papua province, in a manner that dilutes the electoral power of native Papuans.

Special Autonomy in Papua

The five provinces of Indonesia Papua — West Papua, Papua, South Papua, Central Papua, and Highland Papua — enjoy the status of special autonomy (like the provinces of Aceh and Yogyakarta), giving the five provinces privileges not accorded to other Indonesian provinces. The 2001 Papuan Special Autonomy Law aimed to find a workable middle ground to accommodate Papuan aspirations and alleviate the prolonged secessionist armed conflict which has been ongoing since 1965.

The law, which today also applies to the three newly created provinces, guarantees Papuan representation in formal institutions, as well as sizeable central transfers to close the existing developmental gap between Indonesia Papua and the rest of the country. Papuan governors and vice-governors must be native Papuans, and each province has its own special Papuan People's Assembly empowered to protect indigenous rights, while non-elective seats are reserved for Papuan members of parliament in each provincial Papuan House of Representatives.

Central transfers to Papuan regional (provincial, city, regency) governments include extra-large allocations of revenue-sharing for natural resource exploitation in Papua (for example, in oil and natural gas). The transfers also encompass an additional share of revenue for special autonomy, fixed at 2.25 per cent of the portion of the total national budget which is earmarked for regional governments' general spending.

During President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's term of office, he has visited Papua more than any previous president, symbolically spending New Year's Eve in Papua in 2015, and having been proactive in efforts to reduce the developmental gap between Papua and the rest of Indonesia. As part of his Nawacita framework, which called for "Development from the Peripheries", Jokowi expedited the completion of the Trans-Papua Highway, and invested heavily in port and airport infrastructure in Papua.

Despite these efforts and more than two decades of special autonomy, general Papuan acceptance of special autonomy remains low in comparison to the situation of Aceh, another province with special autonomy. Indeed, discussions of the laws on

new Papuan provinces in Indonesia's national parliament were accompanied by widespread protests in Papua and even other parts of the country.

Key reasons for strong opposition to special autonomy in Indonesia Papua, by Papuans themselves, include the persistently low levels of human development in Papua, the actual lack of genuine democratic consultation regarding Papuan aspirations under the aegis of special autonomy within Indonesian rule, and the cycle of local violence and reprisal by Indonesian security forces. Papuan community leaders have called for the resolution of violence through dialogue between the central government and the armed groups, as was successfully brokered with the Free Aceh Movement in 2005. Instead, the central government prefers to double down on its security-heavy and economic development strategy.

Immediate and Longer-term Implications for the New Provinces

With the recent passage of the new laws, the next step will be for the Ministry of Home Affairs to appoint [acting governors](#) for all three new provinces. The acting governors will likely serve in their capacities until provincial elections in Indonesia Papua are held around the end of 2024. That means some areas previously under the authority of the elected Papuan governor will be transferred to the unelected, centrally appointed governors in South Papua, Central Highlands, and Central Papua until 2024. This new configuration gives the central government the opportunity to intervene more decisively in the management of provincial affairs.

Furthermore, under the 2021 amendment of the Papuan Special Autonomy Law, a coordinating unit chaired by the Indonesian vice-president, along with three ministers and representatives from each Papuan province, will monitor the implementation of special autonomy and development in Papua. This adds an additional layer of oversight from the central government.

At the same time, there are also significant political and economic incentives behind the proliferation initiative. Each new province is expected to obtain central transfers amounting to [700 billion to 1 trillion rupiah](#) per year, and 80 per cent of all civil service jobs in the new provinces are expected to go to native Papuans. In addition, each new province requires the formation of a new Papuan People's Assembly and a Papuan House of Representatives. This offers opportunities to co-opt local elites to newly created positions. Furthermore, the new provincial governors are likely to be more open to facilitating investment in extractive industries in Papua; more amenable to issuing mining and forestry permits.

Finally, from an internal security perspective, the provinces will also support the creation of new security units, such as the formation of regional military and police commands. Two of the newly created provinces, Central Papua and Central Highlands, contain regions where there have occurred [flashpoints](#) between the Indonesian National Armed Forces and the West Papua National Liberation Army on multiple occasions.

All that being said, the key development to pay attention to is the pending constitutional review of amendments to the Special Autonomy Law. If the review is approved, then

the 2021 amendment to the 2001 law and the proliferation of the three new provinces will be found unconstitutional.

Special Autonomy 2.0?

Indonesia is developing a more graduated and multifaceted approach to intensifying central control over Papua.

On one hand, the central government plans to soften its direct presence by recruiting local allies. This involves [recruiting local Papuans](#) to serve in the army and police, and the co-optation of local elites in newly formed provincial institutions. This may foster increased Papuan representation, but the details of implementation will determine whether it genuinely accommodates Papuan aspirations.

On the other hand, the centre's means of control is being expanded. The new provinces allow the central government to enhance its security presence, facilitate investments from other parts of Indonesia, and create new electoral boundaries that dilute the Papuans' electoral power.

Therefore, the next two years are critical for the longer-term political stability in Papua. If acting governors only represent central interests, this could inadvertently institutionalise discrimination against ordinary Papuans. However, if the Ministry of Home Affairs appoints acting governors who represent not only central interests but also safeguard political and economic rights of native Papuans, this could generate a great deal of positive momentum.

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