

Finding a dignified resolution for West Papua

Written by The Conversation USA

On Monday, Indonesian police arrested [nearly 1,500 protestors](#) in Jayapura, Papua. They were rallying in support of a coalition of groups representing West Papuans' aspirations for independence.

The police stopped the protesters, who were heading to the local parliament, forced them to board military trucks, and took them to the Mobile Brigade compound.

The protesters were demonstrating their support for the [United Liberation Movement of West Papua](#)'s (ULMWP) bid to gain full membership in the grouping of Melanesian countries, the [Melanesian Spearhead Group](#) (MSG).

The ULMWP holds observer status in the group, which consists of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. Last year, Indonesia was granted associate membership.

To prevent further violent mistreatment of protesters, together with several Papuan councillors and church leaders, that day I went to the Mobile Brigade's compound to negotiate with the security forces to release the detainees peacefully.

Monday's arrests were the largest in the West Papua independence movement's [history](#).

Why did thousands of people in Papua take to the streets to support ULMWP?

Public discontent in West Papua is a result of a complicated past. It is a product of historical manipulation and repression of the right to self-determination of West Papuans.

Over the past five decades, the Papuan people have not moved from their position in relation to

Indonesia. They have struggled to make progress in their predicament as the oppressed people. They are marginalised, suffering from various forms of violence, and being pushed from their own land.

Solving the problem of West Papua in a dignified manner should involve not only Indonesian authorities but also Papuans and the international community. In that sense, ULMWP and the popular support for ULMWP within West Papua is part of the solution and should not be repressed.

The silenced truth

Ever since West Papua was [transferred into the hands of Indonesia](#) in the early 1960s from being a remote outpost of the Dutch, it has become the land of “mourning and grief”.

Gross human rights violations have been taking place in West Papua since Indonesia, backed by the United Nations, annexed the western half of the island of New Guinea in 1963. In 1969, Indonesia gained complete rule of West Papua via a [sham referendum](#) .

West Papuans have looked to their Melanesian brothers and sisters to assist them in seeking resolution of past abuses by the Indonesian government and to build a new Papua. But they are still confronted with many challenges.

In September, countries in the [Pacific Island Forum](#) , a grouping of 14 countries that includes Australia and New Zealand, agreed to send a fact-finding mission to investigate human rights violations in West Papua. The Indonesian government refused to accept such a team.

Indonesia’s co-ordinating minister for politics, law and human rights, Luhut Pandjaitan, instead held two focus group discussions at a luxury hotel in Jayapura for the so-called “settlement of human rights issues”.

But West Papua is a nation that grew up with and is shaped by experiences of living under Indonesia’s military operations. These cannot be solved simply with focus group discussions.

Sadar Operation (1962, 1965-67), Wisnumurti Operation (1963), Wibawa Operation (1969), Pamungkas Operation (1970-1971), military operations in Jayawijaya (1977-80), Sapu Bersih Operation (1979-82), and Tumpas Operation (1983-84) are only a few of a series of violent acts of oppression that have confronted ordinary Papuans.

Today, Indonesia's militaristic approach in West Papua remains intact.

This approach has resulted in a series of acts of intimidation and terror committed by security forces. They are involved in land expropriation and natural resources extraction under the banner of development and investment, in the name of Papuan welfare.

Diplomatic pressure from Indonesia

Following the increasing concern and solidarity from the Pacific region and support from the MSG for a resolution of West Papua's problem, the Indonesian government is aggressively lobbying countries and political leaders in the Pacific.

Upon his return from a visit to PNG and Fiji last month, Pandjaitan boasted that Indonesia had the support of the two countries and could handle the MSG. At the same time, he argued that foreigners should not interfere in matters of human rights in West Papua.

Meanwhile, environmental destruction and rampant militarism walk hand in hand in West Papua. Papuans are continuously stigmatised as backward, ignorant and poor. This has become a pretext for what Indonesian authorities call "the acceleration and expansion of development".

Pressed against waves of Indonesian migration, Papuans are not given any chance at all to develop themselves. They are a minority in their own land, not only in terms of number but also in terms of power. Every protest and negotiation effort by indigenous people is met with brutal responses and security operations.

Dignified resolution

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In talking about West Papua, the Indonesian government often uses language that obscures past abuses. Papua's relationship with the outside world is heavily controlled. The Indonesian government [makes it difficult](#) for international journalists to cover Papua and bans international researchers from studying the region.

Indonesia's solutions for West Papua are based on shallow reflections and fear of the West Papuan people.

A genuine resolution for the West Papuan problem will only come from Indonesia's willingness to listen to and stop oppression of West Papuans.

Indonesia should welcome the support from international communities, such as the MSG and the United Nations, as mediators in finding a resolution on West Papua.

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