West Papua making waves

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Abstract
The front pages of Australian newspapers have been awash with stories about asylum seekers travelling to our shores from Indonesia and the newly elected Abbott government’s attempts to stop them. The tensions that have developed between Australia and Indonesia as a result have been well canvassed. The prominence of this issue has tended to overshadow a major development in regional geo-politics: the rise of West Papuan diplomacy and its consequences, specifically the aggressive entry of Indonesia into the domestic politics of the Melanesian countries.

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West Papua making waves

by Jim Elmslie, Camellia Webb-Gannon and Peter King*

The front pages of Australian newspapers have been awash with stories about asylum seekers travelling to our shores from Indonesia and the newly elected Abbott government’s attempts to stop them. The tensions that have developed between Australia and Indonesia as a result have been well canvassed. The prominence of this issue has tended to overshadow a major development in regional geo-politics: the rise of West Papuan diplomacy and its consequences, specifically the aggressive entry of Indonesia into the domestic politics of the Melanesian countries.

Long viewed as Australia’s backyard the Pacific countries have never featured prominently in Indonesia’s worldview. This is changing as the members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group, the MSG, consider a membership application by the West Papuan National Coalition for Liberation. This is not new – West Papuan rebel groups have been trying to join the MSG for years, attempts that have always been firmly rejected. This time, for a complex variety of reasons including some support by Fijian leader, Frank Bainimarama, and a greater sense of pan-Melanesian identity, their application has been taken very seriously.

At the MSG Leaders’ Summit in Noumea in June the Papuans’ application for membership was the dominant issue. Normally a low key affair the MSG meeting became energized by swirling diplomatic lobbying behind the scenes as the West Papuans moved to shore up promised support while the Indonesians pulled out all stops to kill the application. The outcome was a characteristically Melanesian compromise – at Indonesia’s invitation the MSG foreign ministers would visit West Papua for themselves to assess the situation first hand and report back to the MSG secretariat. Meanwhile the membership application would be put aside for six months: neither rejected nor confirmed.

The window of opportunity for lobbying is now wide open and both Indonesia and the West Papuans are pushing their arguments with maximum force. The Indonesians are feting Pacific leaders and busy suggesting all manner of aid and development projects, particularly with PNG along their shared border, but also with the Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu. Indonesia is prepared to use its economic clout to draw the MSG nations into its camp, thereby neutralizing the West Papuans’ push for greater international attention to their plight and any chance that the situation there might follow the East Timor trajectory. The fear is that the MSG countries will be used as stepping stones for the Papuans to take their case to the United Nations.

One way of heading off the West Papuan application would be the MSG foreign ministers reporting back that the situation inside West Papua is relatively benign, that human rights abuses have been exaggerated and that genuine broad based economic development is underway. This would suggest that the appropriate course for the MSG to take over West Papua would be increased engagement with Indonesia. Conversely, the opposite is true for the West Papuans: they need to show that they are suffering a form of military occupation under Indonesia where atrocities are common and international attention desperately needed. Thus the diplomatic hurly-burly seems set to roll on.

Illustrating the stark choices which face regional actors have been two recent events which throw new light on the nature of Indonesian rule over West Papua. The Biak Massacre Citizens Tribunal at Sydney University on July 6 marked the 15th anniversary of a little known but particularly violent event in the troubled history of West Papua. On this day in 1998 scores, if not hundreds, of West Papuan civilians peacefully demonstrating for independence were killed by Indonesian security forces. Hundreds of Papuans, stirred by the new rhetoric of reformasi in Indonesia, gathered around a water tower on the island of Biak, believing that the world, particularly the United Nations, would finally hear their demands for independence dating back to the 1960s and, as happened in East Timor, intervene on their behalf. This was not to be. Rather the opposite happened. The Indonesian state responded with lethal armed force to make it overwhelmingly clear it would not countenance talk of self-determination in West Papua.

The Tribunal, convened by the West Papua Project for the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, entailed the presentation in a public hearing of evidence and testimony from Papuan survivors of the massacre before a panel of leading Australian legal figures. These included the Hon John Dowd and Dr Keith Suter, who acted as Presiding Jurists hearing evidence with a view...
to delivering written Tribunal Findings. Professor Nick Cowdery acted as lead Prosecutor, assisted by an eminent West Papuan lawyer, Gustav Kawer. Two Senior Counsel, Graham Turnbull and Dan O’Gorman, played the role of Defence, critically assessing the prosecution evidence. The Tribunal was conducted as a formal legal enquiry on an inquest model within the setting of a university.

The Tribunal was both an extraordinary and harrowing event. A massacre that has largely slipped through the cracks of history – the official Indonesian version is that only one person died – was played out in detail, and from many various points of view. Testimony from Papuan survivors, several speaking anonymously from behind a “batik curtain” erected on the upper level of the John Woolley Lecture Theatre, recalled the horrendous acts of torture, rape and sexual mutilation they had suffered and the murders and other atrocities that they had observed. This evidence was heard before an audience numbering around 100 – academics, lawyers, activists, students, citizens and a sizable group of West Papuan observers.

Currently the Jurists are assessing the evidence presented and deliberating on their judgment. As part of Prosecutor Cowdery’s closing submission (see http://www.biak-tribunal.org) several suggestions were made for further action by human rights NGOs and national authorities to address the issues raised. It is hoped that these will form part of the Tribunal Findings and Recommendations due to be released in November and allow this bloody event and its victims to be appropriately marked on the historical record --and the perpetrators and masterminds of the massacre identified.

A second event whereby Australian activists entered the fray of regional diplomacy was the West Papua ‘Freedom Flotilla’. Flotillas championing human rights causes have proved to be a controversial and thus effective tool of creative resistance; however the 50-odd activists travelling on the three vessels comprising the West Papua Freedom Flotilla were anxious to avoid the fate of a similar initiative in 2010 in which nine activists campaigning against Israel’s embargo of the Gaza Strip were killed by Israeli naval commandos.

Reduced midway through the voyage to just one boat deemed seaworthy—the “Pog” (purchased with a government payout to Flotilla activist Izzy Brown after she was brutalized by police at an anti-uranium demonstration in 2010)—the remaining activists heeded Indonesia’s threats to use force against them. Thus, rather than landing in Merauke as initially planned, they met with West Papuan leaders on the outskirts of Indonesian waters for a gift exchanging ceremony. Nevertheless, having just arrived safely home in Australian waters, the organizers of the Freedom Flotilla consider their intrepid adventure across the Torres Strait and back to have been a success.
The activists, comprising Australian indigenous leaders including Uncle Kevin Buzzacott, other Australian supporters and West Papuan refugees including Amos Wainggai, who was amongst the group of West Papuans controversially granted asylum after arriving in Australia by boat in 2006, had two key aims. First, according to West Papuan diplomat Jacob Rumbiak, they wanted to convey the message to the Australian and Indonesian governments that “Before you foreign colonials arrived in our home, we had our dignity and sovereignty, so let us run our own future.”

In the Pleistocene era, the island of New Guinea was joined to Australia (and Tasmania), forming the continent Sahul. Thus the activists travelled on Australian Aboriginal passports and West Papuan visas (neither of which are internationally recognized, of course) to complete their “sacred mission” of gifting water from Lake Eyre and ashes from the Aboriginal Tent Embassies to West Papuan representatives.

This act was intended to “reconnect two ancient cultures” and to complete the Flotilla’s second purpose, “to reveal the barriers that keep human rights abuses in West Papua from the attention of the international community.” (http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/news/flotilla-leaves-australia-for-west-papua-protest-voyage/).

Ironically, or perhaps predictably, Indonesian security forces in West Papua lived up to their reputation (‘democratic’ with brutal autocratic tendencies) and arrested West Papuan community leaders—Piet Hein Manggaprouw, 56, Klemens Rumsarwir, 68, Yoris Berotabui, 36, and Yan Piet Mandibodibo, 30, who were organising a celebration in honour of the Flotilla and in commemoration of another bloody blight on Indonesia’s reign in West Papua—the Biak Massacre mentioned above. West Papuans who ventured out by boat to meet with Flotilla activists in PNG waters and receive the ‘sacred’ gifts have since sought asylum in Australia after receiving threats from the Indonesian police and military and have been sent by the Australian government to PNG for processing.

For its part, the Indonesian government authorised the use of force against the activists aboard the Pog and refused to negotiate with the activists regarding their request to dock in Merauke or their demand that the Indonesian government partake in dialogue with West Papuans about their future. Indonesian Minister for Legal and Security Affairs, Djoko Suyanto, called a meeting with the Australian ambassador to Indonesia, Greg Moriarty, telling him, “no nation should allow its soil to be used as a departure point for a movement aimed at disturbing another nation’s sovereignty” and criticized the Australian government for allowing the activists to depart Australia in the first place.

Allowing democratic principles to prevail in this instance at least, the then Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr responded that the Australian government could not prevent a legal boat from departing an Australian port. He did, however, unequivocally condemn the Flotilla mission, stating:

*This activity by a fringe group of Australians offers a cruel hope to the people of the two Indonesian Papuan provinces; that is, a hope that, somehow, independence for the Papuan provinces is on the international agenda when it’s not.*

To this slight, Flotilla activist Izzy Brown issued the only reasonable response – “If he’s talking about it, that means it is on the agenda”. Indeed, that the Flotilla was able to elicit such categorical statements from both Indonesian and Australian politicians is evidence of the voyage’s success.

West Papua is certainly on the regional agenda as the MSG drama shows. The impact it has on the international agenda may well depend on the respective skills of the various players in this novel and complex diplomatic reshuffle and potential showdown.

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For more information on the West Papua conflict, join the Australia West Papua Facebook Group (https://www.facebook.com/AustraliaWestPapuaAssociation) or visit the West Papua Media website (http://westpapuamedia.info/).