

General Strike and Mass Mobilizations in West Papua

Broad coalition pushes Jakarta and international community for dialogue, demilitarization, referendum

An unprecedented mass mobilization is sweeping West Papua, where a broad coalition of community organizations has come together to demand that Indonesia and the international community grant West Papua its right to self-determination. In a context of ongoing human rights violations by Indonesian security forces, a Papua-wide general strike has been called for July 8 to 10, 2010 in support of a recent joint decision sponsored by the MRP (Majelis Rakyat Papua - Papuan People's Assembly) on the failure of the 2001 Special Autonomy Law.

Background

In 1961, the Netherlands began to implement a decolonization process in what was then their colonial possession of Netherlands New Guinea. By 1969, the western half of New Guinea had been annexed by Indonesia, aided by political support from the United States, on the strength of the UN-sanctioned "Act of Free Choice", a consultation with a selected group of tribal leaders that was widely decried as rigged, undemocratic and enforced with threats of violence. Since then, Indonesian security forces have secured access to Papua's abundant natural resources – mining, oil, gas, logging, fishery, oil palm, and more – for corporations including Freeport, Rio Tinto and BP. Meanwhile, a transmigration program has brought millions of Indonesian migrants to Papua, altering the demographic makeup of the territory such that indigenous Papuans may soon become a minority in their own land. Political and economic marginalization, systemic racism and threats to the viability of Papuans' land base constitute a process that many Papuans describe as a slow genocide, in some respects similar to the early stages of the colonization of the Americas centuries ago.

Since Indonesian annexation, Papuan activists have waged a national liberation struggle by a diversity of strategies and tactics. In 2001, the Indonesian government responded to the growing power of the movement for independence by instituting the law on Special Autonomy, granting a greater share of resource revenues to the Papuan provincial government and mandating a limited set of safeguards for Papuan cultural and political rights – including the formation of the MRP. While more radical sections of the Papuan movement rejected Special Autonomy from the outset, its implementation has disappointed even its former supporters within Papuan civil society, setting the stage for the recent emergence of a wide political consensus among indigenous West Papuans.

Consultation and General Strike

On June 9-10, MRP held a consultation together with a wide selection of popular organizations representing customary indigenous communities, student associations, legal organizations, women's groups, NGOs, Papuan nationalist organizations and religious congregations. This consultation yielded a joint declaration with a set of recommendations including:

- the return of the Special Autonomy Law to the Government of Indonesia;
- an internationally-mediated dialogue and a referendum on independence;
- the restoration of West Papuan sovereignty;
- an embargo on international aid provided for the implementation of Special Autonomy;
- an end to transmigration from outside Papua and tight controls on migration to Papua;
- demilitarization and the release of all Papuan political prisoners;
- the immediate closing of the Freeport Indonesia mining company.

On June 18, a mass of 8000 people gathered to accompany the delivery of this declaration by the

MRP to the DPRP (Papuan provincial parliament). Since then, a wide front of Papuan civil society organizations has united to pressure the DPRP to call a special session to act on the demands of the MRP's consultation. On July 8, coinciding with the first day of the general strike, a demonstration is planned at the DPRP office in the Papuan capital, Jayapura. Organizers have declared that they will maintain a sit-in at the DPRP for days, until the special session on the MRP declaration is held and its outcome made public.

DAP Mobilizes in Wamena

Meanwhile, in the central highlands town of Wamena, a mass rally is planned for July 10 by the La-Pago regional branch of DAP (Dewan Adat Papua – Papuan Customary Council), a mass movement for indigenous rights and signatory to the MRP-sponsored declaration. This event will see the launch of a campaign for economic justice and self-sufficiency for indigenous Papuans as well as a healing ceremony which all cultural communities present in Papua are invited to attend in customary attire. The July 10 events come less than two years after DAP's last mass rally in Wamena – the August 9 2008 rally at which Indonesian security forces responded to the raising of the Morning Star flag by firing on the crowd, killing one man, Opinus Tabuni, in a case for which the Indonesian government has yet to accept responsibility.

Puncak Jaya and OPM: collective punishment and racism

While the political struggle has intensified in Papua's cities and towns, the lightly-armed rebels of the OPM (Organisasi Papua Merdeka – Free Papua Organization) continue to defend a handful of remote territories in forested and mountainous zones. The OPM struggle is particularly fierce in Puncak Jaya regency west of Wamena, where rebels under the command of Goliath Tabuni have carried out occasional raids on Indonesian police and army posts. The response of the security forces to the OPM presence has been harsh; reports out of the tightly-controlled area allege that police and military have raped indigenous women, destroyed farms, extracted forced labour from locals, occupied local churches and carried out sweepings where indigenous Papuans who fail to show ID cards are subjected to beatings and extraction of information about the whereabouts of OPM members. Communities have been displaced by the violence, creating an isolated IDP crisis while security forces bar access to humanitarian assistance. Indonesian police and army troop reinforcements are currently being deployed to Puncak Jaya.

The racism of the security forces is evident in the statement of the chief of police for Puncak Jaya justifying the arbitrary nature of collective punishment measures: “As the faces of highlands tribes are almost all the same, it is difficult for us to tell apart OPM members from ordinary members of the community. Their guerilla tactics of mingling with communities, and the fact that they all look alike makes it difficult for us to conduct our search operations” (as reported in Bintang Papua, 29 June 2010). The report states that local OPM units possess a total of 8 firearms. The Indonesian security apparatus' strategy of harsh repression and collective punishment complements its unwillingness to engage in dialogue with OPM, as reflected by the December 2009 killing of Kelly Kwalik, OPM commander for the Mimika area near the site of the Freeport / Rio Tinto operations at the world's largest gold and copper mine.

Repression, fear, hope and the power of international networks

The political context in West Papua is framed by tight state controls on the content of public expression and gatherings. Papuan political prisoners continue to languish in Indonesian jails, where they are denied medical treatment and subject to beatings. Amnesty International has issued calls for action on the cases of Filep Karma and Yusuk Package, jailed for raising the Morning Star flag. Buchtar Tabuni of KNPB (Komite Nasional Papua Barat – West Papua National Committee) continues to serve a jail

sentence for having organized rallies supporting the formation of International Parliamentarians for West Papua (IPWP) in October 2008.

Papuan activists operate in a climate of fear and mistrust instilled by the Indonesian military intelligence establishment, enduring surveillance, telephone threats and misinformation campaigns. While authorities continue to criminalize political dissent in Papua, they attempt to keep foreign observers under tight control, deporting international reporters and expelling the International Committee of the Red Cross following their visits to Papuan political prisoners.

In such a context, Papuan activists view international networks as privileged sites for the flows of information necessary to secure links of solidarity and support. Indonesian authorities are aware of this potential, and strive to portray a sanitized portrait of the political situation in Papua – a portrait that Western governments seem happy to accept, apparently content with the productive working relationships between foreign resource extraction companies and the Indonesian state. Unbiased reporting on current political events in Papua is crucially needed so as to increase the chances that the ongoing political mobilizations will lead to productive and peaceful developments rather than drastic repression and violence. While mainstream media's occasional attention to West Papua regularly lapses into a patronizing primitivism, alternative media have a crucial role to play in airing the articulate voices of Papuan activists and organizers. The upcoming general strike and demonstration at the DPRP in Jayapura, along with DAP's mobilization in Wamena, carry potential for momentous conflict and upheaval in a region with important foreign economic interests, and are ideal sites for critical international reporting.

Further reading:

<http://etan.org/issues/wpapua/2010/1007wpap.htm>

<https://lists.riseup.net/www/arc/reg.westpapua>

http://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions_details.asp?ActionID=342

<http://www.ipwp.org/>

<http://www.ilwp.org/>