



Research Report

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Addressing the desire for
independence from West Papua

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INTRODUCTION

West Papua has been the focal point of both political tension and human rights concerns on the western half of the island of New Guinea for decades. With a high level of biodiversity and natural resources, not to mention cultural diversity with over 300 tribes, its indigenous population faces considerable challenges due to Indonesian governance.

The independence struggle of West Papua gained the international community's interest after its very controversial integration into Indonesia in the early 1960s. Decades have passed with continuous political persecution, economic marginalization, and gross human rights violations against indigenous people. Activists, along with various organizations, have pointed to the question of West Papuans for self-government and autonomy.

The desire for freedom has grown over the years, with protests and movements in the West Papuan population. The 2019 protests, sparked by perceived racial slurs against Papuans in Java, erupted into violence when Indonesian security forces cracked down on the protests and killed at least six, while many more were injured. Besides that, the continuous military presence in the region has created an atmosphere of fear, with reports of random arrests and torture of activists. Living conditions for many West Papuans also remain abysmal, largely without access to healthcare, education, and basic infrastructure, adding to feelings of disenfranchisement and neglect.

The conflict in West Papua is basically between two opposing sides: the Indonesian government, which claimed sovereignty over the region and meant to underscore national unity, and the people of West Papua themselves, who wanted freedom and recognition of their rights and identity. The resulting tension between the factions has been fulfilled with a humanitarian crisis, with growing violence and repression. This is not only urgent and needed to bring a quick and fair resolution to deal with the grievances of the people of West Papua but also to contribute to stability and peace in the region by making sure that the parties' voices are heard and acted upon.

Definitions of Key Terms

Sovereignty: The right of Indonesia over West Papua as its territory. It recognizes the control that Indonesia has over the region, which was in dispute with several Papuans still desiring independence.

Self-Determination: The right of the people of West Papua to determine for themselves their political status and follow their path in their economic, social, and cultural development. This is one of the guiding principles that makes them desire independence.

Legacy of Colonialism: The historical impact of colonialism on West Papua includes both the influence of Dutch colonial rule and later integration into Indonesia. It is this legacy that continues to keep borders, shapes the contours of political and social life, and fuels debates over identity and governance today.

Indigenous Rights: The Indigenous rights of Papuan people to their culture, land, and resources include land ownership, cultural expression, and self-determination in decision-making processes related to their lives.

Human Rights Violation: Human rights violations against individuals or groups in West Papua; these range from arbitrary detention to torture and extrajudicial killings. Incidents of these abuses often raise an international uproar for accountability.

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Autonomy: The degree of autonomy that can be granted to West Papua within the Republic of Indonesia. In this regard, autonomy arrangements would give self-governance and cultural preservation in the region but may not necessarily go all the way to full independence as some have been agitating for.

Political Asylum: This is inclusive of protection expanded to West Papuans who are seen fleeing persecution and seeking refuge in various other countries. The majority of them also claim asylum, citing threats to life and freedom associated with their political views.

International Observers: Representatives from international organizations or third countries monitor the situation in West Papua. Their presence can ensure some accountability and reports on human rights conditions.

Geopolitical Tensions: From a broad perspective, the balance of power and strategic rivalries among nations impinge on the situation of West Papua. The heightening and lessening involvement by regional powers could also be a source of conflict.

Secession Movement: The Self-determination of West Papua, wanting to free themselves from Indonesia to be an independent country. This is to appease a strong desire for self-government and redress of grievances brought about by cultural and economic marginalization.

Negotiated Settlement: A solution to the conflict by diplomatic negotiations aiming at a solution for all parties, such as greater autonomy or other forms of governance, with various compromises.

Cultural Survival: The efforts to preserve and protect the cultural heritage, languages, and traditions of the West Papuan people. It involves programs to help restore indigenous customs and languages facing extinction due to assimilation.

Resource Exploitation: Natural resource extraction in West Papua has resulted mostly in environmental destruction and the displacement of native people. Most mining and logging corporations are international and have faced criticism for irreparable damage to local populations and ecosystems.

International Advocacy: NGOs and other organizations' efforts to raise awareness and create action on behalf of the situation in West Papua. Advocacy may come in many forms, including lobbying governments and activating public opinion.

Peacebuilding: Reconciliation and sustainable peace efforts in respect of the situation in West Papua. These will include community dialogue, conflict resolution programs, and support for local governance.

General overview

The situation in West Papua is complex and multifaceted, with grounds in historical, political, and cultural contexts. The overview will examine the historical background, current status, and consequences of the ongoing conflict, resting much emphasis on its impact on specific areas, countries, cultures, and organizations.

Traditionally, West Papua was colonized by the Dutch back in the 17th century to set up administrative and economic systems that relegated indigenous populations. After

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World War II, the Dutch sought to keep West Papua while Indonesia declared its independence in 1945, claiming the territory as its own. It wasn't until 1961 that the Dutch formally transferred administrative control to Indonesia, which finally ended in the notorious Act of Free Choice in 1969. That referendum also was criticized as a process not reflecting genuine democratic processes, but it was through this that West Papua became officially integrated into Indonesia. Since then, several independence movements have sprung up, arguing for their cases of self-determination in a West Papuan independent state, and one of the biggest groups is the Organisasi Papua Merdeka or OPM.

The political climate in West Papua remains volatile with continuing demands for autonomy and independence. The Indonesian government has reacted to these with military presence and squashing operations amidst various human rights concerns. Arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings are just some of the reports of human rights abuses still pouring in. The international community, including human rights organizations, has condemned such acts and sought accountability for them. Furthermore, the indigenous culture of the Papuan people is threatened by cultural assimilation policies and resource exploitation, in which efforts toward the preservation of indigenous languages and traditions face an uphill battle.

The consequences of the situation in West Papua are extensive. The protracted conflict has raised serious international concerns about human rights, calling for intervention to appeal for the rights of the Papuan people. Human rights groups continue to report abuses, adding pressure on the Indonesian government to clean up the situation. It has also engendered environmental issues amidst widespread resource exploitation mining and especially logging- which has caused environmental degradation and disturbed biodiversity and livelihoods of the local people. This has brought friction between the multinational companies and the government with the Indonesians.

The pro-independence war in Indonesia, in this context, acts as a challenge to national unity and governance. Criticism against the way the government was dealing with the situation and wanting to further economic interests at the cost of human rights and cultural preservation has always been heard loud and clear. The situation in West Papua has to do with the stability of specifically Southeast Asia and neighboring countries because of probable flows of refugees and the geopolitical ramifications of Indonesia's policies.

This conflict has managed to erode the cultural aspects away from the people's traditional practices and languages concerning the Papuan ethnic group. The efforts towards cultural heritage preservation go hand in glove with making sure their identity is sustained from generation to generation. Their plights have resonated across international Indigenous rights movements, fostering solidarity and a call for action in many parts of the world. A far-reaching discussion of self-determination and indigenous rights is taking place through this connection.

Various organizations have expressed their concern for the plight in West Papua. Scores of non-government organizations organize campaigns of publicity and support for the cause of West Papua, document human rights abuses, urge policy changes, and assist the local people. The United Nations has tried to address the situation from time to time, discussing self-determination and human rights, though concrete actions and resolutions are limited.

The situation in West Papua is part of the historical injustices, ongoing conflict, and the logic of cultural preservation. As this struggle for self-determination continues, its

implications are considered within the context of Indonesia, regional stability, and what the global community is doing in response to indigenous rights. To solve the different challenges facing the people of West Papua, a policy that addresses multiple approaches has to be employed in a manner aimed at ensuring respect for their rights, recognition of their cultural heritage, and dialogue toward peaceful resolution.

Major parties involved

As the name suggests, list the most important parties involved in the topic at hand. Think of countries, NGOs, UN bodies, etc. With each party explain why they are involved.

Major party involved

Major party involved

Major party involved

Timeline of Key Events

1600s: Dutch trading posts were established in the region. It marked the beginning of European colonial influence in West Papua, which led to the exploitation of resources and disturbed the cultures of the indigenous peoples.

1828: The Dutch formally claim parts of western New Guinea. Formal claims consolidated Dutch control, translating into the establishment of colonial governance, and the introduction of Western education, and religion at the expense of local traditions.

1942-1945: During World War II, the Japanese occupation pushes out of the Dutch control. For the native population, the occupation was a time of great misery, with coercive labor and violence under the occupying army. It weakened Dutch colonial authority and led to the post-war independence movement.

1945: Indonesia declared independence, claiming West Papua. Its declaration instituted a tense dialogue between Indonesia and the Dutch on the status of West Papua and laid the grounds for future conflicts on self-determination.

1949: The Dutch-Indonesian Round Table Conference leaves the status of West Papua undecided. Because of its undecided status, Papuans continued to dispute and became discontented, which laid a foundation for the uprisings of the future independence movements.

1961: The Dutch declare the establishment of the Republic of West Papua. This declaration furthered Indonesian fears of losing control over West Papua as military presence increased in the region.

1962: The New York Agreement allows the Indonesian administration of West Papua until a referendum. This agreement indeed changed the hands of governance but was opposed by the Papuans, believing in full self-determination.

1969: Act of Free Choice conducted; West Papua incorporated into Indonesia. This disputed referendum brought widespread resentment from Papuans who felt their voices were not heard. It further entrenched the view of Indonesia as an occupying force.

1970s-1980s: The emergence of independence movements, one of them being the OPM; Indonesian military actions suppress the dissent. Greater military activity resulted in widespread human rights abuses, creating a vicious circle of violence and entrenching the resistance of Papuans further.

1990s: Human rights abuses become subject to international reports. Greater international concern regarding West Papua led some international organizations to call for human rights and self-determination for its people, but there was little actual change.

1998: Indonesian political reform increases calls for Papuan autonomy. The reform era opened up some space for political dialogue. However, a great number of Papuans continued to feel frustrated with the pace of change and demanded further independence.

2001: Special Autonomy was granted by the Indonesian government to West Papua. In an actual sense, it provided partial self-administration, though many Papuans saw this as inadequate and criticized the enforcement of autonomy provisions.

2010s: Human rights, environmental degradation, and cultural assimilation protests and unrest increase. Continuous protesting reflected mass discontent, bringing on crackdowns by Indonesian security forces and further increasing tensions between the government and Papuan communities.

2020: Protests ensue after racial discrimination and crackdowns by the security. The protest demanded that systemic racism and injustices against the Papuans be brought to international attention for reform to take place and reconciliation.

2021-present: Continued human rights abuses reported, and an outcry by the international community for accountability. Sustained pressure from human rights groups sheds light on a need for Indonesia to assume responsibility for abuses and take heed of Papuan voices, even though major barriers remain to lasting solutions and peace.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Past activities and initiatives by NGOs, the United Nations, and individual countries have, until now, been confined concerning West Papua to advocacy and monitoring of continuing human rights abuses and struggles for self-determination. Many NGOs, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have pursued extensive advocacy regarding the deplorable human rights situation in the area. These have involved issuing comprehensive reports highlighting the abuses, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, and restrictions on freedom of expression. Besides that, NGOs also staged protests and drives to force the Indonesian government to be accountable and to call for reforms.

The West Papua situation has been discussed through various resolutions and reports at the United Nations. The UN General Assembly debated the issue of West Papua in the 1960s, culminating in the highly criticized Act of Free Choice in 1969. Human rights abuses have been repeatedly reported by several UN Special Rapporteurs, who have called upon Indonesia to take urgent remedial action and independently provide access to monitors in West Papua. But despite these, the actions by the UN have been few and far between, as geopolitical interests consistently outbalance any semblance of accountability.

In international diplomatic circles, some countries, especially those in the Pacific, have taken to discussions on West Papua. Among the countries that have shown their support for the aspirations of West Papuans are Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. However, at the level of concrete actions, this is generally not the case, given the strategic importance of Indonesia, added to the complex dynamics of regional politics. Periodically, some countries issue statements of concern regarding human rights conditions in West Papua, and such statements lack binding commitments or subsequent follow-up actions in many cases.

Besides that, international forums such as the Pacific Islands Forum and the Melanesian Spearhead Group have given a chance for discussions on the issue of West Papua. These discussions have, however, not resulted in a collective action or put strong pressure on Indonesia. Generally, past efforts by NGOs, the UN, and countries concerning West Papua remain advocacy and creation of awareness with substantial setbacks being witnessed in the process. Due to this, there has not been a significant solution to the unabated human rights issues or the aspiration for self-determination in West Papua, which suggests that solutions in the future may have to be better coordinated and multi-pronged with the involvement of all stakeholders.

Possible solutions

The ideas can range from several perspectives in addressing this complex situation of West Papua and may contribute toward a comprehensive resolution. Accordingly, the ideas pertain to various approaches such as diplomatic dialogue, human rights advocacy, and economic development, which offer different angles to the varied perspectives at hand.

From the human rights point of view, one of the possible ways out for the solution of the situation would be the establishment of independent international monitoring mechanisms. This could involve the United Nations or other responsible humanitarian agencies conducting on-the-ground human rights assessments in West Papua. If the world community allowed independent observers into the country, a far better understanding of the actual abuses of human rights would be seen and appropriately placed at the feet of the Indonesian government. This could also create a platform through which the Papuan people would better dialogue with the Indonesian authorities and make it much more open and constructive.

Diplomatically, there is a need for encouragement of dialogue between representatives of the Papuan people and the government of Indonesia. It would also provide a formal discussion platform that would involve government officials, as well as local leaders and civil society representatives from West Papua. It would focus on solving the Papuans' grievances directly and look for possible solutions, such as greater autonomy or self-government. The involvement of regional states, especially those from the Pacific, in mediating these talks would also give credence and legitimacy to the process.

From an economic development perspective, stimulating sustainable development activities in West Papua could soothe some of the root causes of these tensions. It may be international collaborations in infrastructure investment, education, and health, actually directed at improving the living standards of local people. Such ventures, in upgrading living standards and opening avenues of livelihood, may help to reduce alienation and cultivate a sense of belonging among the people of Papua. Thirdly, an assurance of the involvement of local communities in the management of natural resources may perpetuate equity and respect for the rights of the people.

Other interesting dimensions of consideration involve cultural recognition and the preservation of Papuan identity. Programs that encourage indigenous people's rights and head toward cultural preservation could be part of inducing social cohesion and respect for diversity. This would involve educational programs teaching Papuan languages and traditions, and policies

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recognizing and protecting indigenous land rights. Respecting Papuan culture and making the culture part of the national narrative is a surefire way to engender trust and better relations with the people on the part of the Indonesian government.

Last but not least, there is also the role that could be played by international advocacy. Such efforts will keep the international spotlight on Indonesia and its human rights record in West Papua through the mobilization of global civil society in support of West Papua, along with influential nations that can apply pressure on Indonesia. This would include coalition building to promote Papuan rights in international arenas, and using diplomatic relations to push Indonesia toward constructive engagement with its critics.

The West Papua situation requires a multi-faceted approach that encompasses human rights advocacy, diplomatic dialogue, economic development, cultural recognition, and international support. Considering all these various angles of the issue, the delegates will then try to resolve to bridge the gap in this controversy, increasing peace, stability, and recognition of the rights of the Papuan people.

Further Readings

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