Selective outrage and unacknowledged fantasies: re-thinking Papua, Indonesia and Australia

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Selective outrage and unacknowledged fantasies: re-thinking Papua, Indonesia and Australia

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This article is an extended version of a much shorter piece which appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on 27 April 2006.

Introduction

In a challenging and closely argued essay from a prominent specialist on Indonesian politics, Edward Aspinall of the Australian National University and editor of the magazine Inside Indonesia argues that in the current Australian debate about Papua "there is much simplification, distortion and myth-

making on both sides, not only about Papua, but also about Indonesia and Australia itself." "Australian advocates [of Papuan self-determination], "he argues, "need to examine their motives to ensure they are not also partly acting on the basis of unexamined fears and prejudices and that they have fully thought through the consequences of the positions they are advocating."

Aspinall asks,

> "if a concern for human rights is the main motivation, why do so many supporters of Papuan human rights show so little interest in human rights issues elsewhere in Indonesia? A problem in Australia is that one of the two principal contesting frameworks explaining Papua is becoming dominant to the almost complete exclusion of attention to the claims of the other. The logic of the now dominant framework then subsequently structures most of the public debate - at some cost to the capacity to find non-violent solutions to complex contemporary problems."

Moreover, Aspinall fears, "a lot of what passes for public debate about Indonesia in Australia is based on profound ignorance and stereotyping of the country, including from people who claim to stand for human equality, respect and dignity. For them, Indonesia and its problems have little significance in their own right, but are only a canvas upon which Australian political battles can be played out and Australian fears and fantasies projected."

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Essay - Selective outrage and unacknowledged fantasies: re-thinking Papua, Indonesia and Australia

We can never respond with equal attention to all of the injustices of this world, but sometimes unexamined, selective and uneven attention can be dangerous.

Since the arrival of 43 asylum seekers from the Indonesian province of Papua in Australia in January, and especially after the Indonesian government reacted strongly to the decision to grant 42 of their number temporary protection visas, a major public debate has taken place about the Papua issue in Australia. Much of that debate has taken the form of a simplistic contest pitched in terms of realpolitik versus morality. On one side are those who say that the Australian state has a pre-eminent interest in maintaining good relations with Indonesia and that human rights considerations should be subordinated to this over-riding goal. On the other are those who say that human rights principles should guide Australia's response and that Australia should not "appease" Indonesia. In the process of this debate, there is much simplification, distortion and myth-making on both sides, not only about Papua, but also about Indonesia and Australia itself.

My intention in this brief contribution is not to enter into the debate about what Australian policy should be, or to discuss what might be the best way forward for Indonesia or the people of Papua in resolving the political, human rights and other problems of the territory. Rather, I am interested in exploring the reception of the Papua issue in Australia and examining why it might be gaining such traction. In particular, I have been concerned by disturbing undercurrents in the language and arguments in which much of the debate is expressed, especially although not exclusively, by some of those who position themselves as supporters of Papuan rights.

Is Papua the new East Timor?

In the recent past, some Australians used to look to the vast country of Indonesia to our north and see only East Timor. Many such people, especially those in parts of the left and the Christian social justice lobby, now look to Indonesia and see only Papua. The reasons, they say, are obvious: there is a history of severe human rights abuse there and Australia is in a position to do something about it.

No fair observer could deny that human rights problems have been, and continue to be, very great in Papua. These have been extensively elaborated in the contemporary debate and it is not my goal to repeat this discussion here. Contrary to the charges of some Australians, there is no systematic campaign of genocide, and there have been improvements since the fall of Suharto. Even so, serious problems remain, including arbitrary violence by security forces and persecution of peaceful pro-independence activists. [2] Supporting human rights in Papua is thus a legitimate cause. But Australian advocates also need to examine their motives to ensure they are not also partly acting on the basis of unexamined fears and prejudices and that they have fully thought through the consequences of the positions they are advocating.

If a concern for human rights is the main motivation, why do so many supporters of Papuan human rights show so little interest in human rights issues elsewhere in Indonesia? The Indonesian press is daily filled with reports of human rights problems of one sort or another - in Papua, but also in many other parts of the archipelago. But the latter do not arouse Australian passions and are rarely reported here. When, for example, in March 2004 five protesting farmers were killed in Ruteng, Flores, the story did not rate a mention in any major Australian newspaper. When tens of thousands of Indonesian workers protested for their rights this month, it caused hardly a blip in Australia. This despite the fact that exploited Indonesian workers make many of the shoes and clothes that Australians wear. Perhaps workers' stories are not as dramatic as independence struggles. But surely it is worth asking why there is such interest among Australians in Papua from people who are completely indifferent to the rest of the 240 million or so people in Indonesia?

Romanticising self-determination

One immediate explanation for Papua's appeal is that it seems to be a David versus Goliath story. It is not only that there have been very serious military abuses in Papua, though this is certainly a large part of the story. People in the west are often most interested in human rights when they occur in the context of independence struggles. We often romanticize such struggles, especially when small communities are pitted against apparently large and powerful ones. Self-determination struggles also appeal to our propensity to see human society as made up of readily identifiable and clearly bounded groups (ethnic groups, nations, races, etc) engaged in endless struggles for domination and liberation. They seem to offer a simple narrative of human suffering, and appear also to promise an easy solution, in the form of the magic bullet of self-determination.

In fact, independence struggles are rarely black and white. East Timor, the best known example in Australia and the one to which most Australian discussion of Papua explicitly or implicitly orients was a relatively straightforward case. More commonly than the Timor example suggests, such struggles often raise virtually insuperable philosophical and practical problems about what kind of groups should have the right to self-determination and when and under what circumstances. It is also often far from simple deciding who should participate in acts of self-determination and what should happen to the losers. Australians, people of a country built on colonial conquest, should be willing to face these hard truths above all others.

Take, for example, the question of how Papua became part of Indonesia. Supporters of Papuan independence often say Papua became part of Indonesia in 1969 as a result of a fraud. The so-called

"Act of Free Choice" in that year was undoubtedly a sham: 1025 hand-picked Papuan leaders were intimidated by the Indonesian military to choose integration with Indonesia. In the version that dominates public debate in Australia, the "Act of Free Choice" was the high point in a process of Indonesian "colonialism" that has continued to this day. Indeed, so dominant is this narrative of Indonesian colonialism that it used even by some commentators on the right who argue *against* Australian support for Papuan nationalism. [3]

But consider for a moment the response that Indonesian nationalists might make to this argument. They would retort that the real infamy was committed in 1949 when the Dutch kept hold of Papua, alone of all parts of their East Indies empire. For Indonesian nationalists, the act of self-determination which counts occurred when Indonesia declared independence from the Dutch and started to build a multi-ethnic state within the borders of the old colonial state. In the years that followed 1949, however, the Dutch did all they could to convince the Papuans that their future destiny should be separate from Holland's former rebellious subjects. A sense of Papuan identity that was separate from and opposed to Indonesian identity emerged. We do not know what would have happened had history not played out in this way and had Papua followed the rest of the colony in 1949. But it seems possible that a single and cohesive Papuan identity might not have emerged, or not emerged in the same way or to the same extent. It is also possible that no strong independence movement would have developed. In many other parts of Eastern Indonesia where (like Papua) there was relatively little active support for the Indonesian revolution in 1945-49, and where problems of poverty, social dislocation and local disenfranchisement similar to those in Papua occurred in subsequent decades, separatist movements did not subsequently appear.

Critics can say that the Indonesian argument skates over what actually happened in 1969 and the legacy of government mistreatment since then. On the other hand, Indonesian nationalists can equally validly point out that the dominant Australian version ignores the role played by Dutch colonialism in the genesis of the contemporary conflict. This is a major problem in almost every self-determination conflict: two rival versions of history are in contest. Once one adopts the logic of one or other of the narrative frameworks, it becomes not only easy but also necessary to denigrate and dismiss the opposite claim. Viewed from outside the competing frameworks, it is often possible to see valid arguments on both sides. A problem in Australia is that one of the two principal contesting frameworks is becoming dominant to the almost complete exclusion of attention to the claims of the other. The logic of the now dominant framework then subsequently structures most of the public debate - at some cost to the capacity to find non-violent solutions to complex contemporary problems.

Let's look at the "solution" offered by a future act of self-determination. We should start by setting aside the question of whether it is likely that a referendum on independence might take place in Papua in the foreseeable future. It is in fact very unlikely. We should also, for the moment, set aside the likely bloodshed that would be required to reach such an outcome.

Even imagining that a peaceful act of self-determination *was* possible in the foreseeable future, there is no guarantee that peace would necessarily follow. Acts of self-determination can create new problems even while they solve other ones. In the Balkan wars of the early 1990s, acts of self-determination by minorities within Yugoslavia set off additional conflicts as Serbian minorities within newly independent states, aided by a populist Serbian leadership under Slobodan Milosevic, tried to rejoin Serbia. In Papua, something like 40% of the population are now non-indigenous settlers. Supporters of the Papuan cause, following the iron logic of the colonialism narrative, often characterize these people as colonists, thus delegitimating any claims they may have, and effectively demonizing them. It is true that the arrival of migrant settlers has been accompanied by neglect , mistreatment and marginalization of the indigenous population in Papua and that this has

exacerbated Papuan alienation and fuelled nationalism. [4] On the other hand, the settlers themselves are mostly poor farmers and petty traders from other parts of the archipelago who went to Papua to seek a better life. Some of the transmigrants who moved there during the Suharto years had little choice. None of them saw themselves as bearing a colonial mission (as early European settlers did in Australia) but merely as citizens of a country where there is considerable internal migration, not just to Papua but also to many other (relatively) under-populated regions, as well as to the major metropolises of Java and elsewhere.

An act of self-determination resulting in independence could well cause these people considerable suffering and disenfranchisement. Some of them might resist violently (as some Papuans have violently resisted the Indonesian state).Yes, they are a minority within Papua, but the population of Papua as a whole is also a minority within the larger Indonesia. Working out which minority counts, and why, is a vexed question in self-determination everywhere. It is all very well to say that "democracy" should be practiced: the real question is at what level and in what form a democratic choice should be made.

Indeed, it is worth remembering here a lesson from Australia's own history. In 1933 the majority of the population of Western Australia voted in favour of independence in a referendum. Despite this clearly expressed will of the population, the state did not become independent. The British parliament refused to intervene and the Commonwealth government and the population of other states did not give their assent. In effect, it was required that the entire Commonwealth of Australia consent to secession by one state. We excoriate Indonesia's unwillingness to allow self-determination, but Australia's own constitution calls the Australian federation "indissoluble."

Finally, another argument which is sometimes made about self-determination is that it offers the only truly "permanent" solution to the Papua problem. Whatever the rights and wrongs of past history, so this argument goes, a freely conducted act of self-determination would settle the dispute once and for all. In addition to the objection already raised above about the new problems that self-determination can create, this viewpoint assumes that solutions short of full independence are impossible and that national identity is immutable and unchangeable. In fact, many places in the world today bear the fading traces of nationalist movements and identities that were militarily suppressed, failed politically, whose leaders were bought off by government concessions, or which otherwise died and have been lost to history. Who now, for instance, gives much credence to the claims of Sikh separatists in India's Punjab, despite the considerable mayhem they caused in the 1980s? Closer to home, the current peace process in Aceh suggests that a separatist conflict that a few years ago seemed irresolvable may in fact also soon fade into history (though we cannot yet say this with confidence).

Assuming that a full act of self-determination is the only solution to the grievances which underpin separatist conflicts is also flawed. Many of the grievances that motivate the Papuans today (human rights abuses, poverty, alienation from land, disrespect for indigenous culture, etc) could in theory be addressed by a properly functioning and democratic Indonesian state with a large degree of local autonomy. The Indonesian government has in fact made attempts to address many of these grievances in the form of a 2001 law on Special Autonomy. It is true that implementation has been halting and incomplete (even sabotaged in some crucial respects) [5] and that serious human rights abuses and effective military impunity persist. But much of the debate about Papua in Australia takes place as if in a time warp, with Indonesia still in the grip of full-blown military-based and centralized rule like during the height of the Suharto regime.

My purpose in the discussion so far has not been to argue against self-determination or to say that it is in principle absurd, in Papua or anywhere else. It has merely been to point out that self-determination can be more problematic than the simple narrative of colonialism and liberation in

which its supporters often package it. In the case of Papua, it also suggests that the Indonesian position deserves more serious attention in Australia, and should not be dismissed out of hand as merely reflecting a colonialist mentality. Support for Papuan rights (for example, improvement of human rights protection) can also be expressed in ways that do not adopt either the language or logic of either of the competing nationalist frameworks for understanding contemporary conditions in the territory.

Stereotyping Indonesia

Regardless of the rights or wrongs of self-determination, romanticisation of such struggles cannot be the whole explanation for why Australians have recently taken up the Papuan cause with such gusto. The Indonesian army committed arguably worse human rights abuses in its campaign to eliminate separatists in Aceh, but few people in Australia cared much about this. The Acehnese were Muslims and, to outsiders, they appeared ethnically similar to most other Indonesians.

This points to a second factor. There is deep-seated hostility toward Indonesia in Australia which has replaced fear of Asia in general over the past few decades or at least embodies that longstanding wider Australian anxiety about "the north". This is mixed up with a good dose of Islamophobia, some of it long-standing, and amplified by the Bali bombings. Of course, Australian attitudes are not homogeneous and the response to the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami shows that many Australians are prepared to support Muslims who are suffering (notwithstanding the orgy of self-congratulation about "Australian generosity" that quickly dominated discussion of that event in this country). Yet the extraordinary and hysterical public response to the Schapelle Corby drug trial in Bali suggests that reflexive anti-Indonesian hostility is ever close to the surface of Australian life.

A lot of what passes for public debate about Indonesia in Australia is based on profound ignorance and stereotyping of the country, including from people who claim to stand for human equality, respect and dignity. To cite just one recent example in the context of the debate on Papua: on Wednesday April 26, the left-wing journalist Mark Aarons appeared on Philip Adams' "Late Night Live" show on ABC Radio National [6] where he several times told the audience that people from "West Java" were a dominant and oppressive force in Indonesia who subjugated the populations of various other islands, and that this dominance accounts for various trends we see in Indonesian government. In fact, the majority of the population of West Java, the Sundanese, constitute a small minority of Indonesia's population and are not disproportionately represented in its national elite.

Presumably, Aarons was garbling the commonplace slander in Australia that Indonesia is a Javanese empire (referring to the ethnic Javanese who come from the Central and Eastern regions of the island). It is symptomatic that someone who apparently lacks very basic knowledge about Indonesia can successfully present himself as an authoritative source of information about the country on a prestigious talk show targeting the progressive intelligentsia, and in doing so demonise, stereotype and misrepresent that country. Imagine for a moment the response if a pundit made such an egregious error about, say, the United States or even Italy or France.

This sort of thing, unfortunately, has long been common in Australia. There is a large body of Australian commentators on both right and left who routinely pronounce on Indonesian affairs, and Australia's relations with Indonesia, yet who know Indonesia poorly and who interpret the country only through the prism of Australian nationalism and domestic political debate. For them, Indonesia and its problems have little significance in their own right, but are only a canvas upon which Australian political battles can be played out and Australian fears and fantasies projected.

Myths about Indonesia and primordialist reasoning about it permeate the arguments presented by many supporters of the Papuan cause in Australia. For instance, as a consequence of European

proselytizing in the Dutch colonial period Papuans are mostly Christians, while most other Indonesians are Muslims. Much of the concern for Papua in Australia is mediated by the churches which have links there and are motivated for concern for their co-religionists. Frequently, supporters of the Papuan cause play up the religious differences. According to Sister Susan Connelly of the Mary MacKillop East Timor Institute in The Catholic Weekly, "The Muslim religion has overtaken Christianity as the new religion to the extent that the West Papuans say they are becoming strangers in their own country."

Many Australian commentators add that Papuans should be independent simply because they are so ethnically or racially different from other Indonesians. As one reader of the left-wing web site, Sydney Indymedia, explains: "To me, it seems ludicrous that Indonesia should have sovereignty over Papuan native people!"

Presumably, this person would be repelled by suggestions that different ethnic (or religious) groups cannot coexist in Australia. Yet it is apparently inherently absurd to imagine that Melanesians and Southeast Asians can coexist in Indonesia. It's worth remembering that Indonesia was a country founded on a multicultural ideal. Indonesian nationalists fought the racist exclusivism of Dutch colonialism while we were still in the grip of White Australia.

Moreover, Papuans are not so dissimilar ethnically and religiously from their nearest neighbours in Eastern Indonesia. Many Australians see only the difference between Java and Papua, and have no idea about what Eastern Indonesians look like or the prevalence of Christianity in Eastern Indonesia. Papuans, who themselves are made of literally hundreds of separate language and cultural groups, are in fact one end of an ethnic continuum that stretches from East to West in Indonesia. If Melanesian Papuans "cannot possibly" be part of Indonesia, what then of the inhabitants of West Timor, or of Flores and of every other one of Indonesia's many minority groups?

Again, to ensure that my argument is not misunderstood or misrepresented, I am not here denying that Papuans themselves have faced discriminatory treatment. Especially under the Suharto regime "primitive" peoples around the archipelago were targeted by various policies of "guidance" by which some (though rarely all) of their traditional practices and customs were denigrated and by which they were compelled to conform to mainstream cultural and economic patterns (e.g. by abandoning shifting agriculture). Papuans themselves often encounter views in Indonesia which are racialist if not racist (though even here the picture is complicated and does not invite easy comparison with the history of European racism in a place like Australia). Indeed, we might say that Papuan nationalism has arisen in part because of the *failings* of Indonesian multiculturalism. The point here is that Australian supporters of the Papuan cause should not base their arguments on an assumption that multiculturalism is in principle impossible in Indonesia. Nor should they deny the principles of multiculturalism which still pervade and in large part animate Indonesia's society and government.

In their defence, Australian supporters may be picking up their language and arguments from Papuan independence activists themselves. It is not surprising that Papuan nationalists try to create a picture of ethnic dichotomy: innocent, noble Papuans and cruel, alien oppressors. They often say they are separated from other Indonesians by physical and religious differences. This reflects their experience of repression, but there is more to it than that. It is also a process of ethnic othering akin to what ethno-nationalists do everywhere. It's a logic that can lead to brave independence struggles, but also to ethnic cleansing and genocide. In Papua this process is so far much less developed than in Aceh, where there were systematic and violent attacks on Javanese settlers. But incipient dynamics in that direction are visible in Papua, too, including in the nationalist talk about "Javanese imperialism". Outsiders, especially those who claim to be motivated by an appreciation for universal human rights, should not uncritically repeat ethno-nationalist views.

Reviving Australian nationalism

Finally, there is a belief in Australia that Papua is part of "our" natural sphere of influence and it is thus our duty to protect its inhabitants. Some commentators who support Papuan rights stress the relative physical proximity of Papua to Australia, some mention Australia's former presence in PNG, others the role of Australian troops there in World War II. In Canberra circles and among those who stress realpolitik, the major fears are of floods of refugees and deleterious political impacts for PNG. These attitudes should also give us pause, given our colonial history in the region. At an official level, the notion of the white man's burden is not dead when it comes to Australian attitudes to the Pacific, as recent events in Honiara, and the deployment of Australian police to PNG, suggest. The military intervention in East Timor , and the way it was subsequently celebrated as part of an increasingly militaristic nationalist public culture in Australia, also forms part of this story.

When you combine the contemporary enthusiasm for intervention in the region with the crude stereotyping of our largest Asian neighbor that occurs in public debate, as well as the widespread perception, confirmed in many opinion polls, that Indonesia represents a major security threat to Australia, is it not possible to hear echoes of an Australia from an earlier era?

In conclusion, and to repeat, none of the discussion in this brief paper has been intended to deny that human rights problems have been, and continue to be, severe in Papua. The history of government mistreatment of Papuans lies at the heart of the ongoing political unrest there. There have been some attempts to address Papuan grievances since the fall of Suharto, but only in a halting and inconsistent way, and serious problems remain.

Nor does the above suggest that it is not legitimate to raise concerns about human rights in Papua - and to press both the Indonesian government and Australian governments for their rectification.

Instead, my concern has been with how the Papua issue is received and debated in Australia. Australian sympathizers need to reflect upon what motivates them, think about the complexities, and take care with their language. It is incumbent upon people who criticize other countries to also critically examine their own society's views, their own nationalism and their own prejudices. Australian supporters of Papuan rights need to ensure that their comments about Indonesia are not filtered through a screen of Australian hubris and ignorance. Above all, Australians should ensure that their concern for human rights in Papua does not prevent them from viewing other Indonesians, too, as human beings.

Information about the author

Edward Aspinall is a researcher at the Australian National University and an editor of Inside Indonesia magazine. This article, however, is made in his personal capacity and does not necessarily reflect the views of the magazine. His recent publications include Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance, And Regime Change In Indonesia, Stanford University Press , 2005, and The Helsinki Agreement: A More Promising Basis for Peace in Aceh? East-West Center, Policy Studies No. 20, 2005. Email: edward.aspinall@anu.edu.au

Endnotes

[1] This article is an extended version of a much shorter piece which appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on 27 April 2006. The author would like to acknowledge criticism and feedback from his colleagues at Inside Indonesia, the careful editorial commentary of Richard Tanter, as well as Geoff Mulherin whose ongoing PhD research on the Indonesian nationalist narrative on Papua

inspired some of the comments in the first part of this paper.

[2] For one recent appraisal see Richard Chauvel's recent essay for this forum: Australia, Indonesia and the Papuan crises, Austral Policy Forum 06-14A 27 April 2006 http://nautilus.rmit.edu.au/forum-reports/https://nautilus.org/publications/essays/apsnet/policy-forum/2006-2/0614a-chauvel-html/

[3] See, for example, an opinion piece by former Liberal MP Michael Baume in the Australian Financial Review, 1 May 2006

[4] For one excellent discussion of this, see Rodd McGibbon's 2004 East-West Center study on migration in Papua, Plural Society in Peril: Migration, Economic Change, and the Papua Conflict, East-West Center Policy Studies 13, 2004 [PDF]). http://www.eastwestcenter.org/stored/pdfs/PS013.pdf

[5] See Chauvel, Australia, Indonesia and the Papuan crises, and also the recent International Crisis Group report: Papua: The Dangers of Shutting Down Dialogue. http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4042&l=1

[6] Jakarta, Canberra and West Papua: Examining the 'Jakarta Lobby'. http://www.abc.net.au/rn/latenightlive/stories/2006/1624215.htm

Nautilus invites your response

The Austral Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to the editor, Jane Mullett: austral@rmit.edu.au. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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