

Addressing Papua's problems ¹

A former Indonesian minister, who during his career in the government was deeply involved in handling rebellious provinces, has reportedly told President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono that Papua will become the next major headache for Indonesia if the government fails to take a lesson from the decision of the majority of people in the predominantly Catholic territory of East Timor to separate from Indonesia in a referendum in 1999.

Citing several reasons, including religion and Papua's vast natural resources, the former official hinted that the predominantly Christian Papua will get more support from Western countries, compared to the predominantly Muslim -- and also rebellious -- Aceh province.

"Do not ever underestimate the Papua problem. If we continue repeating what we did in East Timor, it is not impossible that we will encounter the same problem again," was more or less what the highly-respected former official had to say about Papua.

It is clear, however, that the international community has given strong support to alleviating the suffering of the people of Aceh from the effects of the decades-long military operation and the tsunami that devastated the province last December. And now with international support, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the government are very close to reaching a peace agreement. We hope that peace will eventually prevail in the province.

In Papua, although the majority of the population is Christian, the issue is not just about religion. Some Papuans say the danger of extinction of ethnic Papuans -- caused by diseases like AIDS and uncontrolled migration from other islands -- is more alarming than the religion issue.

What mistakes did Indonesia commit in East Timor? The most important thing was rampant gross human rights abuses and disrespect for human dignity, including the people's culture and basic rights as human beings. Indonesia insisted it deserved respect from the East Timorese, taking the view that it had liberated the tiny territory from colonialism and spent money on development there. What it received from the East Timorese, however, was fear and hatred because they saw Indonesia acting as a colonial power, and one that was cruel at that.

We can say that Papua and East Timor are different issues as from the very beginning of Indonesia's independence in 1945, Papua was claimed by Indonesia as an integral part of its territory, although it took 20 years for this to actually come about. But can we say that right from the very beginning the Papuans truly felt that they were real Indonesians, who are treated in the same way by the state as their compatriots who live outside Papua?

Many Papuans feel that they are treated as second-class citizens. Their rich natural resources are exploited but their living standards do not reflect the huge revenues the state has extracted from their land. Regular, oppressive security operations and human rights abuses by the security forces and the government hurt them. And there are no serious efforts being made by the government to improve the situation.

In reacting to the move by the U.S. Congress to internationalize the Papua issue, many Indonesian officials and legislators flew into an apoplectic rage. "Do not ever, ever interfere with Indonesia's sovereignty," was the typical sort of response emanating from Jakarta, just like we have come to expect from ultra-nationalist and narrow-minded people.

The issue here is not whether the 1969 UN-sponsored Act of Free Choice was legitimate or not, because that is very debatable. Those who opposed the Act would argue that very few people participated in the self-determination process and therefore it was illegitimate. However, we must also remember that at the time, Papua was still languishing in something resembling the stone-age so that it is difficult to compare the situation back then to the current situation.

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The central issue is that Indonesia has failed to convince the Papuans through concrete deeds that they are better off as part of Indonesia. This does not mean that the central government never listens to their aspirations. In 2001, the House of Representatives (DPR) passed the very generous Papua Special Autonomy Law (No. 21 of 2001), which included the establishment of the Papuan People's Council (MRP). The international community also hailed this legislation as it gave a greater opportunity to the Papuans to run their own affairs. There were high hopes at the time that Papua's problems could be resolved for good.

But what happened then? The government broke its own promise. It refused to give the MRP the power mandated by the legislation. Despite widespread public opposition in Papua, the government established the new province of West Irian Jaya. It is only a matter of time until another new province, East Irian Jaya, will be set up.

The special autonomy arrangement is now practically in tatters. Again, Jakarta has disappointed the Papuans. So, can we expect them to ever trust the government again? The international community supports special autonomy for Papua, but if the government itself goes back on its own commitments, can we still demand that foreign countries remain committed to supporting us?