

Lowying the Boom on West Papua: Self-determination Unthinkable for Australia's Leading Foreign Policy Think Tank

Peter King
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Established in 2004 with a \$30 million grant from Sir Frank Lowy, his eponymous Institute for International Policy has settled down in Sydney as a government-friendly affair most prominently inhabited by former well-seasoned diplomatic, defence and intelligence officials. There is also a sprinkling of younger academics, some of them no doubt to-be-seasoned for official careers. Naturally enough, given its funding and the scarcity of non-academic, non-governmental research locations in the Antipodes, there is considerable talent to be found at the Lowy Institute, and much of it has taken aim at Australia's nearest, most powerful and most troublesome neighbour, Indonesia, and the consuming conundrums posed for Australia by Indonesia's humanly poorest, resource richest, largest (by area) and most troublesome province—or, more correctly, region—Papua. (Thanks to the divide and rule strategy being pursued in Jakarta, Papua--or West Papua--the region now consists of two confusingly named as well as troublesome provinces: Papua and West Papua.)

The Lowy goal on the Papua problem is to persuade the Australian and Indonesian political and security establishments to lift their game in handling it—and thus persuade the Papuans and their civil society supporters in Australia to give up any dreams of self-determination or independence for a potential Melanesian Republic of Papua. Instead they should settle for the Jakarta-bestowed special autonomy of 2001 which, however, the Papuans are currently rejecting outright. How, then, is the official Australian and Indonesian game to be lifted?

There have been contributions to this project by the Lowy director himself, Bruce Gyngell, former diplomat and close adviser of Prime Minister Keating, and by Professor Jamie Mackie, currently with the Indonesia Project at the ANU and academic scion of the so-called Jakarta Lobby (sometimes “Indonesia Lobby”) which places the interests and concerns of Australians and Indonesians, as opposed to their governments, rather low in the scheme of things. Mackie's 150-page monograph *Australia and Indonesia: Current Problems, Future Prospects*, appeared under the Lowy imprint in September 2007 and was particularly adamant that the Papua issue must not drive the bilateral relationship. (Mackie is even prepared to “appease” Indonesia to this end, but we shall see that could be counterproductive.)

However the big gun in the Lowy arsenal on Papua is, or rather was, since he is now Deputy Director of the Office of National Assessments (ONA), Dr Rodd McGibbon—veteran of “six years in Indonesia for the United Nations, USAID and the United States Institute of Peace”. So we are told in his 150-page monograph entitled *Pitfalls of Papua: understanding the conflict and its place in Australia-Indonesia relations*, which was Lowy Institute Paper # 13 in October 2006.

Pitfalls the monograph avoids the obvious pitfall for any author intending to resume work at the intel coalface (Rodd McGibbon had served in ONA previously) of letting sympathy for the Papuans get the

better of the national interest as conceived in Canberra. Stalwartly Janus-faced, it offers a well-informed, sensitive and persuasive overview of the Papuans' plight since the Dutch abandoned them to the US, the UN, Sukarno and, later, Suharto in 1962. Rodd McGibbon dutifully and quite thoroughly notes the militarisation (and military impunity), the repression, the corruption, the resources rip-off and the very long list of shortcomings in implementing special autonomy in Papua.

However at page 98 of *Pitfalls* the mood changes. It turns out that those authors he politely names (and respectfully quotes) as part of "Australia's West Papua constituency" are subject to severe illusions-- "engaged [indeed] in myth-making that is shaping the public debate over Papua. They have also adopted political positions that are not only unrealistic but potentially dangerous." *Pitfalls* identifies no less than seven myths bedevilling perception and policy over Papua in Australia:

Myth 1: *Indonesia has engaged in genocide in Papua, making it a moral imperative for Australia to intervene*

Here Rodd McGibbon takes the West Papua Project at Sydney University to task for its August 2005 report, *Genocide in Papua*, which achieved wide local and even some global notice at the time, accusing it of "unsubstantiated claims of genocide" by Indonesia. But McGibbon is demanding proof of intent on the part of the Indonesian government rather than inquiring whether genocidally-inclined acts have actually taken place. The framers of the UN Convention on Genocide (1948) were mainly concerned to stop actual or looming genocides:

Article II *In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:*

- a) *Killing members of the group;*
- b) *Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;*
- c) *Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;*
- d) *Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;*
- e) *Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.*

Genocide in Papua? suggested that unchecked settler influx, coercive family planning, a military-implicated HIV/AIDS epidemic, political and cultural repression and dislocation without end, discriminatory agricultural development, plus a large population shortfall since 1963 by contrast with neighbouring Papua New Guinea, all indicate that a genocide *may* be underway. Therefore Indonesian policy in Papua seems to qualify for an inquiry under the Convention on points (a) to (d) at least. And the Convention actually imposes the obligation on signatories to investigate suspected genocides, something that many West Papuans themselves-- those closest to the action and best placed to describe their own experience--are calling for. On Papua's demographic deficit, Jim Elmslie has estimated that a Papuan population of 1.7 million in 2005 was "short" by 500,000 and that this deficit is set to make indigenous Papuans the minority population in Papua within a very few years.

Myth 2: *Australian policy is dominated by a Jakarta lobby which is intent on appeasing Indonesia*

In reality the Lobby--the questioning of whose existence is a worn-out game-- took a giant stride

forward appeasement-wise in November 2006 when the Howard government signed the Lombok Treaty on “security cooperation” with the Yudhoyono government. It was finally ratified unchanged by Canberra in August 2007. Article 2.3 provides that

'The Parties...shall not in any manner support or participate in activities by any person or entity which constitute a threat to the stability, sovereignty or territorial integrity of the other party, including by those who seek to use its territory for encouraging or committing such activities, including separatism, in the territory of the other party.'

“Separatism” is a baneful and resented word among the Papuans, who regard the Indonesian state as the great separator—separating them from one another and their Melanesian kin. It now covers such “sedition” as peaceful demonstrations for negotiations with Jakarta, or raising the Morning Star flag--which has attracted eight and 15 year jail terms. In principle also, demonstrations for “separatism” in Australia could violate the Lombok Treaty, which amounts to at least a symbolic declaration of war on civil society in both countries when it comes to the future of Papua.

Myth 3: *Papua parallels the East Timor situation*

Rodd McGibbon is at pains to argue not only that Australian intervention over Papua's plight is unwarranted but that it would exacerbate the Papuans' problems while deeply offending Indonesia. But his argument is awry in light of recent history:

'Simply put [he says], the critics exaggerate Australia's ability to project power in world affairs and underestimate the risks of a fallout with Indonesia. They fail to appreciate the consequences of Australia attempting to play regional hegemon...Southeast Asia's largest state, and the world's fourth most populous, does not accept definitions that incorporate it within Australia's sphere of influence.'

Equally simply, we might ask who played regional hegemon by assembling a wide coalition in support of intervention to protect the right of self-determination for East Timor in 1999? And who has been leading a still-active coalition of the willing to prevent East Timor slipping into anarchy? Australia's extended Dili intervention is taking place in the heart of Eastern Indonesia while Papua (one might note rather provocatively) is merely periphery for Indonesia—albeit resource-valuable and historically cherished periphery. Anyhow, West Papua is strategically important for Australia and its relations with Papua New Guinea and the rest of Melanesia to the Near North in a way that East Timor isn't, not least for the disruptive influence of the TNI already being felt in PNG with border crossing incidents and army involvement in PNG's timber industry.

The truth is that Canberra and the Jakarta Lobby strove mightily for years to avoid playing “regional hegemon”, or even responsible regional power, at almost fatal cost to the people of East Timor. Yet in 1999 Australian military intervention to end Jakarta's abuses became inevitable. Successive Indonesian governments have amply shown that serious reform of the TNI, especially the the army's so-called territorial function and the rule of impunity, is largely off the agenda, despite the promises of *reformasi*. Yet official Australia is still encouraging Indonesia in a repugnant military occupation of Papua.

Myth 4: *Indonesia is a Javanese empire where democracy is a facade*

Rodd McGibbon correctly notes that the Indonesian settlers in Papua are 60 per cent non-Javanese. But Javanese domination of political leadership, the military and the central bureaucracy in Indonesia

constitutes an acute problem for Papuans even though Indonesia's multicultural and hetero-religious credentials are largely intact. Papuan culture generally—and not only “separatist” political culture—is widely derided and regarded as illegitimate in Indonesian terms. Despite democratic elections for province and regency parliaments and top officials, among whom indigenous Papuans do predominate, Papua continues to languish under the Indo/Javanese “security approach” in a neo-colonial condition.

The Acehnese have their own local parties now, since the tsunami-induced peace of 2005; but Papua, still awaiting its tsunami of whatever kind after 45 years, continues under the ultimate sway of the TNI, with its elected leaders bound to the almost indistinguishable big money parties and corrupt habits made in Java. Papuan governors, bupati (regency chiefs) and bureaucrats challenge the neo-colonial brown mastas of TNI and POLRI (the national police) at their peril.

Democracy is barely even a facade now for those seeking recognition and action on Papua's deep-seated grievances. There is a truly representative Papuan political leadership in the churches, the human rights NGOs and the MRP, the all-Papuan upper house of the Papuan parliament belatedly set up under special autonomy. But this leadership lives in daily fear of harassment and worse from the Indonesian “insecurity forces”—police, military and judicial. Arnold Ap, Theys Eluay and John Rumbiak, respectively the three outstanding cultural, political and intellectual leaders of Papua since the occupation of 1963, have been eliminated by Jakarta. Ap and Eluay were assassinated and Rumbiak forced into exile by death threats, finally suffering a debilitating stroke in New York at age 43.

McGibbon reproaches me for deeming Yudhoyono's Indonesia “a barely reformed” political system. Yet this judgment is unfortunately confirmed by recent studies of the central role of corruption and Suharto/New Order norms in the domestic political economy of *reformasi* Indonesia. Papua's generous new funding under special autonomy has been largely stolen by the TNI (the armed forces) and the local elected Papuan elite and their Jakarta backers. ‘*Where are the new schools, roads, hospitals and health services?*’ Papuans ask. It's a good question not so far answered in Jakarta.

Myth 5: *Indonesia has latent expansionist tendencies*

I'm again taken to task here by Rodd McGibbon for an “outrageous” reference to Indonesian “*lebensraum*”—but let me apologise and assure him the over-the-top reference to Hitler was meant to be jocular. Ironically, when it comes to expansionism, it was the Indonesia Lobby itself, with ALP Prime Minister Gough Whitlam to the fore, which encouraged a somewhat hesitant General Suharto to annex East Timor (the people were supposed to consent of course) in 1974-5. Suharto aimed merely to close down a small living space which it was feared would be Left friendly domestically and internationally. But the invasion backfired rather badly, even though to this day it has not been officially disowned in Jakarta as it might readily have been, since East Timor was not Dutch patrimony.

On the other hand an Australian Liberal government supported American efforts to promote “separatism” and provincial defection in the Indonesian periphery during the late 1950s when military/political rebellions erupted in the Outer Islands against Sukarno and the Communist party. All through the 1950s the same conservative government opposed Papua's integration into Indonesia (supporting, we might say, Papuan “separatism” before the fact of integration), on the ground that Dutch West New Guinea was a Melanesian entity just as deserving of self-determination as PNG. (Indonesia's first Vice President, Mohammad Hatta, more or less agreed with this original Australian position.)

We may conclude that Indonesia's effective expansionism (leaving aside Sukarno's ambiguous and abortive *Konfrontasi* with Malaysia in the early 1960s) has been at least arguably modest but pretty catastrophic for all that when the consequences for East Timor and Papua and Indonesia itself, especially its international reputation, are soberly calculated. Australian governments have not hesitated to support “separatism” to check this expansionism when it seemed opportune or necessary, most notably in East Timor. The time is ripe to seriously consider this option for Papua.

Myth 6: Recent evidence exposes Indonesia's manipulation of the Act of Free Choice and the international community's complicity.

Since this statement is strictly true it seems an unpromising candidate for a “myth”. Nevertheless Rodd McGibbon usefully remarks that the 1969 so-called Act of Free Choice “was not a conspiracy between the actors that has been exposed by the recent release of secret papers, but an open act of *realpolitik* that was accepted by the main international actors at the time.” Even so the coercion, the coverups (including by Australia) and misinformation that accompanied the Act Free of Choice might still be regarded as conspiratorial.

Myth 7: As Melanesian Christians, Papuans are essentially different from Indonesians. On the basis of these religious and ethnic differences, Papua's incorporation into Indonesia should be challenged

McGibbon is right to note the persistence, under challenge from some Islamic quarters, of religious pluralism in contemporary Indonesia. Nevertheless Melanesian religion, both Christian and autochthonous, is widely disparaged, not least by the torturers and executioners of POLRI and TNI. The abiding problem for Papuans is that their one point of deep agreement with Indonesia is that neither they, nor their ultimate rulers and masters in Jakarta and in Papua, consider that they are good Indonesians or even Indonesians at all. That would seem to be a strong enough argument for separation on its own.

There is still a big pebble in the shoe of Indonesian diplomacy, and Papua is doomed or destined to shape the Aust-Indo relations profoundly in the years of political crisis and humanitarian emergency which lie ahead. The key Papuan demand for a new dialogue with Jakarta on the fundamentals of their dysfunctional relationship is one which Rodd McGibbon notes has been endorsed by a parliamentary commission in Jakarta. It is here that the Australian leverage needs above all to be applied. Even friendly “moderate” pressure such as John Howard applied with his celebrated letter to Habibie in late 1998 may work wonders. The Papuans are clear that international pressure and mediation are essential for dialogue and peace, as they were in Aceh, and the Rudd government needs to make it clear that Jakarta is asking too high a price if Australia is expected to endorse the continuing outrages of the “security approach” indefinitely.

Damien Kingsbury has pointed the way to a serious attempt at international resolution of the Papua problem on an Aceh model and been slapped down for his pains by McGibbon, who thinks it will be counterproductive for Australia to push for international mediation until it has somehow reassured Jakarta about its anti-separatist credentials following the boat people episode of early 2006. But this is a know-nothing as well as a do-nothing formula in which we would hope to persuade the Indonesians

to change their behaviour by first of all encouraging them to go on doing what they are doing. Time will tell that if Australia continues to sit on the sidelines in Papua neither the Australian, Papuan nor Indonesian interest will be served.

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Bio

Peter King is a Research Associate in Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney. He was the founding President, later Director, of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies in 1988. Since 2000 he has been co-convener of its West Papua Project. Publications include *West Papua and Indonesia since Suharto: Independence, Autonomy or Chaos?* (UNSW Press, 2004); (with John Wing) *Genocide in West Papua?* (CPACS and ELSHAM Jayapura, 2005), and "Corruption Ruins Everything": Gridlock over Suharto's Legacy in Indonesia' (*Japan Focus*, February 2008).