

Avoiding the real West Papua

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Illustration: *Dyson*

There is little understanding in Australia of the state terrorism being visited on West Papua, writes Scott Burchill.

The arrival of 43 West Papuan asylum seekers in northern Australia earlier this year pressed the pause button on the cosy relationship struck recently between political elites in Canberra and Jakarta.

Despite their common opposition to separatism in West Papua, both governments bungled their responses to this latest challenge to bilateral goodwill.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono believed a quiet phone call to Prime Minister John Howard would circumvent Australia's formal processes for assessing refugee claims. How could the Indonesian embassy in Canberra have offered such misleading advice to its Government?

The Australian Government thought it could grant temporary protection visas to 42 West Papuans because they faced "a well-founded fear of persecution", without discussing serious crimes that were still being committed in their province after Indonesia's alleged transition to democracy.

Predictably, civilian "reformers" in Indonesia feigned outrage and fanned the flames of nationalism to reassure "hardliners" in the parliament and military that their commercial privileges in West Papua weren't under threat.

Canberra offered to reprise offshore processing, both to dissuade West Papuans from leaving the province - politically and physically - and to placate Jakarta.

Despite the crisis-like atmosphere generated in some media circles, these actions should be seen as perfunctory responses by two governments with the same political objective. To the extent that there is a minor diplomatic disruption over the issue, both sides will soon get over it.

More interesting are the strategies devised by those faithful servants of state power in Australia who habitually defend Indonesia against charges that it mistreats its citizens. Their task is two-fold. To divert attention from the source of the problem - continuing human rights violations and political repression in West Papua perpetrated by the Indonesian military (TNI). And to avoid asking the only question that needs to be posed - what do the West Papuans want?

The most popular approach is to blame the messenger. According to Paul Sheehan in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the problem is a result of "yet another intervention by Australian ideological activists", including "the Greens and the ideological left" who "continue to wage ideological war on Indonesia". If not for this "insurgency-mongering", the "patient, low-profile effort by the Australian Government to obtain . . . better governance for the people of Papua" might have succeeded.

If Canberra has been trying to help the West Papuans, its efforts have certainly been low profile. Some might say subterranean. Few, if any West Papuans have noticed them, though they understand that Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and Prime Minister John Howard are more committed to West Papua's retention within Indonesia than they are. If Sheehan believes people are risking their lives to leave the territory at the urging of their Australian supporters, rather than fleeing TNI violence and repression, his brain has been captured by the Jakarta lobby.

In similar need of de-programming is Gerard Henderson (also in *The Sydney Morning Herald*), who manages to comment on the issue without even mentioning Indonesian state terrorism in West Papua - a bit like discussing the Israeli-Palestinian dispute without referring to the occupation of the West Bank. He implies that TNI crimes are fantasies of the Greens and "the extreme left". For conservatives such as Henderson, concerns about human rights abuses constitute "megaphone diplomacy" and "symbolic politics".

Unlike Sheehan and Henderson, Greg Sheridan in *The Australian* has noticed something unsavoury in the territory, although his admonition that "Indonesia hasn't ruled West Papua very well" won't deny him another friendly chat with Yudhoyono. He also blames the messengers with his claim that "outsiders who encourage an independence movement will only be encouraging people to get themselves killed". How this could

happen in a democracy is not explained, nor does he consider present death rates and oppression in West Papua a subject worthy of examination or comment.

In a turgid commentary, Sheridan's stablemate, Paul Kelly, also thinks the issue is "the moralism and resentment of Indonesia entrenched in our appeasement mind-set", rather than the violence of the Indonesian state. At the comic end of the Murdoch empire, Andrew Bolt accuses "fat-bottomed 'Free Papua' critics" of a "Noble Savage fantasy" and "Indonesia bashing", for raising concerns about the treatment of West Papuans.

In Bolt's view, Indonesia is about to fragment, so no sympathy should be shown to asylum seekers who "slid ashore on Cape York" and were subsequently granted protection visas by "some anonymous Immigration Department official". If it wasn't for the "meddling" Greens, there would be no issue.

The problem, apparently, isn't the crimes. It's their exposure.

Or perhaps its our ethical shortcomings. According to Indonesia expert Ed Aspinall, "advocates of the Papua cause need to examine their motives to ensure they are not also partly acting on the basis of unexamined fears and prejudices". Support for freedom and opposition to killing and torture in West Papua is apparently incomprehensible and merely evidence of an indifference to the plight of those outside the province.

Even more bizarre is Amanda Vanstone's claim that "separatism is a toxic cause" and evidence of "racist sentiment". Stigmatising people who are fleeing what her own department agreed was persecution is a very confused and shameful act, to put it mildly. To display an ignorance of how the modern political world has been shaped is just embarrassing.

State terrorism in West Papua is immoral, illegal and should be immediately terminated. It is the primary source of separatism in the province. Diverting attention from the crimes to those who want them stopped may please both governments but it only ensures that the abuses will continue.

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