

Comprehending West Papua: A report on the CPACS conference in Sydney and surrounding events

“We are Melanesian, not Indonesian!” and “Free Filip Karma!” chanted a group of West Papuans from around Australia - some refugees, some studying in Australia on scholarships – who had gathered in front of the Indonesian embassy in Maroubra, Sydney, on February 22, 2011. This demonstration urging Indonesia to free West Papuan political prisoners kicked off a week of events in Sydney bringing together academics and other advocates to focus on the status of West Papuan human rights.

Later that evening, a cocktail reception hosted by the West Papua Project at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPACS), University of Sydney, followed by a dinner for conference participants, marked a merry beginning to a serious conference on *Comprehending West Papua* (February 23-4), the sixth in a series of conferences on the topic held by CPACS over a decade.

The conference was opened the following day by Emeritus Professor Stuart Rees and a performance group from the West Papuan community in Melbourne, both of whom graced the conference, respectively, with West Papua-centred revolutionary poetry and songs of inspiration. Up to 80 people attended the conference which convened at International House, with presenters from overseas (The Netherlands, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand and Vanuatu), and interstate (Victoria and the ACT). Papers from *in absentia* participants (Paul Barber and Rosa Moiwend from TAPOL based in Surrey, John Saltford from London and Jim Elmslie from South Australia) were presented on their behalf, and Eben Kirksey, currently based in Florida, addressed the conference via video link.

The conference received good media coverage prompting an op ed in the Sydney Morning Herald by Hamish McDonald (<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/a-worm-inside-the-new->); several ABC radio interviews (<http://www.abc.net.au/ra/asiapac/stories/m1965274.aspx>); a New Matilda article (<http://newmatilda.com/2011/03/03/does-west-papua-have-publicity-problemINTERVIEW>), and coverage by Radio New Zealand International and SBS.

Paper highlights covered new interpretations of self-determination, from Akihisa Matsuno, in light of the concept of legitimate sovereignty (rather than decolonization) that guided the independence successes of East Timor, Kosovo and (soon to be) South Sudan; a presentation by Nick Chesterfield on the opportunities afforded for West Papua by new social media currently carrying revolutions in the Arab world; a spectacular analysis of the Australian

Museum's Sentani bark cloth art production by Yvonne Carrillo-Huffman; the outlaying of precise political goals for achieving independence and for post-independence governance by Jacob Rumbiak; and an astute reappraisal of the anti-Act of Free Choice campaigns that took place in West Papua in the 1960s by Dutch historian Pieter Drooglever. The entire collection of papers will be gathered into a book to be published later this year.

West Papuan political positions were represented by Rex Rumakiek and Otto Ondawame from the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation, Jacob Rumbiak and Herman Wainggai from the West Papua National Authority, and Franzalbert Joku and Nick Messet from IGSSARPRI (the Independent Group Supporting the Special Autonomous Region of Papua Within the Republic of Indonesia). Passions ran high as discussions on the different political positions (essentially support for independence or integration) predictably emerged with so much at stake for all, but a respectful atmosphere reigned and peaceful dialogue between parties transpired.

The conference closed with the launch of a beautiful short film titled *Mambefor Dance* directed by West Papuan Melanie Kapisa, showcasing two young children learning West Papuan dance from imitating bird of paradise rituals. Dr Jude Philp from the Macleay Museum also generously showed conference participants around the University of Sydney's West Papua collection donated in the 1970s and housed at Fisher Library. Finally, conference participants signed an open letter initiated by Human Rights Watch to Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, requesting that the prohibitive restrictions on access to West Papua be lifted for researchers, NGOs and foreign media.

That evening at the Amnesty International offices in Sydney, Indonesian Solidarity launched a campaign to free West Papuan political prisoners. The launch was addressed by Human Rights Watch's Andreas Harsono with a powerful presentation documenting Filip Karma's imprisonment, and John Dowd, QC, President of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) Australia. The week closed on Saturday 26 February with the annual national meeting of the Australia West Papua Association at which campaign decisions to support West Papuan self-determination for 2011-2012 were decided upon, together with West Papuan advisers (and members) Rex Rumakiek, Jacob Rumbiak, and Otto Ondawame.

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