

In Defence of the Papua Sympathisers: A Rejoinder to Ed Aspinall

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A kind of culture war seems to be developing in Australia over the issue of West Papua's independence from Indonesia. On one hand are the proponents of independence or – it amounts to the same thing – Papuan self-determination. They are a numerous array of tireless activists grouped in the AWPA (Australia West Papua Association) network and in various Christian denominations; a few highly committed Green and Australian Democrat parliamentarians; a small handful of published academics and a somewhat larger number of journalists with long-term Melanesian credentials – plus, most recently, a Melbourne multi-millionaire who has re-deployed his sense of fair-mindedness and campaigning dollars from East Timor to West Papua.²

On the other hand we have Liberal-National government and mainstream Labor Party opinion, together with the rest of the so-called Indonesia Lobby (diplomats, academics, journalists), who are mostly just as horrified at the prospect of West Papua's independence as they were (if old enough) for 25 years before 1999 about East Timor's. Most academic Indonesia specialists were uneasy about East Timor's occupation on legal if no other grounds, but few ever expected Indonesia with its tacit Australian government backing from the beginning to relinquish its conquest.

Despite or because of the Timor experience, however, alarm bells are now being sounded about Papuan independence by Indonesia scholars and researchers of the first rank, most notably Sidney Jones, Edward Aspinall and Rodd McGibbon. I have dealt with Sidney Jones's views elsewhere (King 2006), and I deal with Ed Aspinall's views below.³

Like Sidney Jones Aspinall is notionally very sympathetic to Papua, but contends that independence is a dangerous and in any case probably unattainable unknown (p.124). We should beware the pitfalls of further "wasted" bloodletting; the Melanesian propensity for corruption and anarchy; settler versus native Papuan conflicts in the aftermath of independence, and more (p. 125). Thus Papua is a quagmire waiting to happen for an intervention-minded Australia – like the one possibly emerging now in independent East Timor (Aspinall 2006).

While Ed Aspinall repeatedly expresses concern about Indonesian treatment of West Papuans since the 1962-3 takeover from the Dutch, he also cautions against accepting Papuan narratives of suffering and exploitation uncritically. He ensures a critical stance by following mainstream scholarship, journalistic

cliché and the Indonesian government in habitually referring to sub-national independence seekers in Indonesia by that baleful designation, “separatists”. This word is anathema to Papuan, Acehnese and other province-based patriots in Indonesia who live and die by their version of national legitimacy. The Papuan version of this legitimacy narrative was eloquently (and cunningly) articulated by Theys Eluay in his “Papuan independence declaration” on behalf of the Papuan People’s Congress in June 2000: Having accepted the Dutch promise of independence in 1961, he argued, Papua never (willingly) joined Indonesia. The issue of separating from Indonesia does not arise.⁴

In his narrative Ed Aspinall doesn’t in fact quote any Papuan sources at all. This might be valid in a short article on *Australian* attitudes, but he does peremptorily dismiss the case for believing any “systematic” genocide is underway in Papua, and offers a quite weak account of actual human rights situation in the province:

No fair observer could deny that human rights problems have been, and continue to be, very great in Papua. ...Even so, serious problems remain, including arbitrary violence by security forces and persecution of peaceful pro-independence activists. Supporting human rights in Papua is thus a legitimate cause (Aspinall 2006, 124).

Ed Aspinall acknowledges the undisturbed systematic impunity enjoyed by the police and military in ongoing human rights violations throughout Papua, but neglects to mention the criminal-corrupt basis of military abuse in illegal business and extortion. Elsewhere I have summarised the human rights situation as follows:

- rapacious resource extraction by foreign miners and local and foreign timber companies under military supervision or (often) control, which continues notwithstanding President Yudhoyono’s “crackdown” on illegal logging from February 2005, and repeated promises [especially in parliament] to bring the Freeport mining operation to account for environmental vandalism and embedded collusion with TNI;
- “demographic” – and cultural – inundation by hundreds of thousands of Indonesian settlers from Java, Sulawesi and elsewhere, which has marginalised the Papuans not only in the towns but increasingly in the countryside as well, and is now being aggravated by a runaway HIV/AIDS epidemic for which TNI’s prostitution rackets among the Papuans must bear much of the blame (King 2006, 42)

These developments – and the racial and cultural discrimination against the Papuans acknowledged by Aspinall do raise the issue of genocide – albeit a

slow genocide, or at least a human emergency on a scale sufficient to justify humanitarian intervention. As Australia's former foreign minister Gareth Evans would have it, a Responsibility to Protect arises.⁵ In fact the Genocide Convention seems clear enough:

Article 2

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.⁶

Papuans certainly perceive a genocide in this sense as the likely end result of their Indonesian experience – and there is abundant evidence of “acts” (a) to (e) continuing across 43 years of occupation. The question of intent may be somewhat moot, but the overwhelming evidence of racism, discrimination and imperviousness to demands for restriction of in-migration goes a long way to make it a live issue (see Wing, with King 2005, Appendix). There is a Papuan consensus that unchecked in-migration, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, endless and disruptive security operations, including recurring episodes of large-scale killing, and aggressively promoted family planning threaten the viability of Papuan society. Papuans are also highly aware that their numbers (perhaps now 1.6 m in a total provincial population of nearly three million) are about a quarter of PNG's population when the ratio was more like one half in 1970 (700,000 to 1.5m).

Ed Aspinall believes that Aceh has experienced a more severe repression than Papua under independent Indonesia (p. 126), and he may be right. But there is a large difference in the two cases. To summarise bluntly: Owing to deep mutual mistrust, Papuans do not regard themselves as Indonesians and neither do Indonesians. Acehnese even of GAM, by contrast, seem to have lately succeeded in re-imagining themselves as Indonesians under the stimulus of the Aceh Peace Agreement of 2005, the like of which is not being offered to the Papuans.

So much is preface to a discussion of the main burden of the Aspinall article, which is a searching and not altogether charitable critique of the “sympathisers” of Papuan independence in Australia. Ed Aspinall is troubled by what he clearly regards as inadequately examined, selective and uneven attention to the Papua issue, and the resulting “traction” the issue is gaining in Australia. He specifically criticises their lack of attention to other human rights issues in the

archipelago (concerning labor problems generally and Aceh specifically) (p. 122), and is hostile to the idea of independence as a “magic bullet” to solve Papua’s problems (p. 123). He also points out that much of the blame for the disaster of incorporation in Indonesia for the Papuans should be sheeted home to the prior colonisers, the Dutch – especially for encouraging West Papua in a quest for independence they were unable to deliver (p. 124).

He then offers a comprehensive sociology of Indo-phobia in Australia – fed, so he believes, by atavistic fears of a threat from the north and by Islamophobia, presumably aggravated by 9/11. He skewers to some effect the ignorance and misunderstandings involved in the “Javanese empire” stereotype of Indonesia (although this stereotype actually has considerable currency among sophisticated Papuans) and the theory, normally based on ignorance of other substantial Christian minorities and Indonesia’s constitutional commitment to religious tolerance, that majority Christian Papua has no place in Muslim Indonesia.

He is particularly disturbed by recent opinion polls which show Indonesia is perceived more than ever as a major security threat by Australians, and deplors “an increasingly militaristic nationalist public culture in Australia”, which, impermissibly, “celebrated” the East Timor intervention of 1999 (p. 129). For Ed Aspinall the white man’s burden is not dead, and the “unacknowledged fantasies” of his title apparently concern thoughtless additions to our growing burden of failed or failing ex-colonial independent regional dependencies – East Timor, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. We seem to be abjured to shun these burdens or at least their associated fantasies of liberation as they might apply to West Papua.

“Australian sympathisers” of West Papua are therefore invited

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 (Aspinall 2006, 132).

One cannot object to Aspinall’s largely justified expose of ignorance and prejudice among “Papuan sympathisers” as well as the general public. But his attack on East Timor triumphalism and its associated “fantasies” is another matter. The Australian government’s own Timor triumphalism was very shortlived, for the obvious reason that it did not want to “do” Timor in the first place and certainly not another one.⁷ Yet InterFET led by Australia was in fact a great geopolitical as well as humanitarian achievement, which has delivered 800,000 East Timorese

from the tragic fate of 100,000 of their sisters and brothers in the 24 years before 1999 (CAVR 2005, 44). It's not a fantasy that Papua can give rise to a comparable crisis of the Australia-Indonesia relationship. But it's a paradox that "realists" of the so-called Jakarta Lobby, who place a transcendent value on relations with Jakarta, do not factor Australia's triumph in the arm wrestle with the TNI and the Jakarta elite of September 1999 into geopolitical calculations over Papua. Papua after all is strategically at least as important to Australia as to Indonesia, and its "loss" by Jakarta could do much for the democratisation and demilitarisation of Indonesia and the stabilising of relations with Australia, just as the "loss" of East Timor has.

In any case, despite, but also because of, the Dili disorders of 2006, and notwithstanding the concurrent Solomon Islands elite rebellion against the Canberra-led RAMSI mission, Australia as sub-regional hegemon or order restorer of first resort is here to stay, whether fantasy-nourished or not. This variant of the White Man's Burden is surely preferable to the one proffered by the scions of the All-White (and almost invariably besuited) Jakarta Lobby. They have for many years quite cheerfully borne the burden of variously covering up, apologising for or even celebrating oppression and massacre by the brown men in Jakarta as visited on their own brown but politically pink – or ethnically Acehnese or Timorese – as well as their black Papuan subjects.

Then again, if sympathisers of Papua are to examine their motives, prejudices and fantasies, why not non-sympathisers? It's notorious that experts on the USSR not only failed to predict the demise of that other archipelago of tyranny in 1991,⁸ but were considerably demoralised – and even professionally disadvantaged – by the event. Can we trust Indonesianists to be appropriately prescient and fair-minded in contemplating the (further) breakup of their less than semi-reformed and eternally faltering polity? There is an impressive band of Indonesian – even Javanese – intellectuals who are much cooler and calmer in perceiving the potential upside of a deconstructed (and hopefully demilitarised and further democratised) archipelago than the hegemonic coterie of Australian National University Indonesianists.⁹

And what lies behind the desire to purify the pro-Papuan political stream in Australia? Not a word has been offered about the need to purify the pro-Jakarta stream of Australian politics, from, for instance, callous *realpolitik*. This would include, as I have suggested above, complicity in illegal or otherwise tainted occupations and annexations, and in genocide or its near equivalent – and also in politicide – or whatever one chooses to call the "anti-communist" massacres of 1965-66, which were celebrated in jocular terms by our own prime minister at the time.¹⁰ Large-scale resources theft (in the Timor Sea) and ecologically irresponsible mining might be added to the list of delinquencies – it is rather

long, and its avatars surely deserve some psycho-sociologising too...

Politics, I thought we all knew, is a messy business in which one cannot always choose one's allies, and it's a slow boring of hard boards to boot. But the Canberra comforters of the plutocratic masters of KKN and the commanding heights of TNI impunity have after all had most of the power most of the time in managing Australia's relations with Indonesia for the past 40 years. It would be valuable to have a socio-moral dissection of them to put along side what Ed Aspinall has given us on their avowed enemies to the Left, who do seem disconcertingly to be in the ascendancy with public opinion once again.

Politics is also the art of seizing opportunity. The East Timor experience and example; the Jakarta sabotage and Papuan rejection of Special Autonomy for Papua; the 43 highly political Papuan boat arrivals in Australia of January 2006, and the rise and rise of Papua Sympathy as well as ongoing TNI delinquency may indeed create an opening for rescue of the Papuans, but probably not for the salvation of Flores labourers or Sulawesi Christians. A political economy of activist effort surely would suggest some priority for the freedom of 1.5 million Papuans as lying in the realm of feasibility? Must activists match it with 200 times the effort for human rights in the rest of Indonesia before they qualify as humanly concerned?

One has to suspect that what is most feared about the Papuan Sympathisers is not so much their socio-pathology as their potential success in a future crisis situation, whether because of or despite their ignorance, racism, chauvinism, whatever. In that case it is also indeed necessary to doubt the merits and put high estimates on the potential costs and unlikelihood of an independence outcome. Papuans are unlikely to be impressed.

Notes

1. See Edward Aspinall, "Selective Outrage and Unacknowledged Fantasies: Re-thinking Papua, Indonesia and Australia", *Policy and Society* 25-4 (this issue): 121-130.
2. Ian Melrose. See the videos made for his 2007 campaign on his Free West Papua website.
3. I have also prepared a reply to McGibbon's Lowy Institute paper, 'Pitfalls of Papua: Understanding the Conflict and its Place in Australia-Indonesia Relations' (McGibbon 2006), which takes me to task at some length – among other things for a purely jocular reference to "Indonesian *lebensraum*". McGibbon's polemical conclusion, aimed at exploding ten myths about Papua supposedly held by the "West Papua constituency" in Australia, was extensively plundered in Kelly 2006.
4. King 2004, 48-50. A balance of narratives could be struck by referring to the Indonesian government in Papua as an occupier or "forcible integrationist".
5. Evans, CEO of the International Crisis Group--perhaps the most formidable NGO research group on the planet--is Sidney Jones's employer. He has publicly expressed regret for Australia's previous aid to and cooperation with the TNI (see King 2004, 162). But the ICG is no longer ringing alarm bells about renewed Australian cooperation with the arch-abusers of Kopassus, the army special forces. It is also grossly exaggerating the significance of an elected Papuan officialdom under

the special autonomy law of 2001. See, for instance, International Crisis Group 2006.

6. *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, Adopted by Resolution 260 (III) A of the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948.

7. This was crystal clear by January 2000. See King 2004, 163.

8. Indonesia under Suharto was quite literally a gulag archipelago after the mass killings and arrests of the Left in 1965-66. For the Papuans, on a small scale, it still is. Papuan political dissidents continue to languish (always subject to poisoning) in the major prisons of Java and Sulawesi.

9. These casual deconstructionists include journalist (and former Presidential spokesperson) Wimar Witoelar, academic *extraordinaire* George Aditjondro and (at times) ex-President Abdurrahman Wahid. In their vision formerly alienated provinces would be welcomed as self-determined sovereign brothers and sisters. See King 2004, 70.

10. *Ibid.*, 160.

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