

## A Reply to Peter King

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In responding to my article in this issue, Peter King makes a number of points. I disagree with some and agree with others. Many of the points raise issues I explicitly decided not to focus upon in my initial piece, including the nature and extent of human rights abuses Papua and the orientation of Australian foreign policy. Rather than taking the debate into these new areas, in this response I will emphasise how King's contribution illustrates one of the points I touched on in the original article: that it is perilous for outsiders to try to understand a complex separatist conflict only by looking through the nationalist lens of one group of protagonists. King begins with the unstated assumption that Papuans and Indonesians are two distinct and incompatible groups, so it is not surprising that in his response he interprets events in Papua in a way that bolsters Papuan nationalist claims.

Take the question of genocide. Genocide is the most heinous of crimes, with the result that careful scholars should be very cautious in making an accusation that it is taking place. For the same reason, ethnic movements around the world almost universally accuse their foes of genocidal behavior. It is because Peter King adopts a Papuan nationalist interpretive framework that he is able so readily to identify all official crimes and wrongdoing in Papua as *in themselves* evidence of genocide (in fact, he wriggles here and says that they are merely suggestive of genocide). However, genocide requires an element of genocidal *intent*, as King himself acknowledges. Like all previous writers who have made the genocide charge with regard to Papua, he is unable to offer evidence of such intent on the part of Indonesian authorities. Instead, he points to the acts themselves as being enough to "make it a live issue".

This sleight of hand is not surprising, because the various crimes and other acts that Peter King points to in Papua (e.g. TNI rapaciousness in natural resource exploitation) also occur in other parts of Indonesia. They are not confined to Papua and it would thus be surprising to find that they are motivated by an intent on the part of the Indonesian authorities to destroy the Papuans as a group. This was a point I tried to make in my initial article: inequality, military arbitrariness, failure of the rule of law and so forth, are not unique to Papua in Indonesia. They are, however, almost uniquely interesting to Australians when they occur there. When they happen in other parts of Indonesia, most Australians see these events as, to borrow King's phrases, unworthy of a "political economy of activist effort" or even as symptoms of an "eternally faltering" Indonesia. In

other words: abuses which evoke sympathy for the victims when they occur in Papua, prompt indifference or confirm prejudices when they occur elsewhere.

Once more, to be certain I am not misinterpreted: I am not denying that terrible abuses have happened in Papua. I do believe, however, that it is important to understand the motivations for and context of those abuses so that we are adequately equipped to understand their wider meaning.<sup>1</sup> Because Peter King sees Papuans and Indonesians as distinct and incompatible groups, and Indonesian sovereignty as by its very essence illegitimate, all abuses in Papua are *ipso facto* evidence of genocide. The interpretive frame predetermines the conclusion.

Rather than attempting a point-by-point rebuttal of other places where I disagree with Peter King, I will illustrate the underlying difference between us by focusing on just one other point that he makes. He writes that I was wrong to compare Aceh to Papua because there is “a large difference” between the two conflicts. This difference is that: “Owing to deep mutual distrust, Papuans do not regard themselves as Indonesians and neither do Indonesians. Acehese 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 Papuans”. Putting aside that I was comparing the two groups in order to illustrate the fickleness of Australian public opinion, and putting aside also the puzzling claim that Indonesians don’t consider Papuans to be Indonesians (this is simply wrong, discounting a few very marginal individuals and groups), the changing attitudes of the Acehese illustrate precisely why outsiders should exercise caution in adopting ethno-nationalist frameworks for their analyses of separatist conflicts. A few years ago, just as King now claims is the case for Papuans, most Acehese did not “regard themselves as Indonesians”, and one could find in Aceh all the ethno-nationalist accusations of genocide, floods of settlers and Javanese imperialism upon which King bases his interpretation of contemporary Papuan identity and its incompatibility with Indonesia. Acehese leaders were equally adamant that Indonesian crimes meant that the two entities were irreconcilable. In other words, the “large difference” King points to did not exist.

Formerly enthusiastic foreign supporters of Acehese independence (though they were few in number for reasons I explain in my piece), are now embarrassed to find that all their previous beliefs about the unbridgeable gap between Aceh and Indonesia have proven to be illusory. I don’t know if such an outcome might one day be achieved in Papua, nor do I know if the current compromise in Aceh will hold. The point, however, is that identity and national aspirations need not be fixed and immutable: one need not be *either* Papuan or Indonesian (the assumption which underpins and motivates Peter King’s response), one *can*

be both. Nor is there a stark choice for Australians and other outsiders between supporting Papuans or apologising for their abusers, as King seems to assume. One can also support the case for improved democratic rights in Papua without echoing ethno-nationalist mythologising and demonisation of Indonesia, the path King takes in this piece (so that even HIV infection becomes suggestive of genocide).

However, there is one point where Peter King is on the mark. He implies I am part of a “coterie of Australian National University Indonesianists” which is unenthusiastic about contemplating the breakup of Indonesia. To the charge of being unenthusiastic about disintegration of Indonesia I plead guilty, though I don’t know how many of my ANU colleagues share this attitude (Indonesianists at ANU form a relatively large and heterogeneous group). While I do not have a view on whether in the long run Papua should or should not remain part of Indonesia (who are we to say?), I do indeed believe that the most desirable long-term outcome would be for Indonesia to become a country in which democratic values and social equality prevail (such that groups like the Papuans do not feel they need to secede), while remaining the fascinating and vibrant cross-cutting mix of ethnic and religious groups it is today. This is not due to “callous *realpolitik*” on my part, but because I find ethnic chauvinism unattractive and because I am concerned for the fate of the people of the archipelago.

Europe once looked like contemporary Indonesia: a densely woven tapestry of intermingled ethnic groups. It took over a century of warfare, ethnic cleansing, and massive forced displacement to transform it into the grid-like pattern of ethnically and linguistically homogenous nation-states it is today. Personally, I find it unlikely that Indonesia will follow this path. It’s also far from certain that Papuan independence, should it one day occur, would trigger a wider breakdown of Indonesia, though much would depend on the circumstances. Despite these caveats, people who are genuinely concerned for human rights should not approach with glee the prospect of a European future for archipelagic Southeast Asia. Around twenty thousand people perished in the various ethnic, religious and separatist conflicts that followed the collapse of the Suharto regime. It is fanciful to imagine that Indonesia could dissolve without much greater bloodshed.

## Notes

1. Rather than being genocidal, military violence in Papua is probably best understood in terms of what Michael Mann (2005) calls “callous” violence, in which authorities are reckless about who might be harmed or killed in pursuit of political or other goals. In Papua, of course, the chief such goal leading to human rights abuses has been an intent to eliminate Papuan nationalism, not to eliminate the Papuans as a group. On the contrary, official nationalism in Indonesia celebrates multi-ethnicity, including Papuan ethnicity, albeit in a ritualised, folkloric and depoliticised way.

## Reference

Mann, M. 2005. *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.