

**"... sampai Merauke" : The Struggle for West New Guinea, 1960-62**

"Indonesia merdeka, dari Sabang sampai Merauke"  
(a free Indonesia, from Sabang to Merauke)

– pro-independence slogan from Indonesian revolution, 1945-9

"Papoea Barat, dari Sorong sampai Hollandia sampai Merauke"  
(West Papua, from Sorong to Merauke)

– Mansren movement declaration, 1942

## Chapter 1: Introduction

One of the anomalies of Asian decolonization until 1963 was the variously-named western half of the island of New Guinea.<sup>1</sup> The Netherlands held on to this colony in 1949 when it agreed to the independence of the Dutch East Indies as a new state, Indonesia. For more than twelve years, West New Guinea was a bone of contention which assumed an importance wildly out of proportion to the territory's own – not least as the central focus of Indonesian nationalism. For the last two years of this period, the issue became one perceived as a threat to world peace. Intervention by the United States proved crucial to forcing a settlement that met the needs of both Indonesia and the Netherlands. Indonesia gained control of the territory, while the Netherlands was enabled to save face through an interim United Nations administration. By ignoring the emergent nationalism of the territory's people, however, the settlement proved to be a failure in the long run.

The clash of two emergent nationalisms and their play in the international arena is the central concern of this paper. Indonesian nationalism, having lost its *raison d'être* of anti-colonial revolution, found in the struggle for a lost corner of the Indies a new integrative focus. A stepped-up campaign for what Indonesians called West Irian was a crucial component of President Sukarno's new system of "guided democracy," introduced in 1959. At the same time, however, the Papuans (indigenous people of West New Guinea) were becoming conscious of themselves as a nation distinct from Indonesia, a process that gelled in the same period.

Benedict Anderson has stressed the importance to nationalism of three factors: territory that comes to be regarded as bordered and sacred, a shared language, and a constructed history that confers a shared past on nations that are seeking a shared future.<sup>2</sup> With these bases, people are able to imagine themselves as nations and leaders are able to "nation-build."<sup>3</sup> Indonesia provides a good example for Anderson's schema. The struggle for West Irian, under the slogan "dari Sabang sampai Merauke," from Sabang to Merauke, illustrates the centrality of territorial borders to Indonesian nationalism. It was the territory, the completion of the "map as logo" of the old East Indies, that fired Sukarno's nationalist revival.<sup>4</sup> Sabang was the furthest point to the northwest of the Indies; Merauke in New Guinea its most southeasterly reach. The Papuans themselves were irrelevant to this integrative struggle for territory. But

the Indonesian struggle for West Irian also stimulated a reactive indigenous nationalism that, as Anderson points out, took its own base from a bordered territory, the Dutch New Guinea colony, which nationalists renamed West Papua. They also mimicked Indonesian territorial slogans with their own call for a new nation that would stretch “from Sorong to Merauke.” These bordered “imagined political communities” were bolstered by recalling historical memories that were seen as the forerunner of the modern Indonesian and Papuan nations.<sup>5</sup>

These bordered territories did not contain the struggle, however. Many Papuans looked across the ruler-straight line separating them from the Australian colony of Papua & New Guinea and saw people who looked like them: ethnic Melanesians, therefore compatriots. A new slogan, “from Sorong to Samarai,” expressed the hope for an island-wide Melanesian Federation with ethnicity as its base. This idea sprang from international factors: ethnicity lay at the base of the Dutch argument that West New Guinea had nothing in common with Indonesia. International developments in turn foreclosed this option by the end of 1961, and the power of the colonial border re-asserted itself.

Both Indonesian and Papuan nationalism defined themselves in the international arena. The identity “Papuan” did not simply fill up the territory assigned to it by colonial borders, but existed as a response to the incursions of an insistent Indonesian nationalism. The effort to build West Papua was of necessity waged more in the international arena than in the homeland itself. The course of the international struggle in turn did much to shape an emerging Papuan identity. Between 1960 and 1962, a West Papuan “nation-of-intent,” to use Shamsul A.B.’s phrase,<sup>6</sup> had emerged despite the lack of a state structure, and was trying to escape the cage imposed by Dutch and Indonesian actions.

Indonesian nationalism, too, had been constructed in an international context in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> The name itself was an anthropological term conferred by European anthropologists, adopted by nationalists in the 1920s as the name of the nation they were trying to build. Indonesia was “born in fire,” as Sukarno liked to say, in the course of a two-front war of independence in which *diplomasi* proved as important as *perjuangan* (struggle). The campaign for West Irian succeeded through its ability to replicate this two-pronged strategy. It was conceived as part of Sukarno’s effort to return Indonesia to “the rails of the revolution.” It also asserted a leadership role in regional and Afro-

Asian affairs as an inherent component of Indonesian nationalism. In so doing, it intruded Indonesian nationalism once again into a world setting where the actual battles would be fought.

The logic of the nationalist struggle for West Irian, thus, drew outside powers in. Most important among them were Australia and the United States. Both these countries plotted their response to an escalating diplomatic crisis on their own mental maps.<sup>8</sup> Australians remembered that New Guinea had been used as a springboard for invasion in the Second World War and took it as an item of faith that they had an inherent right to determine the island's future for their own security. This imperative eventually clashed, however, with the mental maps of a more powerful actor, the United States. American policy makers saw it as their responsibility to contain an expansionist communism within its existing borders, in order to maintain their own security. This was particularly important in Southeast Asia, where a "Malay barrier"<sup>9</sup> including Indonesia served as a rear line of defence and an integral part of a "great crescent" of "free" states from Japan to India. When Indonesia turned to the Soviet Union and China for help in its Irian liberation effort, the American effort in Southeast Asia was threatened with the loss of the region's most important country. Indonesia effectively combined radical nationalism with able diplomatic brinkmanship to gain American support, the key to winning control of New Guinea. The Kennedy administration was forced to abandon earlier efforts to stay out of the conflict. Within eighteen months of office, it had actively intervened to force a resolution.

The thin literature on the struggle for West New Guinea can be grouped into two areas: international diplomatic histories, and examinations of the domestic history of Indonesia (or, much more rarely, West Papua). Diplomatic histories, like Terence Markin's superbly-detailed *The West Irian Dispute*,<sup>10</sup> tend to zero in on the negotiations of 1962 and miss the crucial events of 1961, 1960 and before. This paper attempts to examine the intersection of domestic and diplomatic histories in the two-year period between August 1960, when Indonesia severed diplomatic relations with the Netherlands and signalled a new policy of confrontation, and August 1962, when the Netherlands handed its colony to the UN as the first step in a transfer to Indonesia. Because the themes of this period were forged fifteen years earlier, it is necessary to start with the Indonesian Revolution.