

Chapter 5: Aftermath

The United Nations General Assembly endorsed the Dutch-Indonesian agreement wholeheartedly, although the Brazzaville states (along with France and Haiti) abstained in protest at the lack of safeguards for Papuan self-determination.³⁴⁷ The United Nations Temporary Executive Authority (UNTEA) took over on October 1, 1962, the first time the UN had administered a territory. Pro-Western Muslim countries provided both the civilian administrator (Djalal Abdoh of Iran) and the security forces (1,500 Pakistani soldiers), who were joined by a handful of air force personnel from the United States and Canada.³⁴⁸ The UNTEA administration has been heavily criticized for allowing Papuan rights to be crushed by Indonesian officials, and these officials have conceded they paid little attention to UNTEA.³⁴⁹ However, this criticism makes the dubious assumption that UNTEA was meant to be impartial, even after the earlier abandonment of the self-determination principle.

Sukarno eventually announced that there was no need for the act of free choice, a declaration that raised little protest, even from the Dutch. Indeed, the Netherlands was now a close friend of Indonesia, even to the point of professing neutrality in the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation while the United States and Britain backed Malaysia.³⁵⁰ The legacy of this period is a long-running insurgency dismissed by Indonesia as a “Dutch time bomb”³⁵¹ but in fact representing the aspirations of many Papuans, which has only grown under Indonesian rule. The West Papuan flag, in particular, is raised with reverence as a symbol of resistance to this day.

When Sukarno was toppled, his successor Suharto said the act would be held after all. However, he also told the Papuans that any move to separate would be regarded as an act of treason.³⁵² In the event, 1,025 hand-picked delegates assembled and voted unanimously to remain with Indonesia. Throughout the 1969 events, it was clearly the territory, and not its inhabitants, that was of interest to the Indonesian regime. General Ali Murtopo told one group:

Jakarta was not interested in us as Papuans but in West Irian as a territory. If we want to be independent, he said, laughing scornfully, we had better ask God if He could find us an island in the Pacific where we could emigrate. We could also write to the Americans. They had already set foot on the moon and perhaps they would be good enough to find us a place there.³⁵³

Two nationalist movements had clashed in the struggle for West New Guinea, a struggle that was waged of necessity in the international arena. Both were shaped by international developments stemming from the West Irian struggle and from more “important” global events, from Berlin to the Congo. Injecting themselves into a global setting, they were in turn shaped by that setting. Both were future-oriented nations-of-intent, but also looked to events in the past to support their sense of nationality. Indonesia recalled the formative experience of revolution against the Dutch and looked to Javanese antiquity to bolster that further. The formative events of West Papuan nationalism took place in the 1960s, but were also bolstered by projecting the West Papuan nation into the past – in this case to the 1942 millenarian declaration of independence and the symbols of the Koreroi movement.

While their modernized traditions were diametrically opposed, Indonesia and West Papua shared a common national language. The most contested question was territorial: was this half-island an integral part of Indonesia, or the homeland of a separate West Papuan nation? It was on this territorial ground that the struggle was waged, but it was international factors that determined a winner. The United States alone had the power to settle the question. Given the mental maps of American policy makers in 1960-62, on which New Guinea scarcely registered, an Indonesia which loomed large was certain to be the winner. The dates are important, however. The Kennedy administration spanned a unique historical setting in which the conditions for this outcome were likely. At an earlier period, with cold war raging, the United States would not have acquiesced in an Indonesian takeover of any additional territory. The same is true for the later period: although Indonesia’s confrontation with Malaysia was not an irredentist challenge, it was resolutely opposed by the United States and this contributed in large measure to the collapse of the Sukarno regime. This was not simply a matter of presidents, however: the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administrations were all firmly committed to anti-communist containment. In the 1950s, the United States considered itself to have a free hand in Southeast Asia. From 1960, as it began a more direct involvement in the affairs of the region and superpower confrontation shifted more towards the Third World, the United States felt compelled to seek accommodation with states like Indonesia and less constrained by the wishes of allies like the Netherlands and Australia. Once American forces were firmly committed to a particular course of action in Southeast Asia, as they were by 1964, the logic of that course dictated a tougher stance towards

Indonesia once again. Different currents in the cold war would very likely have led to different outcomes in West New Guinea, and thus to a different sort of West Papuan nationalism.