

Heidbuchel, Esther. *The West Papua Conflict in Indonesia. Actors, Issues and Approaches*. 2007. Wettenberg: Johannes Herrmann J and J - Verlag. 223 pages. oISBN 978 3 937983 10 3.

A complex conflict



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This book rightly describes the West Papua Conflict as complex. Held outside Indonesia when the Dutch accepted its independence in 1949, the territory was subsequently incorporated – after a long Indonesian ‘confrontation’ of the Dutch – as a result above all of the intervention of the United States and the involvement of the UN. The Bunker agreement brokered by the US prescribed an Act of Free Choice. Indonesia carried that out in ways of the inadequacy of which the UN did not complain, and which indeed the Indonesians were to use as a precedent for incorporating East Timor, though that by contrast was not met by UN complaisance.

Partly as a result of the inadequacy of the process, incorporation led to new conflicts. Though members of the small Papuan elite were a little more involved in the Bunker process than the author suggests, the Act of Free Choice was, as John Saltford has shown, something of a scandal. Papuans could only resent the policies the Indonesians pursued, displacing even the cooperative element in the elite, exploiting Papua’s mineral resources, in particular through the deal with Freeport that Denise Leith has explored, introducing large numbers of migrants from other parts of the archipelago, who came both under government transmigration schemes and of their own volition. Such activities provided a fertile ground for resistance, often described as OPM, Organisasi Papua Merdeka, though it was not unified. In turn the Indonesian army, TNI, secured a reason and an excuse for action, and as elsewhere it acted in a way that maximised abuse and increased opposition, so enhancing its argument that it continued to be needed: it gets a per diem for a special deployment, whereas it would be better rewarded for creating situations that did not need one.

The dislodging of the Soeharto regime changed the situation, but only in part, making the conflict yet more complex. Though their implementation was sure to be no easy matter, decentralisation and democratisation held out the prospect of improvement. But the independence of East Timor added to the Indonesian fear of breakup and distrust of foreign intervention. The reforms in Papua were as a result all the more half-hearted and confused, and the TNI’s repressive activities all the more difficult to restrain.

My own study of Britain’s policy towards West New Guinea in the period before the Bunker agreement showed how small the Papuan elite was and also how divided (while one British official referred to the Javanese as ‘born imperialists’). Divisions among Papuans remain a feature of the complexity of the situation, encouraging divide-and-rule tactics and making any overall negotiation more difficult.

Repetitive analysis but sensible conclusions

It is on the prospects of a negotiated settlement that the present book focuses. It proceeds by an extensive and at times repetitive process of analysis which may try the patience of the reader. But, well informed by interviews and by research in libraries, on the net and among unpublished theses, it reaches sensible conclusions, which reward the reader and, more important, may provide materials for the negotiation that seems the

best chance for an unhappy land in which a relatively few outsiders have an informed but passionate interest.

Independence seems an unlikely prospect, and even if achieved, might only create a non-viable state, rent with internal dispute. The best prospect, the author suggests, is special autonomy, and properly carried out,

it might meet the expectations popularly attached to the magic word independence. But it has, of course, been on the tapis so long and so ineffectually that the Papuans have lost any trust in the Indonesian government’s promises. It is essential to restore or create that trust. The Indonesians have, after all, good reason to do so. If it can be done, its implications will carry across the rest of the archipelago and improve the Republic’s relations with the outside world, though none of that can really be achieved without putting the role of the TNI on the constitutional and fiscal basis it should occupy in a modern state.

It is also, the author rightly suggests, necessary to seek means by which the Papuans can negotiate and accept such a solution. She sees the greatest hope in the concept of Papua Land of Peace. Papuans might find their unity in that rather than in the concept of Papua Land of Suffering. The focus should be on the future, putting off, without abandoning, the redemption of past abuses.

The book, a thesis at Giessen, is published in Germany but in English. We must be grateful that the results of German scholarship thus become more widely available. The English is far from idiomatic, however, and at times its idiosyncrasies obscure the meaning. An English copy-editor would have made an important message clearer.

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