Erring decentralization and elite politics in Papua

Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on certain members of the bureaucratic elite in Papua as influential actors in determining the future of the region. Amid a wave of recently established new provinces and districts, these leaders adopt strikingly creative ways to gain both popular and central government support, all characterised by marked regional differences. The chapter begins with a substantial historical introduction describing the territory’s tumultuous passage from being the last holdout of Dutch colonialism in Asia in the early 1960s, through the history of suffering (memoria passionis) that followed integration with Indonesia, and culminating in the Papuan Spring of 1999-2000. Contrary to some other accounts of it, that history was marked by both Papuan collaboration and resistance. Set against this background the chapter examines the strategies adopted by various Papuan elites to make the most of the opportunities offered by special autonomy and the redrawing of administrative boundaries (pemekaran), while at the same time keeping faith with the popular mistrust of a state that has failed them in so many ways.

For a number of reasons ranging from Dutch nationalism, geopolitical considerations, and self-righteous moral convictions the Netherlands Government refused to include West New Guinea in the negotiations for the independence of Indonesia in the late 1940s.\(^1\) At the same time, the Government in Netherlands New Guinea initiated economic and infrastructure development as well as political emancipation of the Papuans under paternalistic guardianship. In the course of the 1950s, when tensions between the Netherlands and Indonesia grew over the status of West New Guinea, the Dutch began to guide a limited group of educated Papuans towards independence culminating in the establishment of the New Guinea Council.

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(Nieuw-Guinea Raad) in 1961. In addition, a flag, the Bintang Kejora or Morning Star flag, was designed to be flown beside the Dutch flag and a national anthem was adopted to be played and sung during official occasions after the Netherlands national hymn.

After a twelve-year dispute that was reaching its peak with the threat of open military conflict, this policy had to be aborted. In December 1961, President Sukarno issued the Trikora (Tri Komando Rakyat or ‘People’s Threefold Command’) for the liberation of Irian Barat (West Irian). At the heart of this massive mobilization was Operasi Mandala, an Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia (Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia, ABRI) campaign designed to put pressure on the Netherlands government. The United States and Australia were not willing to support the Dutch military forces.

In an international climate of decolonization and after President Sukarno’s sustained pressing of Indonesia’s claim to the territory, the United States sponsored negotiations between Indonesia and the Netherlands about the future of West New Guinea under the auspices of the United Nations. The resulting New York Agreement of 15 August 1962 outlined the transfer of Netherlands sovereignty over West New Guinea to an interim United Nations Temporary Executive Authority (UNTEA) from 1 October 1962 to 1 May 1963, to be followed by a second phase during which the intervening administration would hand over full administrative responsibility to Indonesia. The agreement formulated the provision that the people of Irian Barat would exercise free choice over their future relationship with Indonesia before the end of 1969.

The victory over what had now become the Province of Irian Barat was a boost to Indonesian nationalism and became portrayed as the final chapter of decolonization. The Indonesians, ruling the new province under the banner of the Trikora mobilization, were triumphant while elements of the Papuan elite empowered by the Dutch began to complain about what they saw as a blunt Indonesian takeover. Feelings of being marginalized by Indonesian bureaucrats and immigrants from other Indonesian islands filling job and business opportunities arose mainly among urban Papuans. Some of the educated Papuan elite were arrested or sidelined as ‘collaborators with the Dutch’ while others continued to play a role in the administration.

A plebiscite called Pepera (Penentuan Pendapat Rakyat, ‘Act of Free Choice’) was held in July-August 1969 during which 1020 cautiously chosen representatives from eight regions voted overwhelmingly for integration with Indonesia. Protest was heard, dissonant speeches delivered, desperate outcries in the form of written notes were delivered to the United Nations

2 Soekarno 2000.
3 Pepera 1972:82-3; Vlasblom 2004:479. For an account of the Pepera based on archival materials and concluding that it was a sham, see Saltford 2000.