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## **Beyond the Armed Violence: The Enduring Resilience of Papuan Separatism**

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Even as public attention has been drawn toward the American and Israeli strikes on Iran, there is one domestic event that cannot be forgotten. The escalation of conflict and violence in Papua continues unabated. Casualties keep mounting on the sides of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and Police (Polri), the Free Papua Movement (OPM), and civilians alike. OPM, whose objective is to Free Papua from Indonesian control, attacks that target not only TNI/Polri personnel but also civilians, particularly migrants, along with the destruction of public facilities, continue to occur. The question is: how long will this conflict go on? Why has it proven so difficult to eradicate this separatist movement? Former Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs Mahfud MD once stated that the OPM was only a small

group, or a “handful,” of people, and that 92% of the Papuan people were pro-Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI).<sup>1</sup>

If that were truly the case, then it would not align with the reality unfolding on the ground today. OPM attacks have grown increasingly brutal and widespread, spreading to nearly every corner of Papua. Their arsenal has become more sophisticated and their tactical acumen increasingly advanced, to the point where it appears to be overwhelming the TNI/Polri forces deployed against them. Beyond the suspicion that certain parties are continuously sustaining OPM logistically, there are fundamental problems that allow OPM to keep finding “ammunition” and momentum to remain a destructive actor disrupting peace efforts in Papua.

### **Ideological and Structural Factors: The Roots of Conflict**

OPM is not merely a separatist group. It also plays the role of spreading the “ideology” of independence, or anti-NKRI sentiment, to anyone it targets as a potential sympathizer. This anti-NKRI ideology, embraced by Papuans regardless of whether they are OPM members, active sympathizers, or neither, is an extremely difficult condition to overcome. This ideology is shaped by shared experience. This article argues that Papua’s protracted separatist conflict persists not primarily because of tactical military challenges but because of unresolved historical contestation, structural economic inequality, identity marginalization, trust deficit, political labelling, and fragmented networking.

Overcoming the OPM is widely acknowledged by both security actors and civil society as extremely difficult for several interrelated reasons. Geographic and climatic challenges in Papua’s highlands hinder the adaptation of security forces, while the OPM employs localized guerrilla-style tactics rooted in tribal knowledge and familiarity with forest environments, making them difficult to counter with conventional military strategies. Each tribe has a different style of warfare. This has not been fully understood by the security apparatus, as it carries significant anthropological values.

Distinguishing combatants from civilians is also challenging due to shared physical characteristics, creating risks of mistargeting and human rights violations, particularly when civilians, sometimes including women and children, are used as human shields.<sup>2</sup> The persistence of illegal arms trafficking further strengthens OPM capabilities, while weak law enforcement and the profitability of the trade undermine trust in state institutions.<sup>3</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Mahfud MD Klaim 92 Persen Rakyat Papua Tak Ada Masalah dengan RI. Kompas.com, 21 May 2021 (<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2021/05/03/15534751/mahfud-md-klaim-92-persen-rakyat-papua-tak-ada-masalah-dengan-ri>)

<sup>2</sup> Terungkap! OPM Jadikan Anak-anak dan Perempuan Sebagai Tameng Hidup dan Alat Propaganda. Reuters September 15, 2022 (<https://papua.reuters.co.id/terungkap-opm-jadikan-anak-anak-dan-perempuan-sebagai-tameng-hidup-dan-alat-propaganda>)

<sup>3</sup> BBC Indonesia. Perdagangan senjata ilegal di Papua, motifnya dituding aktivis 'rekyasa konflik agar masyarakat panik, bisnis masuk untuk eksploitasi tambang, 5 July 2022 (<https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-62040489>)

addition, narratives of supernatural interference,<sup>4</sup> psychological stress from prolonged asymmetric warfare, harsh terrain, and the constant threat of death contribute to declining morale among deployed soldiers, occasionally leading to violations of rules of engagement amid weak oversight, welfare pressures, and impulses for retaliation after casualties.

Apart from the “ideological” problem, there are also other factors that are more structural in nature. The history of Papua’s “integration” into Indonesia through the Act of Free Choice (Pepera) in 1969 is often treated as a trivial footnote. Whenever it is debated, the matter tends to be dismissed with the slogan “NKRI is non-negotiable” and without any serious effort to engage with the history itself. As a consequence, the space for “interpretation” of those events remains wide open. The state views it as legitimate. In contrast, OPM and Papuans who oppose the state regard it as illegitimate. The 1969 Act of Free Choice, conducted through a ‘representative’ consultation mechanism, remains central to competing narratives of legitimacy. As Indonesia maintains that the process complied with the New York Agreement and was recognized by the United Nations, critics argue that the limited participation of selected representatives under conditions of military presence undermined its democratic validity.

The younger generation of Papuans today may well be unfamiliar with that history, but the older generation has kept it alive as a deeply ingrained part of their oral tradition and storytelling. The history of Pepera is continually invoked to form an ideology that shapes an anti-state or anti-government posture. Each time an incident occurs that affronts the dignity of Papuans, such as acts of violence or human rights violations, the Pepera episode provides the justification that Papua was never legitimately part of Indonesia to begin with.

## **The Resource Curse and Development Complexity**

Natural resource extraction, such as gold, copper, and timber, has long failed to translate into proportionate welfare gains for indigenous Papuans. PT Freeport Indonesia’s Grasberg mine, operating since 1967, illustrates the scale of the problem: its tailings have devastated over 11 square miles of rainforest, and an estimated 3.2 billion tons of acid-generating waste rock is projected to be dumped into local river systems over its lifetime.<sup>5</sup> Rather than addressing these harms, the Indonesian government has extended Freeport’s contract through 2061, another 20 years beyond its previous expiry, with an additional US\$20 billion investment commitment, signaling that extraction will continue to take precedence over indigenous welfare and environmental accountability.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> From an interview with a TNI General serving in Papua, while in the midst of pursuing the OPM, a fog suddenly appeared that obstructed the view of the battlefield. TNI/Police members believed that it was the effect of a supernatural or occult force.

<sup>5</sup> See Paull, D. et al. (2010). “Development, Power, and the Mining Industry in Papua: A Study of Freeport Indonesia.” *Journal of Business Ethics*, 89, 129–143. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-010-0371-y> and Soares, A. de J. (2004). “The Impact of Corporate Strategy on Community Dynamics: A Case Study of the Freeport Mining Company in West Papua, Indonesia.” *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 11, 141.

<sup>6</sup> Freeport Perpanjang Kontrak hingga 2061, RI Kantongi Tambahan Investasi US\$ 20 Miliar. *Kontan*, 23 February 2026 (<https://tv.kontan.co.id/video/rtoaP9NetYA>)

Beyond the environment, the human cost has been equally severe. The indigenous communities surrounding the mine face deteriorating food security, widespread poverty, and poor public health, while labor recruitment is largely drawn from outside Papua, leaving local residents economically marginalized. This economic inequality has become the fuel that continuously stokes resistance, lends legitimacy to the separatist narrative, and even finances the insurgency itself.

The Food Estate program under the National Strategic Project (PSN) is another example that has recently attracted significant public scrutiny and is akin to a time bomb, and has become yet more ammunition for OPM's rebellion. The PSN is not only riddled with human rights violations; it is also widely seen as a theft of the natural resources belonging to indigenous Papuans, made all the more egregious by the involvement of non-Papuan communities. Without trust established between the government and the indigenous Papuan people, it is difficult to believe that the PSN genuinely carries out its mission of improving community welfare in the name of development.

For most Papuans, state-led development remains an illusion. Economic growth has been driven largely by resource extraction, yet this has failed to produce equitable prosperity. Development is also non-inclusive. Central government programs are routinely implemented without public consultation, meaning indigenous Papuans see few benefits while migrants capture most gains, widening inequality between the two groups.<sup>7</sup>

This fuels both horizontal and vertical conflicts that persist today. Governance failures compound the problem: corruption, collusion, and nepotism flourish under weak law enforcement, undermining program implementation. Culturally, the influx of outside money is seen as eroding indigenous work ethics and fostering dependency on aid. Development in Papua, therefore, should not be mistaken for a panacea for conflict resolution. It remains deeply complex and contested.

### **The Trust Deficit: A Wall That Cannot Be Scaled**

This trust with the local Papuan community is, in fact, a critical asset that could serve as the government's primary modality for countering the separatist movement. Ironically, it has never materialized. Numerous government promises have been inconsistently kept; for example, Special Autonomy has been hollowed out; development has been invoked as a justification even as injustice and inhumane conduct persist, such as in the case of the food estate program; and human rights violations and acts of violence continue to go unresolved in any fair or just manner.

The Indonesian government faces a formidable challenge in winning genuine trust from indigenous Papuans, rooted in a deep ethnic and cultural divide. Papuans belong to the Melanesian world, ethnically, linguistically, and spiritually closer to Papua New Guinea and

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<sup>7</sup> Perkasa, Vidhyandika D, Medelina K Hendytio and Deni Friawan. 2025. *Unraveling the Tension: The Nexus Between Development and Conflict in Papua's Struggle for Peace*. Jakarta: CSIS.

the Pacific than to an Indonesian national identity shaped by Javanese culture. As Clifford Geertz (1963) argued, such primordial ties are extraordinarily resilient and resist erasure through political engineering, whether via national education curricula or cultural integration programs.<sup>8</sup> In Papua, this identity gap has been further hardened by state policy, migration, and prolonged conflict.

This situation has been further worsened by the impact of the transmigration program, which relocated hundreds of thousands of migrants from Java and Sulawesi to Papuan soil, making indigenous Papuans a minority in many urban areas of their own ancestral homeland. Rather than strengthening a sense of nationhood, this policy has deepened the feeling of being uprooted from one's own land, a dynamic that Ted Gurr (1970) describes in his book titled 'Why Men Rebel' as relative deprivation, wherein a group feels marginalized while others enjoy the wealth of the land they consider their own.<sup>9</sup> It is in this context that separatist movements like OPM find fertile ground, because the narrative of "our land has been seized, our identity ignored" carries an emotional resonance far more powerful than any call for national unity emanating from Jakarta.

Consequently, a security-first approach alone will never be sufficient to quell the Papuan separatist movement as long as the root problems, such as identity inequality and the sense of deprivation felt by indigenous communities, are not addressed seriously and with dignity. Building genuine sympathy from the Papuan people requires far more than physical infrastructure development; it demands a sincere recognition of the uniqueness of their Melanesian identity, the restoration of indigenous land rights, and the assurance that they are not merely objects of development, but subjects who are heard and respected within the framework of the Indonesian nation.

### **The Security Approach and the Politics of Labelling: A Shared Strategic Failure**

Indonesia's security-first approach to Papua has proven not only ineffective but also counterproductive. Rather than suppressing the separatist movement, some military and police operations marked by extrajudicial killings, torture, and forced displacement have entrenched the very cycle Stathis Kalyvas (2006) describes in his analysis of civil war violence: state violence generates new wounds, new wounds deepen grievances, and new grievances produce new recruits.<sup>8</sup> Comparative cases, such as the Helsinki peace process in Aceh, clearly demonstrate that military pressure without parallel political negotiations rarely yields sustainable peace. As a result, Jakarta's Special Autonomy policy, as a central political concession by the Indonesian government designed to manage conflict, pacify separatist demands, and maintain the sovereignty of NKRI, has lost credibility in Papuan eyes. Its conciliatory signals were drowned out by continued militarization and human rights violations.

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<sup>8</sup> Geertz, Clifford. 1963. "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States." In *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, edited by Clifford Geertz, 105–157. New York: Free Press.

<sup>9</sup> Kalyvas, Stathis N. 2006. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The systematic exclusion of foreign journalists and international NGOs has created an information vacuum readily filled by the Papuan diaspora and sympathetic foreign actors, who shape global narratives on their own terms. Without pairing security measures with genuine political inclusion and accountability for past violations, repression will radicalize rather than pacify, and a movement met with force but denied legitimacy will not be extinguished. Instead, it will continue to accumulate moral vindication in the eyes of the world.

Besides the problematic security approach, far from being a peripheral communication issue, the politics of labelling has fundamentally undermined the operational effectiveness of security strategies employed by both the TNI/Polri and OPM. When each side invests heavily in narrative control rather than accountability, they inadvertently corrode the very foundations upon which any legitimate security approach must rest: public trust, credible intelligence, and moral authority. The result is a strategic impasse in which neither party can achieve its stated objectives, not because of insufficient force, but because the labelling framework itself renders those objectives incoherent.<sup>10</sup>

For the TNI/Polri, the practice of retroactively designating civilian casualties as combatants or members of the OPM creates a deeply counterproductive cycle. Rather than consolidating legitimacy among local Papuan communities whose cooperation is indispensable for effective counter-insurgency, this labelling practice generates resentment and deepens the distrust that separatist movements feed upon. Communities that witness their members posthumously stripped of civilian status are less likely to share information with security forces, more likely to harbor sympathy for the OPM armed groups, and increasingly immune to the state's professed commitment to a "humane and proportional approach." In this sense, the politics of labelling does not complement the security strategy, but it actively sabotages it from within.<sup>11</sup>

On the other side, OPM's reflexive labelling of local Papuans who engage with state institutions as "intel" or traitors has similarly constrained its own strategic capacity. By treating any form of accommodation or pragmatic cooperation with the Indonesian state as a form of betrayal, the armed movement alienates broad segments of Papuan civil society who may share grievances but reject the methods and costs of armed struggle. This rigidity forecloses the very coalitions that could amplify political pressure for genuine structural change, reducing the movement to cycles of tactical violence that invite military crackdowns while narrowing its social base. Furthermore, OPM's labelling of migrants as TNI/Polri intelligence operatives and therefore legitimate targets for killing only generates public outrage, particularly among non-Papuan communities, toward the brutality perpetrated by this separatist movement.

Most critically, there has been no serious indication from either side that the politics of labelling is being reconsidered, let alone dismantled. Security operations continue to be evaluated in terms of enemy neutralized rather than civilian trust built, while armed separatist groups maintain the "intel" label as an instrument of internal discipline and external legitimation. This mutual entrenchment reveals that the conflict in Papua is not merely

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<sup>10</sup> See Perkasa, Vidhyandika D. 2025. How the Labeling of Combatants and Noncombatants Sustains Papua's Conflict. The Jakarta Post, October 15.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

prolonged by the absence of military victory, but by the absence of any strategic incentive to abandon a labelling framework that, for each party, remains more useful than the uncomfortable truths it conceals. Until this calculus changes, neither side will find itself any closer to its declared goals, and the Papuan people will continue to bear the highest cost of this shared strategic failure.<sup>12</sup>

### **Fragmented Network and Deep Identities**

Countering the OPM is exceptionally difficult because the pro-independence ecosystem is not a single movement but a decentralized, multi-layered network of political organizations, civil society groups, and armed factions. Politically, umbrella bodies like the ULMWP operate alongside student and advocacy groups, while the OPM's military wing is fragmented across multiple regional commands (Kodap). As Staniland (2014) notes on insurgency fragmentation, this structure is inherently resilient, and dismantling one node does not collapse the system. The movement simply adapts and reconstitutes elsewhere. The result is a network that systematically complicates Indonesia's intelligence-gathering, negotiation, and coordinated countermeasures.<sup>13</sup>

Equally important is the emphasis on the social dimension, where politics is embedded within deeper layers of agama (religion) and adat (customary identity). This reflects a core challenge. Papuan resistance is not merely political but rooted in identity and lived experience. The movement draws legitimacy from churches, customary leaders, and local grievances, which gives it moral authority beyond formal political institutions. There is also an assumption that some local government officials in Papua are sympathizers of the OPM, whatever the reason underlying such support may be.<sup>14</sup> Identity and loyalty are complex matters in Papua, being highly dynamic in nature and occupying a 'grey area'. Such deeply embedded identities are resistant to top-down political engineering. This helps explain why state-led integration efforts, whether through development, education, or administrative expansion, often fail to fully displace separatist sentiment.

The OPM's effectiveness lies in its dual mobilization strategy, combining "closed" methods, such as elite lobbying and international advocacy, with "open" ones, such as mass protests, propaganda, and armed struggle. This flexibility allows the movement to operate simultaneously across local, national, and international arenas, amplified further by technology. Advocacy in regional forums such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), alongside outreach to foreign parliaments, complements grassroots action and helps offset the limitations of sporadic violence. This multi-scalar approach enhances both visibility and legitimacy while complicating Indonesia's response and transforming what Jakarta frames as a domestic security issue into an international political concern.

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<sup>12</sup> Perkasa, Vidhyandika D. 2025. How the Labeling of Combatants and Noncombatants Sustains Papua's Conflict. The Jakarta Post, October 15.

<sup>13</sup> Staniland, P. (2014). *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining insurgent cohesion and collapse*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

<sup>14</sup> An interview with one local government staff in Wamena, Jayawijaya

Finally, trigger issues such as human rights violations, environmental degradation, and contested historical narratives serve as catalytic grievances, sustaining OPM's momentum and reinforcing perceptions of injustice. This reveals that the challenge of countering the movement is not primarily one of security capacity, but of unresolved structural and emotional drivers. As long as these grievances persist, suppression efforts risk being temporary at best and counterproductive at worst, by reinforcing the very narratives that fuel resistance.

## **Concluding Notes**

The atrocities committed by the OPM cannot be justified under any circumstances. Law enforcement must be applied fairly to anyone who violates human rights, including those who capitalize on and support the conflict in Papua, including in its logistical aspects. The approach to Papua in general must prioritize a sense of humanity and justice, including in the context of development implementation.

The Papua conflict is, at its core, not merely a security problem solvable by force of arms (guns), but rather an accumulation of unhealed historical wounds, a yawning economic injustice, an identity difference that has never been genuinely acknowledged, and a state approach that has produced far more trauma than trust. These embers that never die will continue to burn so long as their underlying causes are left smoldering beneath the surface. It is therefore time for the Indonesian government to undertake a fundamental paradigm shift: moving away from a security-first approach toward a comprehensive peace-building framework.

Concretely, this means opening a sincere and inclusive political dialogue with all elements of Papuan society and not merely elites handpicked by Jakarta while simultaneously ending the culture of impunity for human rights violations, reforming natural resource governance so that its benefits are genuinely felt by indigenous Papuans, and discontinuing or reevaluating policies that exacerbate relative deprivation, such as transmigration programs and national strategic projects not grounded in the free, prior, and informed consent of indigenous communities. Papua is not simply a problem to be suppressed. It is a profound question of justice and humanity that demands an honest answer from the Indonesian nation as a whole.

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