

Chapter 7

Indonesian Diplomatic Maneuvering in Melanesia: Challenges and Opportunities

Jim Elmslie

Executive Summary

This paper examines the convoluted process underway in which West Papuan political actors are seeking to join the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), a sub-regional body representing the interests of a collection of South Pacific countries. This development is being vigorously opposed by the Indonesian government, which believes it will strengthen the West Papuan independence movement. In the ensuing diplomatic tussle, the regional architecture of the Asia-Pacific is being redrawn, creating several challenges and opportunities

Challenges to Melanesian countries posed by increased Indonesian diplomacy:

- The new “terms of trade” may take focus away from anti-corruption reforms, good governance and the promotion of human rights; they may indeed negatively affect these areas.
- Pro-Indonesian policies will clash with growing public support for the West Papuan cause, leading to internal conflicts.

The creation of the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) may undermine the effectiveness of the widely respected Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and diminish Australia’s and New Zealand’s often positive role in the region.

Opportunities associated with a greater Indonesian presence in the region:

- Increased aid and development assistance from Indonesia would be welcomed, as all MSG countries still lag far behind their development goals.
- Adding Indonesia into the diplomatic mix may strengthen MSG nations' bargaining positions in their negotiations with Australia, New Zealand and other donor nations over a range of issues, such as access to visas; design and focus of aid programs; implementation of land registration; and general levels of assistance.
- Facilitate the MSG as a forum where pressure can be applied to Indonesia over its policies and actions in West Papua. Human rights abuses, a lack of land rights, political repression, and poor health and education services for West Papuans are significant issues that could be addressed by the Indonesian government; however, it has, so far, lacked the will to do so.

Introduction

The driving motivation behind Indonesia's recent diplomatic offensive targeting MSG countries has been to counter growing support for the troubled region known as West Papua (understood by indigenous Melanesians to comprise the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua). Melanesian inhabitants of West Papua have long desired independence from Indonesia, a dream that has been brutally crushed by military force since Indonesian takeover in 1962. Fellow Melanesians' sympathy for the West Papuans' plight has not translated into effective support until recently. Now, domestic developments, particularly in Fiji, have invigorated the issue of West Papua within the MSG and drawn a countervailing reaction from Indonesia.

This new diplomatic dynamic presents both challenges and opportunities for Melanesian countries.¹

Proposed West Papuan Membership in the Melanesian Spearhead Group

The West Papuan National Coalition for Liberation (WPNCL), the most prominent West Papuan umbrella group seeking independence, was encouraged to apply for MSG membership at the group's annual summit in Noumea in June 2013. All MSG members — Vanuatu, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia's Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste, (FLNKS)² — appeared initially supportive of this application. Then chairman of MSG, Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, met West Papuan diplomat and WPNCL Vice-Chairman John Otto Ondawame and encouraged him to submit the application. Expectations of success were high, but ultimately unfulfilled. Vigorous Indonesian diplomacy stymied the bid by persuading the MSG to defer the membership application until after a January 2014 Foreign Ministerial Mission (FMM), comprised of MSG leaders, to West Papua to investigate the situation firsthand.

Two key points behind the deferral were the veracity of West Papuan claims of human rights abuses and the WPNCL's legitimacy as a representative body of the West Papuan people. Indonesia claimed that significant social and economic progress was being made in the province and human rights abuses were a thing of the past. Meanwhile, two other West Papuan groups disputed WPNCL claims of representation: the West Papuan National Authority and its self-declared government in exile — the Federal Repub-

1 I would like to thank my colleague, Dr. Cammi Webb-Gannon, coordinator at the West Papua Project, University of Sydney, for her advice and comments on this chapter. See, Jim Elmsie and Cammi Webb-Gannon, "MSG Headache, West Papua's Heartache? Indonesia's Melanesian Foray," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 12(47), November 24, 2014, http://www.japanfocus.org/-Camellia-Webb_Gannon/4225.

2 FLNKS is a New Caledonia political movement, *Collins Dictionaries*, <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/flnks>.

lic of West Papua, represented in Noumea by Australian-based activist Jacob Rumbiak; and pro-Indonesian West Papuans represented by Franz Albert Joku and Nick Messet.

The FMM proved to be a farce, spending less than half a day on the ground in West Papua and representatives meeting none of the government's critics. This was due to the issue's extreme sensitivity and the likelihood a serious investigation by the FMM would cause mass demonstrations. Concerns that the mission would be a whitewash had already caused the Vanuatu government to pull out of the trip. Ultimately, the visit allowed the FMM to merely report they were unaware of the existence of local concerns or unrest. Far from being a genuine investigation, the mission became a public relations exercise. It ended with MSG delegates, together with Indonesian officials, signing a statement committing each to respect the "sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity and [...] non-interference in each other's internal affairs." The MSG-Indonesian statement also promised cooperation in food security, trade, education, policing and cultural exchanges.³ MSG countries, with the exception of Vanuatu, had effectively leveraged the West Papuan issue to enhance their relations with Indonesia.

Indonesia and MSG Countries

The Vanuatu government has long been a supporter of West Papuans and their desire for independence. This is more than a sentiment held by the political elite; it is felt strongly amongst the society's grassroots. Even at the time of Vanuatu's independence in 1980, West Papua was a significant fixture on the political landscape. Vanuatu's first Prime Minister, Father Walter Lini, said the country would never be truly free while other parts of Melanesia, especially West Papua, remained occupied by foreign powers.

The ongoing presence of high-profile West Papuan activists in Vanuatu ensured the West Papuan issue has been covered in local papers and media

³ Arto Suryodipuro, "Building Relations with Pacific Islands Countries," *The Jakarta Post*, January 25, 2014, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/01/25/building-relations-with-pacific-island-countries.html>.

in a way unlike that in other Melanesian countries. Thus, the issue of West Papua is strongly embedded in the national psyche and on the domestic political agenda. The Vanuatu Traditional Council of Chiefs, which at times of political crisis has proved to be Vanuatu's supreme repository of political power, is also vocal in its support for West Papua. So, one can see how the issue has percolated down through society from the elite to village level.

Indonesia has been aware of West Papua support within the Vanuatu body politic for many years, but has only recently sought to counter it. The most obvious example of this was the courting of former Vanuatu Prime Minister Sato Kilman with lavish trips to Jakarta, talks of a closer relationship between the two countries, and direct aid, such as police uniforms. Kilman was instrumental in the Indonesians obtaining MSG observer status. He was forced to resign, however, on March 21, 2013, ahead of a non-confidence vote, largely due to his dealings with Indonesia.⁴ Vanuatu voters believed he was too close to the Indonesians, fearing their influence on Vanuatu's internal politics.⁵

Kilman's successor as prime minister, Moana Carcasses Kalosil, made his support for the West Papuan cause firmly known from the outset of his term; in many ways it dominated his short time in office. Kalosil immediately distanced himself from the Indonesian push for closer ties and instead embraced attempts to have an official West Papuan presence in the MSG. He asked the WPNCL to formally apply for observer status and facilitated the efforts of Vanuatu-based Papuan diplomats Andy Ayamiseba and John Otto Ondawame to lobby the governments of PNG, the Solomon Islands and Fiji.

Meanwhile, Kalosil continued pushing the West Papuan cause even after its other erstwhile MSG supporters faltered. At the United Nations on September 28, 2013, he challenged the world body with the question, "How

4 Bob Makin, "Vanuatu PM Kilman Resigns," *Vanuatu Daily Digest*, March 21, 2013, <http://vanuatudaily.wordpress.com/2013/03/21/vanuatu-pm-kilman-resigns/>.

5 Interview with John Otto Ondawame, Port Vila, Vanuatu, April 12, 2013.

can we then ignore hundreds of thousands of West Papuans who have been brutally beaten and murdered?”⁶ Kalosil went even further on March 4, 2014, in a speech to the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva, where he specifically referred to the horrific torture and murder of individual West Papuans, which had been filmed by soldiers. He called for the Committee to establish a country mandate which should “include investigation of alleged human rights violations in West Papua and provide recommendations on a peaceful political solution in West Papua.”⁷

The Indonesian ambassador to the United Nations responded forcefully to Kalosil’s speech, denying the accusation of human rights abuses. He buttressed his statements with a reference to the FMM:

*“Furthermore, the statement of Mr. Kalosil is simply in contradiction with the visit of a high-level delegation of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) members representing [the] Melanesian Community to Indonesia from 11 to 16 January 2014 in which [the] Ministerial Level Delegation of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and representative[s] of the Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) of New Caledonia as well as MSG High Representative conducted [an on-site] visit to Papua province and obtained firsthand information.”*⁸

This open diplomatic confrontation was a sign that Indonesia’s diplomatic offensive over West Papua was well underway. While within the Vanuatu government and throughout the country, there is heartfelt support and empathy for the Papuan’s struggle, this sentiment proved much more superficial in other Melanesian countries. Their support for the West Papuans waned

6 “Vanuatu Urges Inclusive Development, Pledges to Continue Speaking Out Against Colonialism,” UN News Centre, September 28, 2013, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=46117#.U886C7yfgUQ>.

7 “Vanuatu PM Blasts Indonesian Human Rights Violations in West Papua,” Pacific Media Centre, March 2, 2014, <http://www.pmc.ut.ac.nz/articles/vanuatu-pm-blasts-indonesian-human-rights-violations-west-papua>.

8 Ibid.

as their financial and strategic relationships with Indonesia blossomed. Indeed, it is hard to separate these two developments. The financial and strategic support from Indonesia can be clearly linked to the withdrawal of support by MSG states for West Papua. The clearest example of this was Fiji.

Indonesia-Fiji Diplomatic Entente

Fiji was one of the MSG countries actively promoting West Papua's membership, or at least the same observer status that Indonesia enjoys. WPNCL Vice-Chairman Ondawame received an enthusiastic response from Fiji's Prime minister, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, when he visited Fiji's capitol, Suva, for talks over proposed MSG membership in March 2013.⁹

Fiji had been suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum in 2009 under pressure from Australia and New Zealand, following the coup launched by Frank Bainimarama in 2006. This, along with sanctions, was an attempt to diplomatically isolate Fiji and the Bainimarama regime until free and fair elections were held for a new government. Bainimarama responded to this exclusion by forming a rival organization to the PIF, the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), which had its inaugural meeting in Suva in early August 2013. Australia and New Zealand were not invited.¹⁰ Frank Bainimarama also reinvigorated the MSG, principally by pushing West Papua as a pan-Melanesian issue.

While regional concerns about the Bainimarama regime are legitimate, Fiji also has legitimate grievances against Australia and New Zealand. Pacific countries often felt that the PIF was dominated by the "big two," whose economic, military and diplomatic power dwarfed that of small Pacific nations. Australia brushed aside Pacific nations' concerns, such as restrictive visa policies, the threat of global warming (and rising sea levels), and the

⁹ Jim Elmslie interview with John Otto Ondawame, Port Vila, Vanuatu, May 14, 2013.

¹⁰ "Inaugural Meeting of the Pacific Island Development Forum Ends with Allegations of Sabotage," *Australian Network News*, August 8, 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-08-08/an-pacific-islands-development-forum-wrap/4873060>.

off-shore processing of asylum seekers. While Australian development aid to all PIF countries is substantial, many policies pushed by the nation, such as the registration of traditional land as a precursor for its commodification and possible sale (leaving Pacific Islanders landless), are strongly resisted by many Islanders, and also deeply resented as an external intrusion into a profoundly domestic issue.

While the PIDF may have exercised a degree of legitimacy amongst some Pacific nations, it was the role played by Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono at the PIDF forum in June 2014 that transformed the nascent organization into a tiger that threatens the established architecture of international relations in the South Pacific.

Even before the PIDF meeting, Indonesia was not-so-quietly maneuvering to suppress the West Papua issue; it contributed, for example, \$30,000 to Fiji to help fund the costs of hosting the United Nations' regional meeting of the Special Decolonization Committee. Vanuatu's *Daily Post* newspaper saw this as blatant manipulation: "Jakarta's cheque book diplomacy reflects its determination to silence any murmurs of regional support or discussions within the MSG on the issue of re-enlisting West Papua back on the decolonization list."¹¹ It seems to have been money well spent as there was scant mention of West Papua in official forums, despite local moves by some church groups to have the issue aired.

The depth of Indonesian engagement with Fiji became apparent at the PIDF meeting held on the island of Denarau on June 17-19, 2013. President Yudhoyono was the chief guest and keynote speaker at an event focused on climate change and sustainable development. It was the first visit to Fiji by a serving Indonesian president, and the length of the stay – three days – showed just how important the Indonesians judged the event. Espousing the benefits of a closer relationship between Indonesia and Pacific Island states,

11 Winston Tarere, "Indonesia Exercises Cheque Book Diplomacy Ahead of UN Decolonization Conference," *Vanuatu Daily Pos*, May 30, 2014, http://www.dailypost.vu/article_fab40dd0-7571-5c5a-85d1-30188fc6b2eb.html.

Yudhoyono also made firm commitments to increase aid and engagement. Amongst other things, he promised \$20 million over five years to address challenges of climate change and disasters; talked of plans to triple trade to a billion dollars in coming years; and outlined how Indonesia could act as a bridge for Pacific and Indian Ocean states.¹² Yudhoyono was offering Indonesia as a conduit by which Pacific Island nations, especially Fiji, could interact with not only the dynamic Asian region, but also the wider world.

The PIDF meeting also seemed to acknowledge the “terms of trade” of the Indonesian-MSG states relationship: on the one hand, there would be silence by Pacific leaders on West Papua, and on the other hand — as the former *Fiji Times* editor, Netani Riki, put it — Indonesia “would not rock the boat on questionable governance, transparency and human rights issues.”¹³ This Faustian pact should have sent alarm bells ringing in Canberra; there are already voices of concern being raised in the Pacific. Reverend Francois Pihataae, general secretary of the Pacific Council of Churches, commented, “Where our self-determination interests are concerned, whether it be in the areas of governance, development and security, or our firm support for West Papuan freedom, we cannot allow the state visit to cloud our prudence and better judgment.”¹⁴

This perhaps is the core of the conundrum. It is no secret that Melanesian countries do have serious problems with poor governance and widespread corruption. What MSG countries need is more transparency, not less. Transparency, along with an independent judiciary, are among the few effective remedies for reining in corruption. In Papua New Guinea (PNG), billions of dollars of foreign aid and a recently resurgent economy have not translated into improved living standards, or higher education and health

12 “Indonesia to Strengthen Ties with Fiji’s PIDF,” *Radio New Zealand International*, June 19, 2014, <http://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/247675/indonesia-to-strengthen-ties-with-fiji's-pidf>.

13 Neatni Rika, “All Aboard the Gravy Train as SBY Visits Fiji,” *Crikey*, June 19, 2014, <http://www.crikey.com.au/2014/06/19/all-aboard-the-gravy-train-as-sby-visits-fiji/>.

14 Tevita Vuibau, “Plea for West Papua,” *The Fiji Times Online*, June 20, 2014, <http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=271977>.

services for the majority of people. In many areas, such as the Sepik River region, basic services have gone steadily backwards since independence. The master explanation for this is poor governance and corruption.

Frank Bainimarama was ecstatic over the PIDF meeting's success and Yudhoyono's visit. He called it "one of the greatest things that had ever happened to Fiji."¹⁵ Yudhoyono must have been well pleased with the visit too; there had been no mention (at least publicly) of West Papua, and the substitution of Indonesia in the "big brother" role traditionally played by Australia, New Zealand and the United States, was being openly discussed. For Bainimarama, there was an added bonus: Indonesia co-lead the multinational group of observers that monitored Fiji's general election in December, which resulted in Bainimarama's election as prime minister in the ruling Fiji First Party. International observers endorsed the results.

Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and FLNKS

If diplomatic responses by Vanuatu and Fiji to Indonesian maneuvering can be seen as the two ends of the spectrum, the responses by PNG, the Solomons and FLNKS lie somewhere in between. Solomon Islands' Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo had been openly supportive of the WPNCL's bid for the MSG prior to the Noumea Summit; however, shortly thereafter, he visited Indonesia. This trip, allegedly paid for by the Indonesian government, marked a turning point in the Solomons' endorsement of West Papuan aims. Despite strong public criticism that he had been "lured" by Indonesia, Lilo's support for West Papuan MSG membership waned, replaced by an enthusiasm for stronger ties and increased trade with Indonesia.¹⁶

PNG has always had a more problematic relationship with Indonesia, sharing a long land border with their giant Asian and Muslim neighbor.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Lilo Visits Indonesia," *Solomon Times Online*, August, 13, 2013, <http://www.solomontimes.com/news/lilo-visits-indonesia/7834>.

A latent fear of military invasion has always constrained PNG's response to the sufferings of their brother Melanesians over the border. Instead, frequent affirmations of Indonesian sovereignty over West Papua remain the mantra. There is also PNG's own secessionist dilemma: the referendum on independence for Bougainville is due from 2015, and deep tensions remain over the island's ultimate political status. However, even in PNG, support for West Papuans is growing as a younger and more globally experienced leadership emerges both within government and NGO circles. Certain individuals, such as prominent PNG politician Powes Parkop, have come out openly in support of West Papuan independence.

PNG's handling of the West Papuan issue within the MSG is therefore more nuanced than other Melanesian states. PNG Prime Minister Peter O'Neil did not attend the Noumea Summit; he was leading a large delegation of PNG leaders on a visit to Indonesia for discussions on border controls, and increased trade and investment between the two nations. PNG is in a delicate situation as it balances these competing imperatives in its asymmetrical relationship with Indonesia. PNG is seeking ways to both stay on good terms with Indonesia and fulfill what PNG opposition leader Belden Namah refers to as "a moral obligation to raise the plight of the West Papuans and their struggle for independence with the Indonesians and before international bodies and forums."¹⁷ The prospect that there might be a linkage made between the independence struggles in Bougainville and West Papua is an intriguing, but potentially creative initiative for peace building in the region.

The FLNKS, an organization formed to advocate for New Caledonia's independence, has also prioritized its own concerns ahead of West Papuan MSG membership, even though it's expressed its strong support for West Papua. As the FLNKS enters the final phase of the Noumea Accord, where a referendum(s) will decide New Caledonia's eventual political relationship

¹⁷ "PNG Opposition Officially Supports a Free West Papua," Free West Papua Campaign, April 16, 2014, <http://freewestpapua.org/2014/04/16/png-opposition-officially-supports-a-free-west-papua/>.

with France, it is fearful of losing MSG support for its own cause, or of an internal split (over West Papua) that might weaken the MSG as an organization. There are also genuine misgivings about whether the WPNCL should be the West Papuan people's sole representative. The Kanak delegate who completed the FMM visit, Yvon Faua, noted, "The report FLNKS has to make to the leaders is that it is not possible to accept the application. I think the [WPNCL] has to join all the others because we know there are also other organizations."¹⁸

The MSG Decision

Prospective WPNCL membership in the MSG was deferred at the June 2013 Noumea Summit, pending the FMM fact-finding trip to Indonesia. The MSG's decision was formally announced at its meeting in PNG's capitol, Port Moresby, on June 26, 2014. Not surprisingly, given the foregoing analysis of regional politics, the WPNCL's application was knocked back. The official MSG communiqué announced that:

8. The Leaders:

(i) Noted and accepted the contents of the Ministerial Mission's Report;

(ii) Agreed to invite all groups to form an inclusive and united umbrella group in consultation with Indonesia to work on submitting a fresh application;¹⁹

This represented a substantial victory for Indonesian diplomacy in thwarting WPNCL attempts to join the MSG. The group's decision appeared to,

18 "Umbrella Papuan Group Suggested To Apply For MSG," *Pacific Islands Report*, January 22, 2014, <http://pidp.eastwestcenter.org/pireport/2014/January/01-23-03.htm>.

19 Section of the MSG Communiqué in relation to West Papuan application for membership," *AWPA Sydney News*, blog, June 27, 2014, awpasydneynews.blogspot.com.au/2014/06/section-of-msg-communication-in-relation.html.

in effect, give the Indonesian government a veto over MSG policy on West Papua. Apparently, West Papuan membership would only be reconsidered if competing independence groups — the WPNCL, FRWP, the influential activist movement *Komite Nasional Papua Barat* (KNPB), and pro-Indonesian West Papuans — collectively apply and gain the Indonesian government's approval. Given the deep antagonism felt between these various groups and the individuals who lead them, a united application appeared to be a difficult undertaking.

However, in a seminar at the University of Sydney on June 30, 2014, West Papuan “dialogue” diplomat Octo Mote spoke of the recently articulated willingness of WPNCL and FRWP leaders within West Papua, and those of the KNPB to work together in this regard. Unity amongst the three groups was achieved at the West Papuan Leaders’ Summit held in Port Vila December 4-8, 2014, which saw the creation of the United Movement for Liberation of West Papua (ULMWP). A new application for MSG membership was lodged by ULMWP on Feb 4, 2015, to be considered by the MSG in June. Jakarta’s longstanding opposition to inclusion of West Papua in the MSG is obviously still a barrier. Although, according to Mote, West Papuans can appeal to the MSG on the basis that FLNKS did not need France’s approval to join the MSG, so why should West Papua need Indonesia’s?

Optimists expressed the view that this potential unity grouping may be able to create a forum in which serious negotiations could take place between various segments of West Papuan society and the Indonesian government.²⁰ While this may appear unlikely, diplomatic power plays between Pacific nations and Indonesia are far from over. Vanuatu, which has always supported the WPNCL and boycotted the FMM, continues to advocate on the West Papuans’ behalf. Recently installed Vanuatu Prime Minister Joe Natuman raised the prospect of referring the case of West Papua to the International Court of Justice, declaring: “We consider seeking an opinion on

²⁰ “Jakarta/West Papua Talks Urged,” *Radio New Zealand International*, July 2, 2014, <http://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/248848/jakarta-west-papua-talks-urged>.

the legal process held by the UN when it handed over West Papua to Indonesia.²¹ Such a proposal is anathema to Indonesia. The recent establishment of ULMWP in Port Vila, in December between the various West Papuan groups, who are still hopeful of jointly gaining a place at the MSG table, shows this process is far from over.²² Indeed there is something intrinsically Pacific about how the negotiations are unfolding in the face of the seemingly insurmountable MSG communiqué.

Indonesia's machinations over West Papuan's MSG membership have also forced the different West Papuan groups to try to thrash out a 'unity ticket' in the form of ULMWP. This is a positive development. With the recent election of Joko Widodo to the presidency of Indonesia, a window of opportunity may have opened, both for relations between Indonesia and the Melanesian countries, and for the fortunes of the West Papua people – two closely linked issues. President Widodo visited Papua Province twice in his election campaign and stated his clear intention to address many of the social, economic and political problems besetting the two Indonesian provinces that make up West Papua. He did, however, rule out any discussion on independence, but affirmed his commitment to end human rights abuses. These are promising statements and the MSG, by using possible West Papuan membership as a pressure point and showing creative diplomacy, may help its broader aims become something more than mere rhetoric.

21 "Vanuatu states its commitment to liberation of West Papua," *West Papua Daily*, July 3, 2014, <http://tabloidjubi.com/en/?p=2821>.

22 , "Papuans Confident Spearhead Group Will Support Application," *Pacific Islands Report*, July 8, 2014. <http://pidp.eastwestcenter.org/pireport/2014/July/07-09-07.htm>.