

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Following our report on Irian Jaya, titled "A Province At The Cross roads: Irian Jaya or Papua?" in Issue II/18 of the Van Zorge Report, we received the following letter from one of our subscribers pointing out some of the omissions in our analysis and offering several additional points with which to remedy those omissions. We welcome this constructive criticism, and feel that the points made are worthy of the attention of all our subscribers with an interest in the province of Irian Jaya.

Dear Editor,

First, I would like to say that the recent *Van Zorge Report* article on Papua (Irian Jaya) is one of the most accurate—that is to say measured and dispassionate—analyses I have ever read regarding this very complex and troubled province. It seems to be difficult for people writing about Papua to avoid the hyperbolic and the romantic, and you have done well in those respects. I do, however, feel that the article glossed or overlooked seven issues that are critical to understanding Papua, and thus also critical to envisioning the divergent paths towards either meaningful resolution or tragic conflict in the region.

1. Merdeka:

By far the biggest omission of the report is an explicit discussion of the ideology of 'merdeka' in Papua. Sadly, everyone seems to be overlooking this issue—and I am quite sure that there is no hope for a peaceful resolution in Papua as long as this word is not understood (by Jakarta) and addressed in its Papuan context. Simply put, for Papuans, *merdeka* is a word whose meaning fundamentally transcends the political concept of 'independence.' It is perhaps better to think of *merdeka* as a liberation theology, an ideology of moral salvation in which a Christian desire for a world of human dignity and divine justice is finally manifest in Papua. There is a tremendous power in this ideological crusade; it is, and will remain, the

one idea that unites all Papuans, overcoming distinctions of class as well as regional and tribal affiliations. But the power of *merdeka* must be understood in millenarian terms and, in this sense, the movement looks more than a little like the infamous cargo cults of the region's recent history. Similar to cargo cults, *merdeka* is an overpowering desire for moral and physical liberation born out of a profound sense of impotence with respect to overwhelming political and economic powers imposed from the outside. These are dangerous scenarios, because it inspires both unrealistic expectations and the willingness to sacrifice everything to achieve them.

On the other hand, the moral foundation of *merdeka* alone can explain why the movement has been so surprisingly well-organised and so amazingly non-violent. Again, *merdeka* is supra-political in Papua—something both more and less than a struggle for political independence. For this reason, I believe that both the apparent contradictions of independence without *merdeka*, and *merdeka* without independence are possible. Jakarta's goal should be the latter. To achieve that goal it must be capable of truly addressing the moral concerns of Papuan *merdeka* explicitly through its policies and programmes. Unfortunately, there is little at this point to suggest that Jakarta is capable of doing this.

2. Merdeka Vs Otonomi:

Certainly the best example of how an understanding of *merdeka* should inform Jakarta's policies is the case of the *otonomi* (autonomy) legislation. Since *merdeka* is a discourse of liberation, *otonomi*, as its opposite, cannot be accepted by Papuan people. This does not mean that people will not welcome the actual changes of the legislation, only that they cannot accept it as *otonomi*. If however, *otonomi* could be renamed something else in Papua (eg, '*daerah independeri*') and implemented

in such a way to be said to serve the moral goals of *merdeka*, then it likely could be the key to resolving the crisis. Ultimately, the question for Jakarta is how to domesticate *merdeka* so that it is revolutionary in the sense that *reformasi* should be revolutionary. The only word here in Papua is *merdeka*, and until people really understand what *merdeka* means (and its definition is still up for grabs in many ways) and use that understanding to create a dialogue about the common ideas it stands for, there is no possible solution in Papua. As long as the word is read by Jakarta as simply a threat to political sovereignty, Jakarta will ignore and even violate the very moral tenants that could define the word and form a compromise. In this way, Jakarta will push the meaning of the word towards 'political independence' thus ensuring the fulfillment of its own worst nightmare. This will be a dangerous game for Jakarta, because the government is sure to underestimate the depth of the Papuan commitment to this moral crusade.

3. Racism and Self-respect:

An explicit discussion of racism in Indonesia is missing from the article, just as, I would argue, it is missing from Indonesian society as a whole. Discrimination is a very real phenomenon in Indonesia, and the experiences of Papuans are the most egregious testament to this. On a daily basis, Papuans are confronted by derogatory assumptions about their 'primitive' nature. These assumptions, expressed both explicitly and implicitly, limit Papuan's opportunities and infringe upon their rights as citizens and consumers. Much of the emancipatory discourse of *merdeka* is in fact linked to a desire for a world without racism, and in which Papuans can feel proud of their identity. But this leads to one of the most tragic and subtle effects of Indonesian racism: the poor self-conception that Papuans have developed as a consequence of living in a nation in which they feel their

history, culture and appearance are regarded as qualitatively inferior. Besides driving the *merdeka* movement, this poor self-conception is certainly a factor in certain social ills of the Papuan community—such as alcoholism. Of course, these social ills just confirm the racist perceptions of many Indonesians; and the cycle goes on. Obviously, racism is always a difficult problem to tackle, but what concerns me is that in Indonesia it is not even on the table.

4. Adat and Tribal Politics:

Surprisingly, the *Van Zorge Report* article fails to acknowledge the political significance of traditional tribal structures in contemporary Papua—certainly they cannot be written off as the strategies of “opportunists.” This is because tribal leadership and organisation in many ways precede all other forms of Papuan political organisation—particularly at the local level. In the same vein, the report did not discuss the important role that ‘*adat*’ [tradition] and ‘*budaya*’ [culture] are playing in the real politics of Papua. For example, it is interesting to see the Indonesian government’s attempt to de-politicise the Papuan Presidium Council (PDP) and the ‘Morning Star’ flag by recasting them as cultural (*budaya*) movements. Ironically, this has a different meaning in Papua, where *adat* is still considered the highest form of authority. In a strange way, this move by Jakarta might actually serve the PDP in a positive way, by solidifying its status as the focus of *adat* power, a status that many of the elite Papuans do not have in abundance. This is an interesting development, and hard to read, although clearly there are risks for everyone.

5. 1999 Election and The Papuan Sense Of Alienation From Government:

Sadly, no one seems to be aware of the fact that between 70 and 90 percent of all ethnic Papuans boycotted the general election in 1999. In Timika, I can say with total assurance that no more than 10 percent of eligible Papuans chose to vote. There, Papuans expressed the decision to

boycott as a fundamental belief that the Indonesian government does not include them. Said one Papuan, a tribal chief and *kepala desa* [village head], “Maybe this election will start democracy in Indonesia and end the corruption of the past regime. But I do not believe it will even begin to end the discrimination against Papuan people. That’s why we want *merdeka* instead.” But while the boycott displays the fundamental alienation that Papuans feel from the government process, it has also had an exacerbating effect upon the situation in Papua. In effect, the boycott served to ensure that non-Papuans and their concerns are disproportionately well-represented in the provincial government. Because of this, the autonomy legislation may not significantly change the policies of the local government.

Ultimately, the PDP must be seen as an attempt to create a political structure that Papuans can feel ownership of. Despite what A.M. Fatma [Deputy Speaker of the DPR. This is a reference to an interview with Fatma in Issue II/18 of the *Van Zorge Report*] may think about creating new channels of government, Jakarta would do well to attempt to bring Papuans into the process of governance by making gestures toward the PDP that could allow it to assume a formal role within the Indonesian system. This kind of creative solution is the only way to overcome the fundamental sense of alienation that Papuans feel from the government.

6. Inciting A Race War:

Finally, and perhaps most crucially from the standpoint of immediate threats to human life and property, your article does not explicitly discuss the possibility of a race war in Papua. This is critical because it seems to be the path along which certain forces in Papua and Jakarta would like to see things go. The recent events in Wamena are a case in point. But recently there are even more troubling indications that some of the so-called *Tentara Pembebasan Nasional* (formerly the OPM)

groups seem to have been infiltrated and supported—with encouragement and fire-arms—by elements of the Indonesian military (TNI). Thus, some TPN groups may now be organising with the intention of fighting against immigrant communities. If the endgame for many in Jakarta and Papua is conflict in Papua (just as it was in Timor and in Maluku), then TNI knows it cannot fire on unarmed people demanding self-determination. It can, however, fire on armed black people trying to kill defenseless brown people, and it is a story that will play quite well in the media—invoking and confirming the widespread fears and racism towards Papuans already present in Indonesia. Regardless, the potential for racial conflict is extremely high in Papua. In fact, many observers are surprised that it is taking so long to happen. The simple answer is that the moral foundation of *merdeka* ideology—and the belief that violence is the tool of the oppressor—has kept the Papuans so peaceful. Unfortunately, without strong and enlightened leadership from Jakarta, this peace cannot hope to last forever.

The omission of these six issues speaks to the complexity of Papua, not to the deficiencies of your work. Ultimately I would like to thank the *Van Zorge Report* for investigating a province that has been—for reasons both intentional and circumstantial—an opaque and poorly understood region. I should add that it is my belief that the success of Indonesia as a democracy will always be measured by the condition of Papua and Papuans. It is the place where issues of racial, religious and cultural difference diverge most from a Javanese standard, and a place whose rich natural wealth most tempts the greed of those who would take advantage of a people with little political voice.

Sincerely,

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