

Veronica Koman: 'War in West Papua is escalating'

Tuesday 15 September 2020, by [KOMAN Veronica](#), [PRICE Susan](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2020).

August marked one year since the racist attacks on West Papuan students in Surabaya that sparked a new West Papuan uprising. More than 100,000 people rose up against the racist violence and for West Papuan self-determination. In addition to several rallies in Jakarta, Papuans demonstrated across 40 cities.

Scores of students and human rights activists were detained. According to research released in February by the interfaith group Human Rights and Peace for Papua, [59 civilians were killed](#) between August and September alone.

Indonesian human rights lawyer Veronica Koman has played a critical role in documenting human rights abuses against West Papuans and sharing information from inside West Papua. This was recognised by the Australian Council for International Development, which [awarded Koman](#) the Sir Ronald Wilson Human Rights Award last year.

Koman was accused of "inciting" the riots that followed the racist attacks. The Indonesian police issued an international arrest warrant for her and sought Australian government assistance in forcing her to return to face trial. The Indonesian government is continuing, from afar, to try to disrupt her efforts to alert the international community to the brutality of the Indonesian occupation.

Green Left spoke to Koman on August 21 about the significance of the protests last year, the escalating conflict in West Papua and the prospects for independence.

Koman said the protests were "very significant, partly because of the involvement of Indonesians, but also [because] it helped to create more 'negritude' among West Papuans. Negritude is the pride of having Black identity.

"Previously, due to the ethnocide by Indonesia, their colonialism often makes West Papuans embarrassed about their identity. Because they are Black, they are different to the Malay Indonesians.

"They are brainwashed to think ... that being Black is worse. During the uprising many West Papuans expressed more pride in negritude, their ethnicity and identity."

Papuan Spring

The incident that sparked the uprising was the release of a video of Indonesians taunting West Papuan students outside their accommodation in Surabaya on August 17 last year – Indonesia's national day. The students were called "monkeys", a racist slur.

"But then the movement, the uprising reclaimed the monkey as their resistance symbol," said Koman. "During that time also there was lots of pride in saying 'We are Black, we are Melanesian,

we are not Indonesian’.

“And the uprising was also significant because the last ‘Spring’ [uprising] in West Papua was in 2000 – so it’s been 20 years since the last Spring.”

Koman explained that, since the Indonesian People’s Front for West Papua (FRI-WP) was established in late 2016, Indonesian students have been protesting together with West Papuan students on West Papuan commemorative days, but “during the uprising, the involvement was even bigger”.

“We also had the first Indonesian ever to be charged with treason over the West Papuan self-determination cause – Surya Anta.” Surya Anta Ginting is the national spokesperson for FRI-WP.

“Indonesians were among those arrested in several cities in West Papua and, for example, in Manokwari.”

The number of Indonesians who know what is happening in West Papua is still a minority of the population, said Koman, “but our numbers are getting larger”.

Indonesia has continued to arrest, charge and jail activists in connection with the West Papuan cause. This number escalated during the protests last year.

Political prisoners

“During the uprising, there were 1013 arrests, resulting in 113 political prisoners, including Surya Anta,” said Koman. “He is free now.”

Koman told GL that twenty-two political prisoners were charged with treason, which carries a sentence of 20 years jail under Indonesia’s *Criminal Code* and which can be doubled for mobilising others to commit treason. An international campaign has been waged in support of those detained in the protests.

“The majority of these political prisoners are out,” said Koman.

“I think that our international and national campaign to free all the political prisoners worked, but I can still see the racism playing out. Indonesia just cannot free West Papuans.

“During the treason trials, the list of evidence [against the activists] was very weak ... For example, the notorious Balikpapan 7 trials, the list of evidence cited by the judges included Bluetooth speakers, belts, USB chargers, phone chargers and laptops.

“It was just very ridiculous to find someone guilty of treason over that evidence. Yet, Indonesian courts must still find West Papuans guilty.

“But ... I think that because of our campaign their sentences have been relatively low. That’s why the majority of them are free now, but 11 remain behind bars today.”

Armed conflict escalates

The Indonesian government implemented an extreme crackdown on West Papua during the uprising. The internet was blocked, access by journalists into West Papua was prevented, and about 10,000 additional Indonesian security personnel were deployed. There were also reports of disappearances and extrajudicial killings in West Papua.

While the security forces have since been withdrawn back across the border, Koman explained that

the situation on the ground is still fragile, given the escalation in armed conflict between West Papuan independence forces and Indonesian soldiers.

"The extra thousands of security personnel from the uprising were ... sent back to Indonesia in January. I think they were waiting for the West Papuan national day to pass, which was on December 1.

"During the crackdown there were fully-armed paramilitary police patrolling everywhere, including the residential areas, inside universities, [conducting] random raids once every few nights at students' dormitories in the capital of West Papua [Manokwari].

"There was simply no room to breathe.

But, right now ... extra security personnel - more soldiers especially - are being deployed to West Papua these past two months, for new military operations, especially in the Tembagapura area, near the Freeport mine.

"So the war between the Indonesian army and the West Papuan national liberation army is escalating - despite the pandemic."

"The West Papuan national liberation army is getting more active," said Koman. "The conflict in West Papua has escalated into armed conflict.

"That's one of many other reasons why West Papua should be under international scrutiny and the international community has to pay more attention, because international humanitarian law should be applying in West Papua, because of the intensifying war."

Self determination

West Papua's "special autonomy" status is to be reviewed by the Indonesian House of Representatives, in the lead up to the expiration of the Special Autonomy Fund next year.

"The law needs to be revised in order to extend the funds for special autonomy from Jakarta. And during the revision of that law, that is the chance for West Papuans to reject or terminate the law," said Koman.

One point eight million Papuans have already signed a United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) petition demanding an independence referendum.

"There has been massive rejection by West Papuans on the ground," said Koman.

In response to the Indonesian government's announcement in July, Koman said that a coalition among civil society groups called Papuan People's Petition (Petisi Rakyat Papua) is calling for an end to special autonomy. The coalition has launched its own petition calling for referendum of West Papuans to determine their own fate,

"I can see why," said Koman. "Because the special autonomy has been used by Indonesia to whitewash colonialism."

Koman is not optimistic that Indonesia will permit West Papuan independence at this current juncture, however.

"I don't see that Jakarta will be a firm friend for West Papuans."

Koman added that 100,000 people rising up and the escalating violence last year did, however, pressure Joko Widodo's government to act on the West Papuans' demands.

"Jokowi and two of the main public officials in Jakarta back then actually opened room for dialogue with pro-referendum groups. But then, due to one thing and another – to cut a long story short – it evaporated.

"But the uprising has successfully pressured Jakarta to think of other options. But, unfortunately, it has not [been] realised yet."

Koman threatened with arrest, charges

While Koman is safe for now in Australia, the Indonesian government is trying to force her back to Indonesia, where she will face immediate arrest. Its latest strategy is to demand she [return her student scholarship](#), for failing to return to Indonesia.

"In November last year, not long after Indonesia's Chief Security Minister went back to Indonesia after visiting Australia to attend a security-themed conference and to talk about West Papua, the minister suddenly brought up my issue to the media," said Koman.

"He said that he would use the state scholarship to pressure me back to Indonesia and that I might be charged with additional separatism-related charges — which means maybe treason.

"The Ministry of Finance is now demanding I return the state scholarship for failing to return to Indonesia.

"Well, I don't return to Indonesia as I will be arrested right when I touch Indonesian soil – I am on the national police wanted list. So basically, the government is penalising me for refusing to return to face arrest.

"This is despite support from more than a dozen national NGOs including Amnesty International, [who] say that this is financial punishment by the government for my West Papua work.

"I cannot see how the Ministry of Finance will back down, because if they back down, it means that they would undermine the efforts by the national police, security ministry, foreign ministry, and the law ministry in attacking me.

"So this is like a collaboration of state institutions to further punish me and I think they want me to suffer so badly to deter other Indonesians from showing public support for West Papua."

A crowd-funding campaign has been launched by West Papuans in Australia to help raise money to allow Koman to continue her work, and West Papuans at home are also mobilising to collect funds.

"It is very heart-warming to see how West Papuans on the ground on their own initiative, (because West Papuans are in worse conditions than me) they have tried to show solidarity by collecting donations for me at traffic lights or [setting up] an emergency post in the middle of the town.

"But they were forcibly dispersed by police. I was trying to think: 'What would be the legal basis for that?' Then I remembered that – yes – the police hate me."

Susan Price
Veronica Koman

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Green Left

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/veronica-koman-war-west-papua-escalating>