

West Papua's Quest for Independence

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50 years since the so-called Act of Free Choice, an independent West Papua is closer but still elusive.

This year marks 50 years since West Papua was officially incorporated into Indonesia via 1969's ironically named [Act of Free Choice](#), whereby less than 1 percent of Papuans were forced to vote in favor of West Papua's incorporation into Indonesia. To the dismay of Indonesian government officials, 50 years later, a West Papuan pro-independence movement persists and has made some significant gains. Despite these successes, for the foreseeable future, the movement will continue to be hamstrung due to Indonesia's opposition to an independent West Papua and successive American and Australian governments supporting Indonesian rule over the province.

Since 1969, Papuans have sought to obtain independence through pacifist actions and, in the case of the Free West Papua Movement (OPM), armed struggle against the Indonesian army. Key pro-independence organizations, such as the pacifist United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) and the OPM, argue that Papuans should obtain independence on the grounds that, unlike Muslim-majority Indonesia, Papuans are predominantly [Christian](#) and [Melanesian](#). Pro-independence sentiment among Papuans is also motivated by Indonesia's repressive rule in the province, which the ULMWP [labels](#) a form of "colonialism," and the fact that human rights violations have been perpetrated by Indonesian forces in West Papua since the 1960s. These violations [include](#) imprisoning pro-independence Papuans for participating in protests, assaulting Papuan journalists, and killing Papuans alongside allegations of torture and rape of Papuan women.

Papuan independence activists have successfully managed to gain support from multiple Melanesian Pacific Island states. Vanuatu in particular has been a longstanding supporter of an independent West Papua. It has [provided](#) asylum to pro-independence Papuans and [advocated](#) in favor of West Papua's independence in international fora, including the United Nations. Furthermore, in 2015, the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), consisting of Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands, [granted](#) "observer" status to the ULMWP, led by Benny Wenda, a Papuan who obtained asylum in the United Kingdom after fleeing Indonesia in 2003. The MSG conferring this status upon the ULMWP was significant as it boosted the ULMWP's legitimacy and [marked](#) the first instance in which a Papuan pro-independence group was represented at an international organization.

Beyond Pacific Island states, pro-independence activists have also gained support from prominent British and Australian politicians. Britain's Labor Opposition Leader, Jeremy Corbyn, arguably constitutes the most high-profile [supporter](#) of the Papuan independence movement, which is [not supported](#) by the British government. Richard Di Natale, a senator in the Australian Parliament and leader of the Australian Greens political party, supports Papuan self-determination. In 2017, Di Natale publicly [condemned](#) human rights abuses that have occurred in West Papua, notably the fact that multiple Papuans have been [imprisoned](#) for raising the Morning Star flag, which is banned in Indonesia as it is the flag of the Papuan independence movement. Moreover, in 2018, Di Natale publicly [asserted](#) that the Indonesian government has denied Papuans right to self-determination

“for so long,” a reference to the authoritarian and unrepresentative manner in which the so-called Act of Free Choice was conducted.

A small pro-Papuan independence lobby also exists outside the Australian Parliament. For example, in 2017, a pro-independence activist [raised](#) the Morning Star flag on the roof of the Indonesian-Consulate General in the Australian state of Victoria. This action unsurprisingly provoked strong condemnation from Indonesia’s foreign minister, Retno Marsudi, and saw West Papua re-emerge as a source of tension in the Australia-Indonesia relationship. In 2017, three Victorian local councils held ceremonies where they raised the Morning Star flag and [expressed](#) support for the Papuan independence movement.

Pro-independence Papuans have also effectively drawn international attention to their demands and human rights abuses perpetrated by Indonesian forces against Papuans. Notably, in 2019, Benny Wenda [presented](#) the United Nations high commissioner for human rights, Michelle Bachelet, with a petition signed by 1.8 million Papuans advocating in favor of a UN investigation into alleged human rights violations occurring in West Papua. The petition also called for an internationally supervised vote on Papuan independence.

Despite these gains, since 1962, all Australian governments and Australia’s major political parties, the Liberal Party and the Labor Party, have supported Indonesian sovereignty over West Papua. This support is, in part, motivated by Australia’s desire to maintain good relations with neighboring Indonesia, which constitutes the [largest](#) economy in Southeast Asia and the fourth most populous state in the world. Bipartisan support for Indonesian rule in West Papua stands in contrast with Australia’s support for Timor-Leste’s independence from Indonesia in the 1990s, which created tension in the Australia-Indonesia relationship.

The Australian government’s support for Indonesian rule in West Papua was codified in 2006 when the Australian and Indonesian governments signed the Lombok Treaty. The treaty [stipulates](#) that Australia and Indonesia would not “support or participate in activities by any person or entity which constitutes a threat to the stability, sovereignty or territorial integrity of the other Party, including by those who seek to use its territory for encouraging... separatism in the territory of the other Party.” The treaty’s reference to separatism is an implicit reference to the Papuan pro-independence movement, which Indonesian governments have repeatedly [labelled](#) as a separatist movement. As a result, via signing the treaty, the Australian government, then led by John Howard, formalized Australia’s policy of supporting Indonesian rule over West Papua.

Similarly, successive U.S. governments have [supported](#) Indonesian sovereignty over West Papua. Thus, the efficacy of the pro-independence movement is and will continue to be limited as it lacks support from either the global hegemon, the United States, or the regional hegemon in the South Pacific, Australia.

Interestingly, even governments of Timor-Leste, which was an Indonesian colony from 1975-99 and had a pro-independence movement that fought against Indonesian rule, have refused to support the Papuan independence movement. This policy is likely motivated by a desire to [maintain](#) positive relations with Indonesia as it constitutes Timor-Leste’s largest and most important neighbor. This support is demonstrated by the fact that Jose Ramos-Horta, who served in the upper echelons of the Timorese pro-independence party, FRETILIN, during Indonesian rule and served as the prime minister, president, and foreign minister of Timor-Leste, has consistently [supported](#) Indonesian sovereignty over West Papua and thus refused to demonstrate solidarity with pro-independence Papuans.

Arguably the most important factor limiting the effectiveness of the movement for an independent

West Papua is the fact that all Indonesian governments have opposed Papuan independence. Opposition toward Papuan independence is motivated by a deeply held [belief](#) among successive Indonesian governments that West Papua is rightfully part of Indonesia as West Papua and Indonesia were both Dutch colonies and together constituted the Netherlands East Indies.

Indonesian governments' refusal to entertain an independent West Papua is also motivated by the fact that West Papua is a resource-rich province that raises considerable revenue for Indonesian governments. West Papua contains the Grasberg mine, the world's second-largest copper mine and [largest](#) gold mine, which is run by the U.S. mining company, Freeport McMoRan, the [largest](#) taxpayer in Indonesia.

Finally, Indonesian government officials likely fear that an independent West Papua may bolster the pro-independence movement in [Maluku](#), which has existed since the 1950s and has been repressed by Indonesian governments.

In 2019, Indonesia's Defense Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu [stated](#) in relation to West Papua, "[They're] not allowed independence. Full stop." Despite the efforts of pro-independence Papuans, for the foreseeable future, an independent West Papua will remain prohibited and improbable.

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