

Let Papuans decide

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The government, in refraining from forcing its will on Papuans in the protracted dispute over the status of West Irian Jaya, seems to have learned from the past.

Although earlier setting a Feb. 20 deadline for a settlement of the dispute, the government has opted to heed the wishes of the Papuan People's Assembly (MRP) and the provincial legislature.

Vice President Jusuf Kalla, who has facilitated negotiations over the issue, made it clear the central government preferred to defer the issuance of a legal umbrella, including an emergency government regulation, to sanction West Irian Jaya province and its administration. This deferral also means a delay in the West Irian Jaya gubernatorial election until the dispute is resolved.

Both the MRP and the Papuan legislature said they did not oppose the formation of West Irian Jaya province, but underlined that people in the proposed province were not ready to break away from Papua.

This conclusion was reached after a popular consultation in eight regencies and a mayoralty in West Irian Jaya, which defenders of the new province claimed did not represent the true wishes of people.

In addition, the establishment of the province must first be approved by the MRP, in accordance with the 2001 Papua Special Autonomy Law.

In its seven-point recommendation, the Papuan People's Assembly said any decision to split Papua must not lead to more military soldiers in the territory or result in an influx of migrants. The assembly also said Papua must be maintained as a unified cultural, social and economic entity.

In short, the assembly is seeking a guarantee that any division of Papua would benefit local people and protect their social, economic and cultural rights.

A hasty division would only keep Papuans, particularly those in the western half of the territory, from achieving the underlying objectives of special autonomy status. Under special autonomy, Papua receives 70 percent of oil revenue, 80 percent of mining revenue and 70 percent of natural gas revenue. However, despite these generous divisions, ordinary Papuans have seen little change in the quality of their lives since the special autonomy law was introduced five years ago.

Statistics from the Office of the State Minister for the Development of Disadvantaged Regions speak of the paradox of development in Papua. Of 29 regencies and mayoralties across the territory, 19 are categorized as underdeveloped. This paradox was underlined by reports of famine in remote villages in Yahukimo a few months ago, and more recently in Wamena, Jayawiyaya, Bintang and Gunung Mulia.

With indigenous Papuans lacking the skills and knowledge to compete with migrants in many jobs, the fast-growing migrant population is another cause for concern for the MRP. The indigenous Papuan population is now only 10 percent higher than the migrant population, prompting concern by the MRP that Papuans will become a minority in their own land within the next decade.

The MRP clearly has strong reasons for calling for a delay of the partition agenda, which dates back to 2003 when then president Megawati Soekarnoputri tried to push through a law on the formation of West Irian Jaya and Central Irian Jaya provinces.

Whatever the motivations of Megawati, however, West Irian Jaya has become a de facto province. It has four elected legislators each in the House of Representatives and Regional Representative Council, and a working administration. These facts were taken into consideration when the Constitutional Court ruled that West Irian Jaya was a legitimate province, even though the legal basis for its formation was questionable.

While the Constitutional Court's ruling is final and binding, it is now the central government's ball to play without ignoring the 2001 Papua Special Autonomy Law.

West Irian Jaya province, and perhaps one or two more new provinces in Papua, is only a matter of time. There is no opposition to the division of Papua, as far as the MRP recommendation is concerned, but a reminder that such a division must reflect the wishes of Papuans, not the politicians in Jakarta.