

Separatism in Papua: Perceptions or misperceptions on Papuans

Jakarta — Benny YP Siahaan

On the surface, recent developments in Papua province look promising. These could be best epitomized by the decision of the government to pass a special autonomy law in 2001 and the establishment of Papuan's People's Council (MRP) in 2005. It was expected that the decisions would cater to the needs and concerns of Papuans and diminish separatist aspirations in the province. Indeed, theoretically and empirically, autonomy has been able to quash rebellions and separatism in various parts of the world.

However, despite the positive development, separatist aspirations in Papua are not subsiding. Besides Aceh, separatism in Papua is considered one of the most stubborn rebellions confronting the Indonesian government today. Indeed, separatism in Papua has lingered on for more than four decades.

Why is the separatist issue in Papua so difficult to solve? Some argue that it is because of Jakarta's policies toward the province. To some extent, this argument is accurate. In many cases policies are based on the perceptions (or misperceptions) of the policy makers, especially if those policy makers have never even set their foot in the region concerned.

Benedict Anderson, in his highly acclaimed book *Imagined Communities*, says that even President Sukarno, who fought fiercely for Papua for decades, visited Papua only after he was 62 years old.

Nonetheless, here are some of the perceptions prevalent among the general public, including policy makers, on Papua and its people:

First, Papuans are stupid and drunkards. This is the most common perception. This perception in turn generates another assumption, as Neles Tebay puts it, "the presumption of incompetence". Perhaps this explains why not so many Papuans are given opportunities to hold key posts compared to the people of the restive province of Aceh.

However, George Saa and Anike Bowaire, the Papuan gold medalists in the Physics Olympiad for two consecutive years, should change this perception. They could be just the tip of the iceberg. There could be many heavyweight brains created in Papua if we were serious about educating its people.

Second, Papuans are primitive and ignorant barbarians. This perception creates subsequent policies that Papua needs to be "civilized". The perception has made Jakarta send agriculturalists to Papua to plant rice, an alien food to Papuans.

It was a naive policy, or perhaps they did not know that the Papuans had cultivated their land for thousands of years with their staple of sago or corn. The starvation in Yahukimo regency in December 2005 may corroborate the dangerous effects of that policy.

The subsequent logic of this perception is that many Papuans still hold on to animism as a belief, resulting in the efforts to convert them to mainstream religions. History tells us that the conflicts that claimed the biggest number of lives were motivated by religion (John Stoessinger, 1999).

Third, Papua is no man's land. This perception has had two consequences. First, according to John Rumbiak, Jakarta sees Papua as no more than its El Dorado or Siberia, a remote frontier full of resources that need to be exploited.

Second, it has become one of the primary destinations of state-sponsored and spontaneous migrations. Many studies have shown that the transmigration policy has had bad implications on social issues, demographics and the Papuan economy.

Recent studies revealed that spontaneous migration posed the biggest threat to Papuans particularly the so called BBM (Buginese, Butonese and Makasarese) because of how they are perceived by the Papuans as aggressive traders, ignorant of local culture and deceitful in dealing with the natives (Gibbon, 2004; Bertrand 2004; Aditjondro, 2000). If the trend continues, ethnic violence like that which occurred in Kalimantan between the Dayak and the Madurese migrants might break out in Papua.

Fourth, the separatist movement in Papuan will receive more international attention and support (particularly from the Western countries) than Aceh. One of the reasons behind this perception is because Papuans are mainly Christian. The exit of predominantly Catholic East Timor from Indonesia in 1999 seems to support this notion.

This opinion is further substantiated by recent developments such as the support of the Black Caucus in the U.S. Congress in proposing the HR 2601 bill questioning the legitimacy of 1969 plebiscite, which eventually failed, and a book written by Dutch scholar Pieter Drooglever on the same issue.

However, if we look at the Aceh peace process, the success of this effort is largely due to support of Western countries. In this regard, therefore, we should not forget that in relations among countries, interest would hold the highest priority.

So far the majority of UN member countries support Indonesia's territorial integrity, including the U.S. Nonetheless, it would be wrong as well for Indonesia to take for granted this international support. The breakaway of East Timor, again, is a good example of how fluid positions of countries are over Indonesia's territorial integrity.

Fifth, Papuans are a socially and politically homogeneous. From their physical appearance, it is difficult to differentiate Papuans. Actually, the Papuans consist of around 250 tribes with intelligible languages and there is tight rivalry between them. Furthermore, the strife occurs also between lowlanders and highlanders. They are also politically fragmented.

Thus, even Papuan intellectual and pro-independence activists like John Rumbiak (2001), have been pessimistic and realized the danger of an independent Papua. He imagined that after gaining independence Papua would be like Africa -- tribal-strife and bloodshed would prevail.

Theoretically, this deep factionalism and lack of social cohesion could partly explain why the Free Papuan Movement (OPM) separatist organization has failed to regenerate like GAM. Thus, the government does not need to negotiate a settlement like in the case of Aceh. The government needs only to dissipate the separatist sentiment, which is the hardest task. One of the ways is to set their perceptions right.

In this regard, the government has not erred. However, as asserted by Keith Loveard, a journalist-cum-media consultant, it has just implemented inappropriate policies that can be adjusted. Then it is the time for the policy makers to correct their perceptions on Papua to be followed by a change in policy.

Finally, what Papuans need from the central government is just perseverance and consistent policies, particularly on the full implementation of the special autonomy law. Full implementation of the law will not only eliminate the separatist sentiment among Papuans, but also weaken the efforts of certain groups and countries to separate Papua from Indonesia.

The writer is an alumnus of Tsukuba University in Japan. The views reflected herein are strictly personal.

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