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THE CONTEMPORARY PACIFIC is published twice a year. Articles and reviews on current issues and concerns from a wide range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities are published with the aim of providing comprehensive coverage of contemporary developments in the entire Pacific Islands region, including Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. Opinions expressed in these pages are the responsibility of the authors. Information for contributors and subscribers appears on the inside back cover.

Waïa, Thérèse. 2023. La validité du troisième référendum au coeur du sommet du groupe Fer de lance mélanésien. *La Première*, 23 August. <https://la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/nouvellecaledonie/la-validite-du-troisieme-referendum-au-c-ur-du-sommet-du-groupe-fer-de-lance-melanesien-1422824.html>

Waïa, Thérèse, and Cécile Rubichon. 2023. Jean-Pierre Djaiwé, porte-parole du Palika: “Il faut que les uns et les autres sortent de leur posture.” *La Première*, 23 October. <https://la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/nouvellecaledonie/jean-pierre-djaiwe-porte-parole-du-palika-il-faut-que-les-uns-et-les-autres-sortent-de-leur-posture-1438097.html>

PAPUA

As the November 2022 memorandum of understanding calling for a humanitarian pause fell apart (Hernawan 2023), the mosaic of Papua in 2023 remained framed by continued armed violence. The existing hot spots of armed violence remain unresolved, notably in the regencies of Maybrat, Intan Jaya, Nduga, and Pegunungan Bintang, which reaffirms the protracted nature of the armed conflict in Papua.

This review analyzes power relations that deeply marked the political, social, and economic landscape of Papua as encapsulated in the burning issues: the establishment of Majelis Rakyat Papua (MRP, Papuan People’s Assembly) for the new Papua provinces as a legal consequence of the new version of the Special Autonomy Law; gross human rights abuses; the internal dynamics of United Liberation Movement of West Papua (ULMWP) leadership; and the continuing survival of Indigenous Papuans against the unabated extractive industry (for a

previous discussion of the extractive industry, see Hernawan 2023).

Over Christmas of 2022, the Tentara Pembebasan Nasional Papua Barat (TPNPB, West Papuan National Liberation Army) asserted that it occupied the regency capital of Kumurkek, but the chief of police of West Papua Province, Irjen Pol Daniel T M Silitonga, dismissed this claim, insisting that the joint forces of the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI, the Indonesian Military) and the police maintained full control. Further, he ordered that TPNPB members must be captured alive or dead (Antaraneews 2022). The chief of police’s action was supported by TNI action: by the beginning of 2023, the Indonesian armed forces deployed a war tank and some four hundred additional security forces to seven villages—Faan Kahrrio, Kamat, Assem, Sory, Aisa, Kisor, and Tahsimara—to ensure that the security forces gained control of these targeted areas. On 18 January, the security forces raided villages from Kamat Village in Aifat Timur Tengah District to Aisa Village in Aifat Timur District and arbitrarily arrested a number of villagers who had already returned to Aisa Village from their refuges (Human Rights Monitor 2023b).

A local source illustrated the atmosphere of the daily life of the affected villages: “We feel like strangers. It’s not like in the past. We are scared, cautious, insecure. A lot of things come to my mind. Wherever we go, we have to get permission [from the military] . . . and we feel under constant surveillance. There is no health services at all here, even before the incident. If we are sick, we have [to] go to the regency capital or to

Sorong. We have to pay transport by ourselves. One way normally costs IDR500.000 [about US\$30] per person [to the regency capital] or IDR1.5 million [about US\$90] to Sorong” (pers comm, 6 March 2024).

Despite these actions by the police and military, TPNPB operations did not decline but in fact steadily escalated. In a press release on 7 January, Sebby Sambom summarized TPNPB operations in Yahukimo, Intan Jaya, and Pegunungan Bintang regencies and claimed responsibility for all of their actions. In Pegunungan Bintang, TPNPB Kodap (Military Command) XXXV shot dead an intelligence agent in Eshipding Village, District of Serambakon; attacked a police car in Ipukdol Village ([Suara Papua 2023a](#)); burned down a 4G telecom tower; and shot at a commercial aircraft run by Dimonim airline as it transported army and police personnel to Oksibil. The TPNPB also shot at two other cargo planes of Trigana and Ikairos airlines and set fire to Vocasional High School 1 Oksibil ([Suara Papua 2023b](#)).

In the regency capital of Dekai, TPNPB Kodap XVI shot at a police intelligence officer and four military personnel, and in Intan Jaya area, the deputy commander of Kodap VIII, Apeni Kobogau, shot dead a TNI soldier on 8 January. Deputy Commander Kobogau also repeatedly warned the so-called “Indonesian migrants” to leave the area because TPNPB were engaging in a “Totally Revolutionary War” ([Yeimo 2023](#)).

The spike in armed violence culminated on 7 February when the TPNPB attacked and burned to the ground a Susi Air plane that had landed in Paro, Nduga Regency, and kidnapped

the pilot, Philip Mark Mehrstens of New Zealand ([Ridhwan and Wibowo 2023](#)). The TPNPB spokesperson explained that the pilot was their bargaining chip to put pressure on New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and the United Nations to talk to the TPNPB because for the past sixty years they had sent war equipment to Indonesia and had trained Indonesian forces to kill Papuans. The TPNPB threatened to execute Mehrstens if these countries did not respond to their demand that Papua’s independence be recognized ([Hidayat and Faturahman 2023](#)).

The response from Indonesian authorities was to swiftly send an additional eight hundred security forces, two hundred members of the mobile police brigade, and three hundred and thirty troops of the Kostrad (Strategic Command) Elite Unit to locate and release the pilot ([Van den Broek 2023a, 8–9](#)). However, the TNI commander in chief explained that the TPNPB attacked the troops who had tried to negotiate with them. In response, in April, the TNI commander, Admiral Yudho Nugroho, decisively raised Papua’s alert status from “pengamanan daerah rawan” (safeguarding risky areas) to “tempur” (combat) ([Muarabagja and Andryanto 2023](#)). This decision demonstrated the Indonesian state’s escalating response toward the ongoing TPNPB resistance. The military also decided to increase the reserve command of the Regional Military Command (Kodam) XVIII/Kasuari by recruiting two hundred new candidates from the TNI and police forces, public servants, and staff of government-owned business enterprises ([Weking 2023](#); [ALDP 2024, 12](#)).

The growing political tension prompted Papuan church leaders to publicly express their concern in a joint letter signed by the newly ordained Catholic bishop of Jayapura, Bishop Yanuarius You; the Head of Synod of the Evangelical Church in Indonesia; the Head of Synod of the Baptist Church; the Head of Synod of the Christian Evangelical Church; the Head of Synod of the Tabernacle Church (Kingmi); and the Papua Council of Churches. They appealed to President Joko Widodo to address the conflict in Papua and proposed six recommendations: (1) restoring the constitutional rights of the Indigenous Papuans, especially the rights of freedom of expression and association; (2) addressing the internally displaced persons who returned to their homelands by providing essential services for them until they can return to their homes; (3) establishing a government task force for initiating a peace process; (4) establishing a church-based task force as a counterpart to the government task force; (5) declaring a humanitarian pause; and (6) addressing the hostage crisis by involving the church leaders as mediators without any intervention from the authorities ([You and others 2023](#)).

Despite various appeals to release the hostage, the TPNPB commander, Egianus Kogoya, posed an ultimatum that if the Indonesian government did not respond to their demand by 1 July 2024, the pilot would be executed. Unlike the TNI chief who opted for the military approach, the Papua chief of police, Mathius Fakhiri, relied on persuasion. He explained that he had

already requested that the acting regent of Nduga, the relatives of Egianus Kogoya, and Papuan church leaders maintain communication channels with Kogoya to persuade him to cancel the plan and release the hostage to the authorities (Dirhantoro and Lestari). However, one of the church leaders, Benny Giay, emphasized that the churches would not start any negotiations with Kogoya since the government had not provided the support requested, namely, the withdrawal of the military from Nduga and the rehabilitation of Nduga's internally displaced persons ([BBC News Indonesia 2023](#)). Regardless, it seems the informal persuasion worked: the pilot survived, and on 7 February 2024, the TPNPB announced that they had decided to release him to the jurisdiction of the United Nations (Khoirunikmah and Dewi). However, the response from the Indonesian and New Zealand authorities remained unclear during the time period covered by this review.

Various human rights reports recorded the fluctuation of armed violence incidents in Papua since 2017, illustrating the dynamics of armed opposition between the TNI and police joint forces and the TPNPB. Human Rights Monitor documented the number of clashes between the TPNPB and TNI-police forces between 2017 and 2022 as follows: 24 incidents in 2017, 44 in 2018, 33 in 2019, 64 in 2020, 85 in 2021, and 72 in 2022 (2023a, 3). The latest annual report by Aliansi Demokrasi untuk Papua (Alliance of Democracy for Papua) recorded 21 incidents in 2023 ([ALDP 2024, 9](#)). While there is an indication of a significant decrease

in the number of incidents, the report also revealed the continuing illegal arms trade as an important factor that fuels armed conflict in Papua (ALDP 2024, 13).

The Kingmi Church in Nduga Regency is one of the key witnesses to this ongoing armed conflict and has also suffered from police brutality. Church officials reported that on 17 September 2023, the Mobile Police Brigade arbitrarily arrested six civilians from the church compound, accusing them of working as informants for TPNPB Commander Kogoya. The Mobile Police Brigade also injured two church leaders, the Reverend Nataniel Tabuni and the Reverend Sakius Kogeya, as well as two women (Gereja Kemah Injil Nduga 2023). This incident exemplifies the current daily life in the affected area, where justice remains faint.

While the state of armed violence remains unresolved as of this writing, the political landscape of Papua is also deeply influenced by the legal consequences of the new Special Autonomy Law (Otsus) for Papuan provinces, as reflected in a number of problematic issues over the establishment of new Papuan People's Councils in the new provinces. The law was originally designed to grant Papuan provinces more power and authority to govern themselves than is typical for Indonesia. However, the new amendment has significantly reduced the original spirit of the law since it merely extends Jakarta's direct control over the whole of Papua. Jakarta's top-down approach was apparent in the selection of new Papuan People's Councils for the provinces of Papua, Papua Pegunungan (Highland Papua),

Papua Tengah (Central Papua), and Papua Barat (Western Papua).

In the old Papua Province, the deputy of the Ministry of Home Affairs initially refused to inaugurate eight MRP members who had been officially selected, arguing that while two of them were critical to the Otsus Law, the rest were viewed as not fulfilling the requirement to represent the Tabi Saireri region (the customary area roughly corresponding to the new [remnant] Papua Province along the northern coast). The rest were eventually appointed following public pressure on the government to act. In the Papua Pegunungan Province, the acting governor, Velix Wanggai, unilaterally replaced Hamka Yelipele with Ismail Asso, even though the former had already been officially appointed by way of a letter from Governor Nikolaus Kondomo dated 18 October 2023. The reason for the replacement is apparently that Ismail Asso is a strong advocate for the land acquisition for the construction of the governor's office and has even encouraged the military to tackle anyone opposing the plan (ALDP 2024, 4). In the Papua Tengah Province, the Catholic Diocese of Timika declined to send its representatives since the selection process was considered flawed (Istanto 2023). In the Papua Barat Daya (Southwest Papua) Province, initially only thirty of thirty-three MRP members were inaugurated. The head of Kesatuan Bangsa dan Politik or Kesbangpol (the government unit responsible for maintaining political stability) of Papua Barat, Rosa M Thamrin Payapo, explained that the Ministry of Home Affairs rigorously scrutinized the candidates so that

they would be “faithful and obedient to Pancasila” as stipulated by Article 4(c) of West Papua Provincial Regulation No 8/2022 regarding the selection process of West Papua Province’s Papuan People’s Assembly. She was referring to the national ideology of the Indonesian Republic, Pancasila (literally, “Five Principles”) ([Kapisa and Sutomoaio 2023](#)).

The MRP drama encapsulates the scenario of control and domination on the part of the central government, masked by terminology touting representation by Indigenous Papuans. In reality, while the MRP selection process was conducted with adequate representation by religious leaders, adat (customary) leaders, and women’s groups, the ultimate decision lies in the hands of the Ministry of Home Affairs as regulated in West Papua Provincial Regulation No 8/2022. Even when an official appointment was already declared by an elected government official, an acting governor official was able to annul and make a new decision, as in the case of Papua Pegunungan Province. In other words, MRP candidates who are selected by their constituents do not necessarily end up with official appointments.

The situation in the field of human rights is also problematic. As the result of the work of Tim Penyelesaian Non-Yudisial Pelanggaran Hak Asasi Manusia yang Berat Masa Lalu (Tim PPHAM, a nonjudicial team tasked with dealing with past human rights abuses), President Jokowi acknowledged that there were twelve pending dossiers of gross human rights violations across Indonesia, including two dossiers from Papua: Wasior in 2001 and Wamena

in 2003. He stated that if new evidence for prosecution can be collected, the dossiers will be heard by an ad hoc human rights court, which can only be established if the Indonesian House of Representatives gives their blessing. This parliamentary procedure is political since the decisions of the legislature follow the interests of political parties rather than strictly legal mechanisms or human rights’ scrutiny. The fact that no ad hoc human rights court has been established to date speaks to the ineffectiveness of this approach.

With regard to violent military operations that took place in Wamena in 2003 (see [Timmer 2004](#)), Linus Hiluka, one of the representatives of the survivors, insisted during a meeting with the government of Jayawijaya Regency on 24 July 2023 that the survivors categorically rejected any nonjudicial solution from the government, including Tim PPHAM. Instead, they asked the UN high commissioner to come to Papua to investigate all human rights abuses ([Adisubrata 2023](#)).

The judicial path, however, does not show a better track record. As a follow-up to the appeal of the Paniai case of extrajudicial killing of four high school students in December 2014, the attorney general has a chance to appeal to the Supreme Court since the victims’ families did not accept the finding of the appeal court. However, the attorney general’s office did not pursue the appeal, arguing that ad hoc judges have not been appointed to hear such a case. While the victims’ families were already pessimistic and cynical about the court hearing since the beginning, they were now even more convinced that the

court proceeding was simply window dressing by the government attempting to show that they had followed the human rights adjudication procedure.

Apart from the TPNPB, another equally influential Papuan actor is the ULMWP. During the second ULMWP Summit in Port Vila, Vanuatu, in September 2023, the organization elected Menase Tabuni as the new executive president for the period of 2023–2028 ([Suara Papua 2023c](#)), replacing Benny Wenda, who was assigned to handle the Foreign Affairs portfolio. But the election process did not go smoothly, as some factions—notably Buchtar Tabuni, Benny Wenda, and Edison Waromi—did not accept the decision of the summit to dissolve the Provisional Government of West Papua, which Wenda had declared in December 2020. The disagreement was not solved during the summit. Back home, Buchtar Tabuni and Edison Waromi unilaterally established Forum Rakyat West Papua (West Papua People’s Forum) and organized the first ULMWP Congress. The congress voted to reinstate Wenda as the president of the Provisional Government of West Papua.

As a response, the original ULMWP released a strong public statement asserting that Buchtar Tabuni’s “political syndicate” was actually part of the divide-and-rule strategy of the Papua police to undermine the unity of the Papuans and to incite opposition among Papuans toward the ULMWP Summit. Menase Tabuni pointed out that the political syndicate did not have a legal basis within the ULMWP constitution. Further, Wenda’s leadership was considered a failure, and he had not been able to report his

accountability to the summit.

Therefore, the ULMWP decided to suspend the membership of Buchtar Tabuni and Benny Wenda as well as a long list of their supporters: Edison Waromi, Oridek Ap, Jacob Rumbiak, Frans Kapisa, Simion Alua, Bazoka Logo, Alen Halitopo, Sem Karoba, Diaz Gwijangge, Erik Walela, Danny Wenda, Fanny Kogoya, Markus Yenu, Edison Kendi, Ibrahim Peyon, and Jeniffer Robinson. These individuals are also banned from claiming any affiliation with ULMWP ([Lao-Lao 2023](#)).

The decision is timely and crucial to maintain the unity of the ULMWP leadership as well as the trust of Papuans in their leaders. A local source explained, “The impact of the decision is clear. For instance, when Benny Wenda visited Vanuatu, the government of Vanuatu no longer welcomes him as a ULMWP representative” (pers comm with confidential source, 12 March 2024).

While internal leadership rivalry is not uncommon in any political organization, let alone in Papua more generally, the ULMWP decision is considered professional, as they used their own disciplinary measures not only to maintain cohesion but also to assert their authority. Their decision also has had a real impact on real politics. It revealed a previously hidden alliance between the Indonesian Police and Buchtar Tabuni’s group in organizing the first ULMWP Congress, which eventually only lasted four hours instead of three days as initially planned ([Van den Broek 2023b, 4](#)).

The state’s intervention in an attempt to undermine the ULMWP is not novel, but the ULMWP is not the only such target. Komite Nasional

Papua Barat/KNPB (West Papua National Committee), a Papuan youth group advocating for the right to self-determination for West Papua, might experience worse. Their members have been not only criminalized but also arbitrarily arrested, detained, tortured, and even assassinated. The case of Viktor Yeimo, the international spokesperson of the KNPB, who was released from prison on 23 September 2023, is representative. He was charged with treason after he was accused of leading anti-racist demonstrations on 19 and 29 August 2019 in Jayapura. The Court of Jayapura found him guilty not of treason but of inciting hatred against the Indonesian authorities under Article 155 (1) of the Penal Code. Ironically, this article had been annulled by the Supreme Court, but nonetheless Yeimo was sentenced to and ultimately served eight months in prison (Kelen 2023).

Other examples include the arbitrary arrest of three members of the KNPB in Tambrau, who were charged with treason on 9 June 2023 for establishing their branch office (Tapol 2023). The police also arbitrarily arrested six members of the KNPB in Dekai Mamberamo Tengah on 6 July 2023 while they were doing a collective cleaning activity in town. The police argued that such an activity required a police permit (Human Rights Monitor 2023c).

State violence is not limited to Papuan political organizations. Masyarakat adat (Indigenous communities), their land, and their customary forests, are also targeted. The 2023 annual report of Pusaka Bentala Rakyat (People's Heritage Foundation) identifies the worrying

sign of the new direction of government policy in the new provinces of Papua, which redraws the spatial planning for conservation and cultivation (Pusaka 2024). The 2023 document on spatial planning of the Ministry of Public Works and Housing proposes that 58.41 percent of the area of Papua Selatan (Southern Papua Province) would be dedicated to conservation and 41.59 percent to cultivation. Similarly, the spatial planning for Central Papua Province proposes 40.88 percent for cultivation and 59.12 percent for conservation (Pusaka 2024, 67). Further, the spatial planning for Southern Papua Province insists on keeping food estate programs in Merauke and Mappi regencies, where the Indigenous Papuans have already rejected these modern, industrialized agricultural projects.

All of these plans contradict the existing regulation concerning spatial planning for Papua for the period of 2013–2033, Article 6 (1a) of the Papua Provincial regulation No 23/2023, which stipulates that a minimum of 60 percent of the total area should be classified as conservation area and 90 percent should remain covered in forest. The central government's spatial planning not only disregards the existing provincial regulation and demonstrates its strong top-down approach but also clearly disrespects the landowners, that is, Indigenous Papuans. The policy essentially treats Papua as a no-man's land. That is why Papuan nongovernmental organizations and the Indigenous community use the slogan "Papua bukan tanah kosong" (Papua is not a no-man's land) in their public demonstrations to resist

the state's continuous expropriation of Papua's customary lands and forests.

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PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The year 2023 brought opportunities and challenges to Papua New Guinea (PNG) at home and abroad. In the international arena, Papua New Guinea continued efforts to assert itself as an emerging middle power, with its size, economic potential, and