

**Managing Conflict in Papua:
Suggestions for a New President**

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I. INTRODUCTION

The legacy on Papua that Indonesian President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) will bequeath to his successor as his final term comes to an end in 2024 is a better armed, better resourced, more coordinated pro-independence insurgency; higher civilian casualties; and the failure after a year to secure the release a New Zealand pilot held hostage by the guerrillas. The conflict between the fighters of the West Papua National Liberation Army (Tentara Pembebasan Nasional Papua Barat, TPNPB) – the armed wing of the Free Papua Movement (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, OPM) – and the Indonesian state grew palpably worse during Jokowi’s ten years in power. As a new president comes in, it is worth asking why, and whether there are any models for reducing violence that have worked at a local level and that might be replicated elsewhere in the six provinces, four of them created in 2022, that now constitute the “land of Papua”.

This report argues that initiatives that start from Jakarta and attempt Papua-wide solutions through a combination of economic development, limited autonomy, co-optation, military repression or, in very rare cases, dialogue are doomed from the start. This is not just because of misguided assumptions or sometimes deliberate sabotage on the part of government officials but also because of the fractious nature of Papuan political movements.

The Papuan independence movement is not going to be defeated, militarily or politically, but neither is independence on the horizon. A more practical aim of a new government therefore should simply be to keep the violence to a minimum. One way to do this is through a ceasefire or humanitarian pause, but this requires a formal agreement and a high-level commitment to implementation. The potential for any progress to be undermined by spoilers on both sides is high.

An alternative is an informal *modus vivendi*, made operational at a local level by officials who know and are in regular communication with key figures both in the local guerrilla command and in the Indonesian military. These officials can quietly ensure that the guerrillas have adequate food, medicine and support for their families. At the same time, they ensure that the military can carry out patrols without fear of ambush by arranging that they and the guerrillas stay out of each other’s way. No one acknowledges this arrangement, but it prevents deaths and retaliatory attacks on both sides and keeps the civilian population from being displaced. Such an approach has been in effect in one district, Lanny Jaya, for several years with a significant drop in violence.

This live-and-let-live approach does not meet the demand of the central government that all Papuans swear loyalty to the “unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia” (Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia, NKRI). It does not meet the aspirations of the guerrillas and their supporters for a separate state. It is not a long-term solution to the conflict. But it has the double advantage of buying time and building trust while other initiatives are explored. An arrangement of this kind, if successful, also has the potential to be expanded, to include, for example, an informal agreement not to build additional military or police posts in the area or bring in “development” projects that will lead to an influx of non-Papuan migrants.

Whoever becomes the next president should refrain from announcing the kind of grandiose goals for Papua that marked the Jokowi administration. Aiming for better protection of civilians and a reduction of violence would be more practical. It might also have a better chance of success.

II. WHY PAPUA-WIDE APPROACHES HAVE NOT WORKED

Every post-Soeharto government has tried a new approach to governing Papua and ending the insurgency, and all have failed for different reasons.¹ These approaches, which were never mutually exclusive and often contradictory, can be characterized as “Get them to like us”; “Hit back without mercy”; “Divide and rule”; “End their isolation”; “Give them money”, and very occasionally, “Talk to them.” Every approach has been coloured by a denial that there is any need to address political grievances and by an assumption that Papua was an undifferentiated whole that had to be addressed as a single entity. The multiple failures by themselves should convince a new president that a radically different approach is needed.

A. “Get them to like us”

The idea of giving Papuans something Jakarta thinks they want and that will be enough to satisfy them politically is an approach most associated with the brief presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid (2000-2002). Just as in 2001, he granted Aceh the right to implement certain aspects of Islamic Law in the naïve belief that this would produce an end to armed rebellion, he allowed Papuans to fly the pro-independence flag, the so-called Morning Star, beneath the national flag and call their province “Papua” instead of the Soeharto-era “Irian Jaya.” He also removed restrictions on pro-independence expression, but the military forced him to backtrack.² Indonesia had just lost East Timor, and the military was not about to have anything similar happen in Papua.

Wahid also encouraged the drafting of a special autonomy law to address the conflict and provide a political alternative to armed struggle. It was only passed under his successor, Megawati Sukarnoputri, four months after he was impeached, but it was based on extensive consultations with Papuans that he had initiated and included provisions on human rights accountability, local political parties, and the creation of a Papuan People’s Council (MRP) to safeguard Papuan culture. While many of the provisions were watered down in the final version, most Papuan drafters could live with it – until Megawati undercut it all in 2003 in an unconstitutional act that the new Constitutional Court let stand.³

Soesilo Bambang Yudhoyono tried to restore a modicum of trust by pressing for an enhanced special autonomy law (Otsus Plus) and creating a “Body for the Acceleration of Development

¹ IPAC, “Policy Miscalculations on Papua,” Report No. 40, 31 October 2017.

² Rodd McGibbon, “Pitfalls of Papua: Understanding the conflict and its place in Australia-Indonesia relations,” Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2004. See also Human Rights Watch, “Human Rights and Pro-Independence Actions in Papua, 1999-2000,” 1 May 2000.

³ International Crisis Group, “Dividing Papua: How Not to Do It,” Asia Briefing Paper, 9 April 2003. Article 76 of the 2001 Special Autonomy Law states that any division of Papua into new provinces can only be done with the approval of the MRP and the provincial assembly (DPRP) after considering socio-cultural unity as well as the existing human and economic resources available.

in Papua and Papua Barat” (UP4B), but no real progress was made on key issues of concern to indigenous Papuans: land rights, accountability for human rights violations, reduction of the military presence and limits on the influx of non-Papuan migrants.⁴

President Jokowi made a point of visiting Papua frequently, more than any other president, but the visits did nothing to address the causes of violence. Moreover, he pursued a policy of recentralisation at the same time, taking back powers that had been earlier granted to the provincial governments.⁵

B. “Hit back without mercy”

When major insurgent attacks or ambushes take place, especially those that lead to military or police deaths, a common military response has been to engage in widespread “sweeping” operations to pursue the perpetrators instead of trying to understand and address the factors that made the ambushes possible. These include the unfamiliarity of soldiers with the terrain, inability to distinguish between friend and foe, and often guerrilla control of the airstrips vital to military resupply. A particularly deadly ambush took place on 15 April 2023 when fighters under TPNPB commander Egianus Kogoya attacked a joint unit of the army special forces (Kopassus) and army strategic reserves (Kostrad) that reportedly had decided on its own to rescue New Zealand pilot Philip Mehrstens whom Egianus had taken hostage several months earlier. Instead, it led to the near obliteration of the unit and the sacking of the officers responsible (see below, section VI).⁶

Many of the most serious human rights violations are reported after retaliatory operations by the military. In the area of Aifat, Maybrat, in what is now the new province of Southwest Papua (Papua Barat Daya), an attack by the TPNPB on 2 September 2021 killed four soldiers who were guarding a military outpost in Kisor village, Aifat Selatan. Anticipation of military reprisals in conjunction with the burning down of more than 1,000 houses by security forces in their pursuit of insurgents led to the displacement of more than 5,000 people.⁷ These operations are almost always militarily ineffective and disastrous for military-community relations.

C. “Divide and rule”

The “divide and rule” strategy is most associated with the state intelligence agency BIN; the military intelligence agency BAIS; and the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the primary goal is to weaken support for independence. It involves promoting the creation of new districts and provinces, ostensibly to bring government closer to the people, but in fact encouraging members of the political elite to content themselves with seeking spoils through public office, rather than pursuing broader political goals.⁸ The problem is that the strategy does

⁴ For an analysis of the origins of otsus plus, see IPAC, “Otsus Plus: The Debate over Enhanced Special Autonomy for Papua”, Report No.4, 25 November 2013 and “Papua Update: The Latest on Otsus Plus,” Report No.7, 27 February 2014.

⁵ IPAC, “Diminished Autonomy and the Risk of New Flashpoints in Papua,” Report No. 74, 23 December 2021.

⁶ The TNI headquarters reported that out of 36 soldiers attacked by Egianus Kogoya, four were killed, four missing, and 21 were said to be rescued. “Panglima Ungkap 36 Prajurit TNI Diserang KKB di Nduga: 4 Hilang, 4 Luka-luka,” detik.com, 18 April 2023 and “Momen Pergantian Tiga Komandan TNI di Papua Usai Insiden Penyerangan KKB di Nduga,” kompas.com, 5 May 2023.

⁷ “1.212 Rumah di Maybrat Rusak Buntut Penyerangan KKB, 419 Unit Diperbaiki,” detik.com, 9 August 2023.

⁸ IPAC, “Carving up Papua: More Districts, More Trouble,” Report No. 3, 9 October 2013.

not make the goal of independence go away – rather it provides more resources from local governments to support it. It also provides a rationale for the creation of more security posts.

One manifestation of this strategy was the creation of four new provinces in 2022, but this was preceded by a wave of new *kabupaten*, *distrik* (the Papuan term for *kecamatan* or subdistrict), and villages that elevated local clan leaders to salaried positions. Many of the central highland bupati are absentee, and in conflict-prone places like Nduga, the local government can barely function.

Other divide-and-rule tactics have been to co-opt OPM leaders, especially members of the founding generation who had settled overseas like the late Nicholas Jouwe and encourage splinters in pro-independence groups.

D. “End their isolation”

Many government officials, most notably Jokowi but also Yudhoyono before him, have come to see economic development as the key to curbing independence aspirations. Constructing roads has been an essential component, aimed in part at ending Papua’s isolation and serving its most remote locations. While Papuans undoubtedly could use better access to markets and government services, many in the interior saw new roads, including the construction of the 4,325 km Trans-Papua Highway, as primarily facilitating military transport, commercial activity (including illegal logging), and the influx of migrants into indigenous areas.⁹ The problem was compounded by the fact that successive governments often relied on army engineering battalions to do the construction, and corruption in the procurement of building materials led to the quick deterioration of the segments that were built.

As a result of the prevalent assumption that construction workers were partners with the military, one of the worst attacks on civilians by the TPNPB took place in December 2018 when seventeen workers were seized and executed on the grounds that they were military in disguise.

E. “Give them money”

As it did with East Timor and Aceh, two other areas that once had active insurgencies, the Indonesian government threw cash at Papua through a Special Autonomy Fund, Infrastructure Fund, and General Allocation Fund, so that the provincial budget of Papua in 2023 was one of the highest in Indonesia, even as its population was the poorest.¹⁰ The influx of funds produced lavish lifestyles for some members of the Papuan elite but barely touched most ordinary Papuans. The late governor of Papua Province, who died in late December 2023, was known among other things for his profligate gambling trips to Singapore. He was serving an eight-year prison sentence at the time of his death, accused of having embezzled billions of rupiah in state funds. The national Anti-Corruption Commission had seized close

⁹ “A Highway Megaproject Tears at the Heart of New Guinea’s Rain Forest,” Yale School of the Environment, 17 January 2019.

¹⁰ Between 2017 and 2023, Papua province annually received on average, Rp.8 trillion (\$USD50 million) in special autonomy funds and Rp.4 trillion (USD\$25 million) in infrastructure funds. Combined with the general allocation funds and the village funds, Papua province received a total of Rp.57 trillion (\$3.6 billion) for the 2022 regional budget. “Dana Otsus dan Bantuan Infrastruktur untuk Papua Tembus Rp11 Trillion per Tahun.” 15 September 2022; “Pemerintah Gelontorkan Rp84 T untuk Papua dan Papua Barat di 2022,” [cnnindonesia.com](https://www.cnnindonesia.com), 17 January 2022.

to Rp. 80 billion (\$5 million) worth of assets after his arrest.¹¹ The Yudhoyono and Jokowi governments used the combination of money and threats to expose his corruption to keep him on side politically.

F. “Talk to them”

Genuine dialogue has been the least common of central government initiatives, but several attempts have been made, only to fall apart when the dialogue partners made clear they wanted more than just talk. The Indonesian government fear of enhancing the legitimacy of the Free Papua Movement or providing a pretext for international intervention a la East Timor has been a major obstacle. The government has also been in denial of the depth of support in Papua for independence. Even the word “dialogue” became contentious: to some in the government, it just meant discussion on topics of mutual interest, while to some on the non-governmental side, it was seen as the first step toward negotiation between belligerents. Pro-independence activists insisted that any “dialogue” had to involve a third-party mediator, looking to Aceh as a model. For the government, this is a non-starter.

The first attempt at dialogue was undertaken by Soeharto’s successor, President B.J. Habibie, who invited 100 Papuan delegates to the presidential palace on 26 February 1999 in a reconciliation gesture, only to be confronted with a petition to review the 1969 Act of Free Choice and to hold a referendum on independence. In 2011, a civil society initiative, the Papua Peace Network (Jaringan Damai Papua, JDP), held a series of public consultations across Papua to get agreement on key indicators of peace. The aim was to get a consensus so that the government could no longer say that dialogue was impossible because there was no single representative of the Papuan people. The process seemed to be working well and had the Yudhoyono government’s support, until a final workshop in Jayapura when one faction in JDP insisted on naming the “negotiating” team for the Papuan side of the dialogue. All were pro-independence leaders of the Papuan diaspora.¹² The government, which had sent the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs (Menkopolkam) to attend the final session, felt blindsided.¹³

The possibility of dialogue was briefly revived after riots and anti-migrant violence erupted across Papua in September 2019 in response to racial slurs against Papuans at a dormitory in East Java.¹⁴ But rather than addressing the root cause of the problems, Jokowi staged a meeting with 67 Papuan figures who were all vetted by the National Intelligence Agency (BIN) and determined to be pro-Indonesia before they were invited.¹⁵

¹¹ “Lukas Enembe Meninggal, KPK Disebut Harus Kembalikan Aset yang Disita dan Diblokir,” Kompas.com, 29 December 2023.

¹² International Crisis Group, “Indonesia: Hope and Hard Reality in Papua,” Asia Briefing No. 126, 22 August 2011.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See “Special Report: Wamena Investigation: What the Government Is Not Telling Us,” *Jakarta Post*, 26 November 2019. The death toll across Papua was Jayapura (four killed, dozens injured); Deiyai (10 killed including three TNI), Wamena (40-60 killed, including many migrants).

¹⁵ Many Papuans saw the meeting as nothing but a political optic as none of the elected politicians were invited, and the topics discussed were mostly plans for investment and the proposal to split Papua into five provinces. “Kontroversi 61 Tokoh Papua Bentukan BIN yang Dialog dengan Jokowi, tirto.id, 4 October 2019.

III. THE FAILED EFFORT TO SECURE A “HUMANITARIAN PAUSE”

A more interesting effort began in 2021 when the Indonesian government and Papua Governor Enembe wanted to ensure that the Twentieth National Games competition, to be held for the first time in Papua from 7-15 October 2021, would proceed smoothly. The TPNPB attack and military retaliatory operations in Maybrat had taken place only weeks before, so urgent discussions began between officials of the Jokowi government and the Papuan representative of the National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM), Frits Ramandey.¹⁶

These backchannel discussions intensified after the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a statement on 1 March 2022 calling on the Indonesian government to investigate reports of “shocking abuses against indigenous Papuans, including child killings, disappearances, torture and mass displacement of people.”¹⁷ It noted that the situation had deteriorated sharply after the Maybrat attack. The government strongly denied the report, but Mahfud MD, the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, reportedly indicated that he was interested in exploring the idea of a peaceful dialogue with all parties, including the independence movement, and that the military, police, and most importantly Jokowi were all on board.¹⁸

Facilitated by Geneva-based NGO, Humanitarian Dialogue Centre, the aim was to carry out a pilot project for two months in Maybrat, during which violence would cease, humanitarian aid would be delivered to the displaced, and the rights of prisoners and detainees would be ensured. If Maybrat worked, the teams would negotiate similar pauses for other conflict-wracked districts. The Papuan side was represented by the Papuan People’s Council, the Papuan Council of Churches, and for the independence movement, the United Liberation Movement of West Papua (ULMWP). The government was represented by Komnas HAM.

A “Memorandum of Understanding for Humanitarian Pause in Papua” was signed in Geneva on 11 November 2022, but it was dead on arrival for several reasons. The Indonesian government never formally authorised Komnas HAM to negotiate on its behalf, despite encouragement conveyed to its chair in the backchannel talks, letters of immunity drawn up by Mahfud MD for the ULMWP negotiators on the team, and the presence of officials at the signing ceremony. Papuan parties that negotiated the MOU had no control over the armed groups on the ground, and the TPNPB not only rejected any form of dialogue without the involvement of the United Nations, but also threatened to kill anyone who claimed to represent the Papuan people at the negotiation table.¹⁹ A blueprint for how the agreed commitments would be implemented was never drawn up. Finally, the five-year terms of Komnas HAM commissioners ended a few hours after the MoU was signed, and the new commissioners only learned of the MoU three days later. Rather than being forced to implement undeliverable commitments they did not make, the new commissioners declared

¹⁶ IPAC interview with Frits Ramandey, Jayapura, 19 September 2023.

¹⁷ “Indonesia: UN experts sound alarm on serious Papua abuses, call for urgent aid,” United Nations – High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1 March 2022.

¹⁸ “Komnas Ham: Jokowi Setuju Dialog Damai dengan OPM,” cnnindonesia.com, 9 March 2022.

¹⁹ “Jubir TPNPB OPM Bantah Panglimanya Pernah Temui Ketua Komnas HAM,” Kompas.com, 19 September 2022.

that the previous commissioners had violated decision-making procedures and formally rejected the MoU on 9 February 2023.

The idea of a humanitarian pause was a good one, as was the concept of starting with a pilot project in one area, but ultimately the MOU had to be agreed by officials who in some ways were too senior and too removed from the conflict hot spots to be able to deliver concrete outcomes. Looking back at all the elements used in the past to address the Papuan conflict, one common feature was the lack of detailed understanding of the situation on the ground and lack of personal connections with the key players, including the guerrillas. The kabupaten of Lanny Jaya made good use of both.

IV. THE LANNY JAYA APPROACH

From 2018 through 2023, Lanny Jaya had one of the lowest levels of violence in the highlands and virtually no civilian displacement, despite a strong presence of both guerrillas and government security forces. Without any formal “humanitarian pause,” major development projects, new roads or large infusions of cash, officials managed the conflict by maintaining constant communication with both the guerrillas and state security forces, ensuring that the former could hold meetings and ceremonies and the latter could conduct patrols without either running into the other. They routinely met the basic needs of the guerrillas and their families – rice, vegetables, cigarettes. They also gave the military and police enough information on what was happening with the fighters that they could send detailed reports back to headquarters without having to go very far off the main road. The critical figure was Chris Solihait, an Ambonese who had served in the kabupaten government for 20 years as head of the education office and regional secretary. He had grown up in the area, gone to school with many of the top TPNPB commanders, and spoke Lani, the local language.²⁰

Lanny Jaya, one of many *kabupaten* carved out of Jayawijaya district in the post-Soeharto years, only began to see insurgent activity in mid-2010 when TPNPB commander Purom Okiman Wenda separated from Goliat Tabuni’s command in Puncak Jaya and set up his own regional command, Kodap X, in Kuyawage, a subdistrict on the border of Lanny Jaya, Nduga and Jayawijaya. Until 2018, Purom led an aggressive campaign that involved attacks on police, kidnap-for-ransom activities and killings of non-Papuan migrants.²¹ Between 2018

²⁰ A biography of Solihait was published in 2020 with testimonials from Minister for Home Affairs (and former chief of police for Papua province) Tito Karnavian; the then current provincial chief of police, Paulus Waterpauw; and the governor of Papua, Lukas Enembe. See Alex Japalatu and Wahyu Joko Susilantoro, *Beta Papua: Kisah Hidup dan Pengabdian Chris Solihait*, Bekasi, 2020. The former regional army commander (Danrem), Brig. Gen. Tri Yuniarto also commends Solihait in the book for his ability to communicate with the armed groups.

²¹ On 28 November 2012, the group raided Lanny Jaya police station, killing three officers and stealing all the firearms inside. A day later, it ambushed the then-provincial police chief, Tito Karnavian, who came to check the crime scene. Detailed chronology of the incident can be read from the Supreme Court documentation, “Putusan Nomor: 753 K/Pid/2015,” link <https://putusan3.mahkamahagung.go.id/direktori/putusan/f9a382a97dd3b423c902afa632001b07.html>. See also “Penembak Rombongan Tito Karnavian 2012 di Papua Ditangkap,” cnn.indonesia.com, 2 June 2020.

and 2023, however, there were only six recorded incidents involving Kodap Kuyawage members.²² What changed was systematic communication.

Direct communication with Kodap Kuyawage started after a new bupati, Befi Jigibalom, was elected in 2014, and Chris, who was already the kabupaten secretary, stayed on in the job. At the time, six subdistricts were under Purom's control, and no social services could be delivered without relying on security forces.²³ The new team wanted to change this, and the plan hinged on talking to the rebel commanders and persuading them to withdraw in exchange for certain benefits. Sohilait had the phone numbers of all top commanders.²⁴ He knew some of them from his childhood and others from his work in the education department. He and Befi followed three basic rules in dealing with them. First, ensure they have enough food and other basic goods. Second, take care of their families and especially their children. And third, prevent them from buying weapons.

The government provided four tonnes of rice per month as well as sacks of cigarettes. Sohilait would work out drop-off points with his contacts and then leave the sacks by the side of the road in bags labelled "Pemuda" (Youth). He would know the exact spot because as he was traveling along the road in his official car, a small arrow would be shot from the forest along the side of the road and land in front of the car. This was a signal to unload the goods. When supplies ran low, one of the rebels would call him and a new drop-off would be arranged.

He also identified the children and family members of the insurgents and regularly gave them various forms of assistance.

I called their teachers and asked them to pay a little more attention to them compared to other kids. If they were smart, in the top ten ranking, make them No. 1. If they aren't in the top ten, find out what they're good at and then have a competition they can do well in. It can be a planting competition, a sports event, anything. Give them a certificate and tell them to take it home. Give them a day off so they can go to their village up in the hills. Sometimes we also have an event at the school where the champions come on stage, then we invite their parents. Afterwards, their father usually sends me a note on cigarette paper (they rarely have paper in the hills) saying, "Thank you for taking care of my child."²⁵

If the commanders did not have children, he would find ways to assist their parents.

Finally, he ensured that cash donations, which the TPNPB often demanded for ceremonies or meetings, were delivered in small denominations so that they could be used to buy betel nuts or cigarettes but not arms. He reasoned that corrupt security personnel would not accept Rp.1,000 or Rp.5,000 bills for their rifles, when they were demanding millions of rupiahs.

²² According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) dataset on Papua between 1 January 2018 to 1 December 2023, there were six conflict incidents involving TPNPB Kodap Kuyawage that resulted in a total five fatalities. The string of incidents from March to April 2023 were related to the security forces rescue operation against the Egianus Kogoya group, who went hiding in Kuyawage.

²³ These subdistricts were Kuyawage, Balingga, Popome, Malagai, Pirime, and Makki.

²⁴ One of the commanders, Enden Wanimbo, was a former colleague in the kabupaten education office, who left and joined the rebels out of anger that he was not appointed as the head of education office.

²⁵ IPAC interview with Chris Sohilait, Jayapura, 26 September 2023.

Frequent contact with the insurgents would not have been possible if Solihait had not been on good terms with the military and police. His knowledge of the local language and clan networks had already made him indispensable, and each new incoming regional commander knew to contact him. In addition, he made sure that the newly deployed soldiers did not venture to dangerous areas that made them prime targets for ambush, and he would not hesitate to report any rogue soldiers who engaged in shady business.

Tiom [Lanny Jaya capital] is a small place. I know every soldier coming in, including the non-uniformed special forces. I told my people to report to me if any of these soldiers were smuggling alcohol, gambling, or extorting people. My close relationship with their commanders in Wamena or Jayapura allowed me to reprimand or even kick them out of Lanny Jaya.²⁶

He also addressed the soldiers' reward system, which was typically quantified by the number of firearms they could seize from the insurgents. He often went to the rebel camps to buy broken weapons and then gifted them to soldiers so that they could get promoted for their counterinsurgency work and transferred out.

Sohilait's objective was to prevent bloodshed, not to persuade the insurgents to surrender or reveal their identities and positions to security forces. The point was to keep the two sides apart, meaning he would warn the guerrillas not to pass through a particular area if a military patrol was underway, and warn the military not to have anyone in an area where a ceremony or meeting was taking place. One of his biggest concerns was foolhardy soldiers acting on their own without knowledge of the area, which was a recipe for getting killed. Any armed clash meant more troop deployment, more civilian casualties and displacement, and a bigger incentive for retaliation. Violent conflict was also expensive for the local government, which often had to pay out blood money to the relatives of Papuans killed or cover the medical expenses of security personnel who were injured in battle.²⁷

The situation in Lanny Jaya changed drastically after Egianus Kogoya brought the New Zealand pilot he had seized in Nduga in February 2023 to Kuyawage in March 2023 to evade pursuing security forces.²⁸ Sohilait, who had left Lanny Jaya in 2020 to work in the provincial government (but still maintained communication with some of the rebels), claimed that he was almost shot by newly deployed soldiers when he tried to visit Purom Wenda in Kuyawage. It was apparent that the military no longer tolerated any communication with the insurgents. Moreover, military operations had pushed the insurgents far up the mountains where there was no radio signal. Sohilait said,

How can we negotiate if there are thousands of soldiers surrounding one kabupaten. All access points right and left have military posts. We would be stupid to enter, we would get killed, and we would not even know who shot us.²⁹

²⁶ IPAC interview with Chris Sohilait, Jayapura, 26 September 2023.

²⁷ According to the TNI law, security operations are paid out of the state budget, not the local government. In practice, the local governments are often forced provide food for the soldiers and medical treatment when they get injured. Sohilait said that Lanny Jaya kabupaten spent Rp.2 billion for two Brimob officers who were injured in a clash, as they had to be airlifted from Lanny Jaya to a hospital in Jayapura for emergency treatment. IPAC interview with Chris Sohilait, Jayapura, 26 September 2023.

²⁸ "KKB Egianus Kogoya Has Left Nduga, Search For Susi Air Pilot Philip Mark Extended To Lanny Jaya," *voi.id*, 6 March 2023.

²⁹ IPAC interview with Chris Sohilait, Jayapura, 26 September 2023.

The Lanny Jaya approach of “live and let live” worked for five years. It involved no central government authorisation or agreement. Deliveries of rice and cigarettes, contribution of pigs for feasts, and periodic cash donations were a small price to pay for relative peace. It depended entirely on personal contacts, regular communication with all parties (and guerrillas being within the range of a telephone signal), and detailed local knowledge. It also depended on acceptance of the premise that guerrillas were little different from other Papuans and there was no point in trying to either isolate them or defeat them militarily.

The question is whether the Lanny Jaya approach is replicable. While Komnas HAM Papua was interested in holding a workshop for bupatis on the Lanny Jaya model, it may be that sharing too many of the details in a quasi-public setting could raise alarms on both sides.³⁰ It is also worth noting that Befana, the Lanny Jaya bupati, largely stayed out of the communication, since he was an elected official, representing the central government, and could not be seen to be engaging too closely with the TPNPB. The trick is to find an official who can play the same role as Solihait but stay out of the spotlight. It may have helped that Solihait, while born and bred in Lanny Jaya, is not a Papuan with clan obligations and associations that can make some of this go-between work more complicated. On the other hand, his close ties to government, while vital to the success of the project, could make any formal recognition of the model unacceptable to Papuan interlocutors.

V. THE PROBLEM OF DEALING WITH MULTIPLE ACTORS

There was another reason that Lanny Jaya succeeded for five years in staving off serious violence – local officials were largely dealing with only one regional command of the TPNPB (Purom Wenda’s) and not with the independence movement’s political wing at all. Once multiple groups are involved, the obstacles mount exponentially, as those involved in the effort to secure an MoU on a humanitarian pause discovered. The fighting in 2023 between the TPNPB and the West Papua Army (WPA) and the leadership struggle within the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) illustrate the problem, but Indonesian government also is often plagued by different agencies promoting different interests and policies on Papua.

A. Benny Wenda and the West Papua Army (WPA)

Since 2019, a major obstacle to Papuan unity has been Benny Wenda, the founder of the Free West Papua Campaign based in Oxford, England. Benny was one of five diaspora leaders who made up the executive council of the United Liberation Movement of West Papua, (ULMWP), an organisation founded in December 2014 to press independence claims in the international arena, especially in the Melanesian Spearhead Group and the United Nations.³¹ ULMWP made a huge effort to bring the various factions of the movement together and for a

³⁰ IPAC interview with Frits Ramandey, 25 December 2023.

³¹ For background on the ULMWP, see IPAC, “Policy Miscalculations on Papua”, Report No. 40, 31 October 2017.

while seemed to have succeeded. Benny's self-promotion, however, led to tensions, then splits.³²

One of ULMWP's problems from the beginning was that it had no control over the fighters on the ground. In June 2019, Benny tried to address this weakness and simultaneously boost his bid for leadership by claiming to have successfully merged three armed factions and reorganised them as the West Papua Army (WPA).³³ With a paper army under his command, Benny then moved ahead in July to form the West Papua Provisional Government with himself as interim president.

The TPNPB was furious. In August 2019, its titular supreme commander, Goliat Tabuni, released a statement that all regional commands across Papua opposed the establishment of a new armed group that would challenge TPNPB as the only legitimate OPM military wing.³⁴ They were even angrier when Menase "Kebe" Tabuni, then head of ULMWP's defence department, organized a high-level conference (Konferensi Tingkat Tinggi, KTT) in Paniai in August 2021 at which Demianus Yogi, the head of the TPNPB's command in Paniai, was appointed as supreme commander of the West Papua Army.³⁵

Demianus Yogi was the youngest son of an OPM founder, Thadeus Yogi, who first set up the Paniai Kodap in the 1970s. It was based in Eduda, a hilly subdistrict near the kabupaten capital, Enarotali. The Yogi family was known for its collaboration with the local government in exchange for perks. Confrontation with the government was rare, leading to accusations that the Yogis had been co-opted.³⁶

TPNPB spokesman Sebby Sambom denounced Yogi's appointment as a coup against the TPNPB and called him a traitor for his history of collaboration.³⁷ The TPNPB saw the Yogi move as a serious threat to TPNPB's cohesion, which since 2012 had been under the nominal command of Goliat Tabuni, though most regional commanders were largely autonomous and

³² One incident in particular became an issue. In 2017, Benny Wenda, calling himself chair of the ULMWP, held a press conference and claimed to have handed over a petition from 1.8 million Papuans to the UN's Decolonisation Committee in support of reinstating West Papua on the list of still colonised territories and investigating human rights violations. The head of the Committee said he never received any petition, and there was no way to verify the names. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³³ The three factions were the West Papua Revolutionary Army (TRWP) led by Mathias Wenda in PNG, the West Papua National Army (TNPB) led by Fernando Worabay in Yapen Islands, and the TPNPB. Mathias Wenda was named supreme commander, to the consternation of other ULMWP members who believed the top commander had to be based in Papua, not outside. See ULMWP, "Press Release: West Papuan military factions form unified 'West Papua Army' in historic declaration," 1 July 2019.

³⁴ "Perkuat TPNPB, Goliat Tabuni Cs Tolak Organisasi Tandingan," *suarapapua.com*, 14 August 2019.

³⁵ "Komnas TPNPB-OPM Tuding Demianus Magay Yogi Lakukan Kudeta Militer Revolusi," *suarapapua.com*, 17 August 2021.

³⁶ In 2009, Thadeus reportedly received Rp 8 billion (\$800,000 at that time) from the government as compensation for the use of his customary land for development projects. After he died in 2010, two of his sons, Salmon and John Yogi, took over the command. Both became involved in the extortion of mining businesses, legal and illegal, which drew the attention of the police. In 2011, a police paramilitary unit raided Eduda camp and killed Salmon. The remaining insurgents followed his brother, John, who set up a new camp in Ogeida, near Lake Wissel. Under the Paniai bupati at the time, Hengky Kayame (2013-2018), John Yogi and his men were given in construction projects and access to heavy equipment. John died sometime in 2013, and the leadership passed to another sibling, Leo Magai Yogi. Leo, was gunned down by the police in Nabire in 2015. The command passed Thadeus's youngest sons, Demianus Magai Yogi and Otto Jemi Yogi, who were released from prison in 2018 after serving a year and three months for extortion. Demianus tried to stay away from legal trouble. In August 2018, his men beat up a military patrol unit in Wagemuka district and seized their weapons. Instead of keeping them, Demianus apologised and returned the weapons immediately to a military base in Enarotali. The bupati elected in 2018, Meki Nawipa, extended the collaboration by giving Otto Jemy Yogi, who owned a coffee farm, micro-loans and a monthly stipend as part of a program to assist coffee farmers. In December 2021, the bupati and the deputy provincial police chief, Brig. Gen. Eko Sudarto, came to survey Otto's coffee farm in Madi district, Paniai Timur. The visitors also brought construction materials and built a new house for Otto.

³⁷ "Komnas TPNPB-OPM Tuding Demianus Magay Yogi Lakukan Kudeta Militer Revolusi," *suarapapua.com*, 17 August 2023.

Goliat had no operational role.³⁸ Demianus Yogi was popular among the Mee people, the predominant ethnic group in Central Papua (Papua Tengah) and commanded sizeable forces and firearms.³⁹ He also controlled several camps in Paniai on the border with Intan Jaya, where other TPNPB groups operated.

Hostility between the TPNPB and WPA erupted in violence after several Kodap commanders from Intan Jaya and Mimika switched their allegiance to the WPA in 2022.⁴⁰ In August 2022, the TPNPB replaced them, establishing new Kodap in Paniai, Deiyai and Dogiyai.⁴¹ Undius Kogoya was appointed as the new Kodap VIII Intan Jaya commander.

In September 2022, an ethnic Mee and Yogi loyalist named Anton Gobay left for Mindanao in the Philippines to buy arms. Over the next three months, he followed various leads but was eventually arrested by Philippine police in Sarangani province in January 2023 with an arsenal of newly purchased weapons. It was never clear where he got the funds to purchase them, but it would have been in the Indonesian government's interest to encourage internecine warfare within the armed independence movement.⁴²

In January 2023, Undius Kogoya arrested several men who entered his territory in Titigi subdistrict, Paniai carrying firearms. He seized their weapons and gave them a stern warning that he would kill any WPA members if they entered Intan Jaya without prior notification from the TPNPB. The first blood was spilled on 20 April 2023, when Undius's men ambushed a group of WPA fighters, led by Joni "Botak" Beanal from Kodap Mimika who entered Intan Jaya, and killed four of them.⁴³

In July 2023, Demianus Yogi received information that the new TPNPB commands were gathering in Paniai and decided to intercept them. The first attack took place in Obano subdistrict on 9 July 2023. Two TPNPB members were killed. On 28 July, another clash occurred in Wegebino subdistrict, where Yogi's brother and chief of staff, Otto Jemi Yogi, ambushed TPNPB members from Deiyai.⁴⁴ The newly formed Kodap Deiyai members had few arms and could not put up a fight. Three were shot and killed, and seventeen were injured.

³⁸ IPAC, "Escalating Armed Conflict and a New Security Approach in Papua," op.cit.

³⁹ Demianus Yogi was the youngest son of Thadeus Yogi, the original Kodap Paniai commander who died in 2009. His older brothers, John and Salmon Yogi, succeeded in their father's position, but they died in the battle against the police in the early 2010s. Demianus Yogi became Kodap Paniai's commander after being released in 2018.

⁴⁰ Several notable rebel figures from Kodap VIII Intan Jaya, including Sabinus Waker and Gusby Waker, relocated to Paniai and became top figures in the WPA. In August 2022, Komnas TPNPB filled the vacuum by appointing Undius Kogoya as the new Kodap VIII Intan Jaya commander and Apeni Kobogau as his deputy. "Undius Kogoya pimpin Kodap VIII Intan Jaya," jubi.id, 10 August 2022.

⁴¹ These new TPNPB Kodap are Kodap XIII Kegepa Nipo Paniai, Kodap XI Odiyai-Dogiyai, and Kodap Noukai XXXI Deiyai. These new groups only possess a few firearms, and they have generally avoided attacks on Indonesian government security forces.

⁴² Anton Gobay was born in 11 August 1993 and lived in Jayapura. He graduated from a law school in Paniai (Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Hukum) and also attended a flight school, All Asia Aviation Academy, in Zambales, Central Luzon in the Philippines – hence his claim to be part of the WPA air force. He joined the West Papua National Parliament in 2013, the ULMWP in 2014 and claimed to have been promoted to "military and civilian coordinator" in 2019. As of 2024, he remained in detention in the Philippines.

⁴³ Joni Beanal was the person responsible for leading the TPNPB incursion on the PT Freeport office in Timika on 1 April 2020, which left one New Zealand worker killed. Undius accused Joni Beanal of being a government spy after his defection to the WPA. He was shot in the leg and beaten by Undius Kogoya's men but survived. "Komandan Sorong Samarai Gussby Waker Bantah Joni Botak Cs Pengkianat KKB Papua," tribunnews.com, 26 April 2023.

⁴⁴ There were also pictures circulated in the social media purportedly showing Oto Jemi Yogi, Demianus's brother, meeting with police officers at his house the day before the first attack on 9 July 2023. WPA supporters believed that the picture is an old photo, and the person in it is not Oto Jemi Yogi, but his father, the late Thadeus Yogi with a police officer. Nonetheless, the TPNPB used the pictures to portray Yogi's family closeness with security apparatus. Link to the TPNPB's Media Facebook post <https://www.facebook.com/KomandoNasional/posts/pfbid02VEEGwSXwEEfWHDwpE9PmK4Uz2Bx8SAWakEmBWHWSPamLTn7aj5ghQfbvMgvWbBmgI>

The TPNPB also reported that a Papuan TNI soldier was involved in these attacks, but the report was never verified.⁴⁵

B. The ULMWP Leadership Struggle

The ULMWP failed to achieve any of its goals under Benny Wenda. Its hope to be recognised as a legitimate negotiating partner with the Indonesian government was dashed with the cancellation of the MoU on the Humanitarian Pause. Not only did it fail repeatedly in its bid for membership in Melanesian Spearhead Group, but it had to watch as Indonesia secured the membership it craved at the MSG's meeting in Vanuatu in August 2023.⁴⁶ Most importantly, its claim to represent a unified Papuan independence movement was thwarted by Benny Wenda's tactics and his alienation of the other senior members.

Following the MSG meeting, the ULMWP met separately on 26 August 2023 in Port Vila, Vanuatu to reorganise and decide on short-term objectives. The meeting resulted in three major changes: the appointment of Menase Tabuni as executive president and Benny Wenda's demotion to foreign minister; the dissolution of Wenda's "Provisional Government" that most had not agreed to in the first place; and a renewed focus on domestic affairs and internal consolidation.

Benny Wenda rejected the outcome and mobilised his supporters to challenge Menase Tabuni's leadership.⁴⁷ On 20 November 2023, at a so-called "1st ULMWP Congress" in Sentani subdistrict, Jayapura, they announced the reinstatement of the provisional government and Benny Wenda as its president. Menase Tabuni called the decision unconstitutional and treasonous.⁴⁸

C. Consequences of the Divisions

The three-way split in the independence movement – between the TPNPB and the WPA; between Benny and Menase and their respective followers within the ULMWP; and between the ULMWP and the TPNPB – makes any Papua-wide solution hard to reach and harder to implement.

The Indonesian government does not speak with one voice either. The president's office, the line ministries, the coordinating ministries, the military, the police, different factions in parliament and Komnas HAM often speak with different voices, as do different levels of government. Trying to get an agreement is like herding cats. By aiming lower and reducing the number of actors involved, a lull in violence, if not a formal ceasefire, might be possible.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Indonesia was accepted as an associate member on the grounds that the country represents five Melanesian provinces: Papua, West Papua, Maluku, North Maluku and Nusa Tenggara Timur. Indonesian government's intense lobbying and financial aid through the Indonesian AID programs probably secured the Melanesian countries' support. "Melanesian leaders group decides West Papua independence body does not meet 'existing criteria' to join," abc.net.au, 25 August 2023. See also IPAC, "Policy Miscalculation on Papua," Report No. 40, 31 October 2017.

⁴⁷ "Benny Wenda: Selamat Datang Forum Rakyat West Papua," westpapuanews.org, 6 November 2023.

⁴⁸ Buchtar Tabuni, Edison Waromi and Yakub Imbiri were responsible in organising the conference. All of them were the ministers of Benny Wenda's provisional government. "Kongres ke-I di Sentani bagian dari Faksi baru, Presiden ULMWP: Tidak Ada Kaitannya dengan Kami," tribunnews.com, 20 November 2023.

VI. EXTERNAL SHOCKS: THE IMPACT OF THE MEHRTENS ABDUCTION

One difficulty, though, is that workable local initiatives can be undermined by circumstances over which local players have no control. An example is the abduction on 7 February 2023 of Phillip Mehrtens, a pilot for Susi Air in subdistrict Paro, Nduga. The response of the Jokowi government, which was to saturate the area with troops, not only undermined any serious effort at negotiation but also disrupted local initiatives such as the relative peace in Lanny Jaya, Nduga's neighbour.

The head of the group that took Mehrtens hostage was 24-year-old Egianus Kogoya, the same commander whose men had executed the construction workers in Nduga in 2018. He declared that he would only release Mehrtens if Indonesia accepted Papuan independence.

At the outset, Coordinating Minister Mahfud MD said the government would prioritise a "persuasive" approach with the help of local actors, and that the pilot's safety was paramount.⁴⁹ The government still surrounded the area with troops, both from the TNI and the paramilitary police, Brimob. It prepared a shortlist of candidates to facilitate direct communication with the insurgents, but many on the list were reluctant to play any role with the military hovering in the background. Some believed that the central government was not in full control of the various military and paramilitary units it deployed; others said it had become too difficult to distinguish between genuine insurgents and government infiltrators.⁵⁰ Theo van den Broek, a naturalised Indonesian who helped successfully negotiate the release of two Belgians taken hostage by the OPM in Ilaga, Puncak in 2001, noted that in 2001, the police kept the military away and actively helped negotiators communicate with the captors. The Jokowi government was clearly not prepared to envision a solution that did not involve military pressure, however much Mahfud insisted on persuasion. This meant that Mehrtens became in effect a life insurance policy for Egianus, and there was little incentive to release him.

As negotiations stalled, the military deployed more forces, preparing for a hostage rescue operation. In late February 2023, Egianus Kogoya fled to Lanny Jaya, which borders Nduga, to seek protection from Purom Wenda, the commander of TPNPB Kodap "Kuyawage."⁵¹ Purom set strict conditions for Egianus's presence. He and his men reportedly had to transfer the custody of Mehrtens to Purom's group. They were not allowed to operate independently or stay there indefinitely.⁵² Egianus returned to Nduga with Mehrtens sometime in April. He

⁴⁹ "Mahfud MD: Aparat Persuasif Bebaskan Pilot Susi Air di Papua," *cnnindonesia.com*, 16 February 2023.

⁵⁰ Theo Hesegem, a human rights activist based in Wamena, said that it has becoming difficult to distinguish the Kodap Nduga insurgents from pro-government militias or non-uniformed special forces. IPAC interview with Theo Hesegem, Wamena, 23 September 2023.

⁵¹ "TNI-Polri Duduki Nduga, Egianus Kogoya Diyakini Bawa Kapten Philip ke Wilayah Lain," *Kompas.com*, 23 February 2023.

⁵² The interaction between Egianus Kogoya and Purom Wenda illustrates the autonomous nature of the TPNPB regional commands (Kodap). Neither was in touch with or sought instructions from the men who are ostensibly head of the TPNPB chain of command, Goliat Tabuni (since 2012 the 'national chief commander' but mostly inactive) and Lekagak Telenggen, the national operational commander. Neighbouring Kodap commanders may conduct joint operations on an ad hoc basis without merging their forces into a single unit.

split his forces and transferred the hostage to another group in a different location, forcing the security forces into a wild goose chase for months.⁵³

The military's search operation in Nduga suffered devastating setbacks. On 15 April, the TPNPB ambushed a 36-member joint Kopassus-Kostrad unit in Mugi subdistrict, resulting in its almost complete annihilation.⁵⁴ The initial internal report disseminated by the military stated that six soldiers were killed, nine captured, and 21 missing in action.⁵⁵ TPNPB claimed that it had killed the nine soldiers and captured sixteen.⁵⁶ The Kopassus unit had reportedly acted on its own, hoping that a successful rescue of Mehrstens would be a fitting birthday present for the Kopassus anniversary on 16 April.

On 2 May, the Kodap Nduga released a statement claiming that they had executed twelve of the sixteen soldiers they captured and seized their equipment.⁵⁷ On 30 May, TPNPB ambushed another joint special forces unit (Paro Operation Taskforce) in Paro subdistrict, killing three and injuring three others.⁵⁸ Three commanding officers from Papua regional military bases were sacked immediately because of two disasters.⁵⁹

The government tried to persuade Kodap Nduga to accept hefty ransom payments, but Egianus would not budge. His brother, Penme Kogoya, was not so scrupulous and reportedly set a price of Rp.5 billion (\$322,062) to release Mehrstens, without Egianus's knowledge. He then pocketed a downpayment of Rp. 1 billion (\$64,412) given by the Nduga caretaker bupati, Edison Gwijangge. Egianus was said to have been so angry that the brothers got into a fistfight.⁶⁰

The dispute over ransom payments seemed to have only hardened Egianus Kogoya's resolve, and whatever internal discord there was within the group was already resolved by the time a new video update on Mehrstens was released on 26 May 2023.⁶¹ In the video, Egianus threatened to kill the pilot within two months if the government did not comply with his political demands. The government ignored the threat, amid growing signs of a military losing patience with the standoff, and insinuations from some senior officials with no knowledge of

⁵³ A human rights NGO in Papua, Aliansi Demokrasi untuk Papua (ALDP) released an annual report on the status of human rights violations and non-organic troops deployment in Papua. The report estimated that a total 10,250 troops were deployed to Papua in 2023. However, information on the number of troops in Nduga after the kidnapping is less clear because it involved special forces units. The only available information was the number of regular units such as the Police Brimob and Army Infantry Raider battalions: 400 soldiers from Raider GT/321 (22 July 2022); 450 soldiers from Raider Battalion 321/GT (deployed in 22 July 2022); 400 soldiers from Raider Battalion RK 751/VJS (17 June 2023). See ALDP, "Laporan Situasi Umum Hak Asasi Manusia Tahun 2023 di Papua," 19 January 2024.

⁵⁴ "Panglima Ungkap 36 Prajurit TNI Diserang KKB di Nduga: 4 Hilang, 4 Luka-luka," *detik.com*, 18 April 2023.

⁵⁵ The TNI chief, Navy Admiral Yudo Margono, tried to conceal the number of casualties by falsely stating that only one soldier died, based on the number of bodies that the military could retrieve. However, a picture of a room with four coffins guarded by soldiers was leaked to the media and forced the TNI headquarters to retract their statement.

⁵⁶ "TPNPB-OPM Klaim Tembak Mati 9 Prajurit TNI Nduga Papua," *tempo.co*, 16 April 2023.

⁵⁷ "TPNPB-OPM Beberkan bukti Rampasan Senjata Hasil Penyerangan di Mugi, Nduga," *seputarpapua.com*, 3 May 2023.

⁵⁸ The casualties were from different military special forces unit: three soldiers from Kopassus counterterrorism unit 81 Taskforce, 1 soldier from Kopassus Group 1 (Para Commando), and 1 soldier from the Air Force Bravo 90 Detachment. "Tiga Prajurit TNI Kembali Tewas Dalam Kontak Tembak lawan KKB di Nduga Papua, Dua Jenazah Dievakuasi ke RSUD Mimika," *fajarpapua.com*, 1 June 2023.

⁵⁹ "Momen Pergantian Tiga Komandan TNI di Papua Usai Penyerangan KKB di Nduga," *Kompas.com*, 5 May 2023.

⁶⁰ "Polda Papua Sebut KKB Minta Tebusan Rp 5 Miliar untuk Pembebasan Pilot Susi Air," *tempo.co*, 30 June 2023. Also, IPAC interview with Frits Ramandey, Jayapura, 19 September 2023.

⁶¹ "Separatists in Indonesia's Papua threaten to shoot New Zealand hostage if they are denied talks," *Reuters*, 27 May 2023.

the situation that Mehrstens had “Stockholm syndrome” (though one referred to it as “Oslo syndrome”) and had joined the rebels.⁶²

The crisis surrounding the hostage-taking also led to several high-profile murders of civil society activists who wanted to help with Mehrstens’ release. In the case of Michele Kurisi, who was stabbed to death near the Nduga-Lanny Jaya border on 28 August 2023, there are strong opinions as to who the perpetrators were but no conclusive evidence. Her death, however, does reveal a negotiation strategy hatched by provincial intelligence (Kabinda) which could only be counterproductive, likely making Egianus less willing to talk to any negotiators for fear they would be government agents.

Many independence supporters believe Michele was killed by the TPNPB or a political affiliate for collaborating with state intelligence, and indeed she came from a family that historically sided with the Indonesian government.⁶³ Her relatives offered a different perspective, however.⁶⁴ They believe that she was the victim of a botched attempt by Kabinda to negotiate with Egianus Kogoya for Mehrstens’ release.⁶⁵ To approach Egianus, she set up a humanitarian project for displaced civilians in the Nduga capital, Kenyam, hoping that through them, she would find a way to contact the rebel commander.⁶⁶ In July 2023, however, locals discovered her affiliation with intelligence and asked her to leave.⁶⁷ In August 2023, she tried an alternative route to Nduga via Lanny Jaya, where she also hoped that by promising new homes for displaced Nduga residents who lived in temporary shelters in Lanny Jaya, she would find a way to Egianus.⁶⁸

While she was in Lanny Jaya, photos of Michelle with high-ranking police and intelligence officers were leaked on social media. On 16 August, she was stopped by KNPB activists in Tiom, the kabupaten capital. They warned her to leave and not return to Lanny Jaya or else her life would be in danger. She did not heed the message. On 26 September, she went back to Tiom to deliver four pigs to a person affiliated with Egianus’s group and promised to deliver more pigs in the following days. On 28 August, she departed from Wamena to Tiom, but she was murdered before reaching her destination. Her body was buried a hundred metres away from the road near subdistrict Kolawa, Lanny Jaya.

Her murder was still unresolved as of early 2024. Police arrested four members of the Baliem Barat branch of the West Papua National Committee (Komite Nasional Papua Barat, KNPB) for the murder.⁶⁹ KNPB itself said the four men were not active members, but rather passive

⁶² “Pengamat nilai Pemerintah Indonesia tak akan penuhi tuntutan KKB,” *ANTARA*, 18 March 2023.

⁶³ “Kejanggalan Pembunuhan Aktivistis Perempuan Papua, Benarkah Michelle Anggota Intelijen,” *republika.co.id*, 2 September 2023.

⁶⁴ IPAC interview with Michele Kurisi Doga’s relative in Wamena, 24 September 2023.

⁶⁵ Michele Kurisi’s family has significant political influence in the Baliem Valley, Jayawijaya. Her great-grandfather, Silo Doga, was one of the signatories to the Act of Free Choice in 1969. Apparently, he was so impressed with President Soekarno that he renamed his tribal land to “Silo Karno Doga”, which has now become a subdistrict in Jayawijaya. Michele’s grandfather, Alex Doga, is the current tribal chief and the leading figure for the pro-government association “Barisan Merah Putih” in Jayawijaya. “Cucu Kepala Suku Besar Lembah Baliem Itu, Harus Berpulang dengan Tragis,” *seputarpapua.com*, 1 September 2023.

⁶⁶ “Sebelum Dibunuh KKB, Aktivistis Michelle Kurisi Disebut Sedang Mendata Pengungsi di Nduga,” *Kompas.com*, 4 September 2023.

⁶⁷ Before her death, Michele appeared in a popular Youtube podcast channel, explaining her humanitarian work in Nduga and how she got expelled. Youtube link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1UsgZl_MJc&t=507s

⁶⁸ In 2019, Lanny Jaya regency reported that there were 779 IDPs from Nduga who sought refuge in Kuyawage and Wano Barat districts. “Pemkab Lanny Jaya data jumlah pengungsi Nduga di wilayahnya,” *ANTARA*, 9 October 2019.

⁶⁹ “Tiga anggota KNPB diduga bunuh aktivis perempuan ditangkap aparat,” *ANTARA*, 9 October 2023.

supporters who had been coopted by intelligence and used to get rid of Michele because she was no longer useful. Her family believes that she was betrayed by her own team because she failed to meet the intelligence deadline for contacting Egianus and had already used up too much money.⁷⁰ There is no information on who drove and accompanied Michele to Lanny Jaya for the last time. Regardless of who killed her, it was foolhardy of provincial intelligence to attempt to use a young woman from a known pro-government family to try to establish communications with Egianus when tensions were running so high.

The hostage situation has altered the usual dynamics of conflict in Papua by bringing a substantial number of new troops to Papua who appear to be itching for action. At the same time, it has been clear from the beginning that any military operation to rescue Mehrtens would almost certainly result in his death and the death of many civilians in the area. In late 2023 and early 2024, local contacts were somewhat optimistic. Mehrtens appeared to be in reasonable health somewhere in Nduga; troops were on standby but not actively chasing the men pursuing him; and the caretaker bupati of Nduga was believed to be in communication with the TPNPB. It remains to be seen whether the situation will improve or deteriorate under a new president.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

A new government coming in may want to put its own stamp on Papua, but instead of trying any big, bold moves to “solve” the Papuan conflict, it should encourage local initiatives to reduce violence and civilian casualties. It should provide incentives to local officials to maintain the peace, including through regular communication with the TPNPB and a “live and let live” approach.

It should avoid any hot pursuit policy which tries to chase independence fighters into areas where they are not in control or have no access to communication or basic goods. The only hope of managing conflict is to ensure that government soldiers and insurgents keep their distance from each other, and that both avoid preying on the civilian population.

At some point, it may be possible to talk of Papua-wide solutions, but not now. For the last twenty years, the conflict has only grown worse, and the last ten years in particular have seen an escalation of violence, despite huge amounts of money and huge numbers of troops sent in. The goal now should be to scale back violence on all sides, and that means starting at a local level, with knowledgeable people, at a kabupaten or subdistrict level, coming up with workable plans for dealing with the various parties involved – one Kodap on the TPNPB side, for example.

It would be useful for an independent organisation to do a new assessment of the costs of ongoing conflict at a local level – not the cost to the state, but the burden placed on local government.

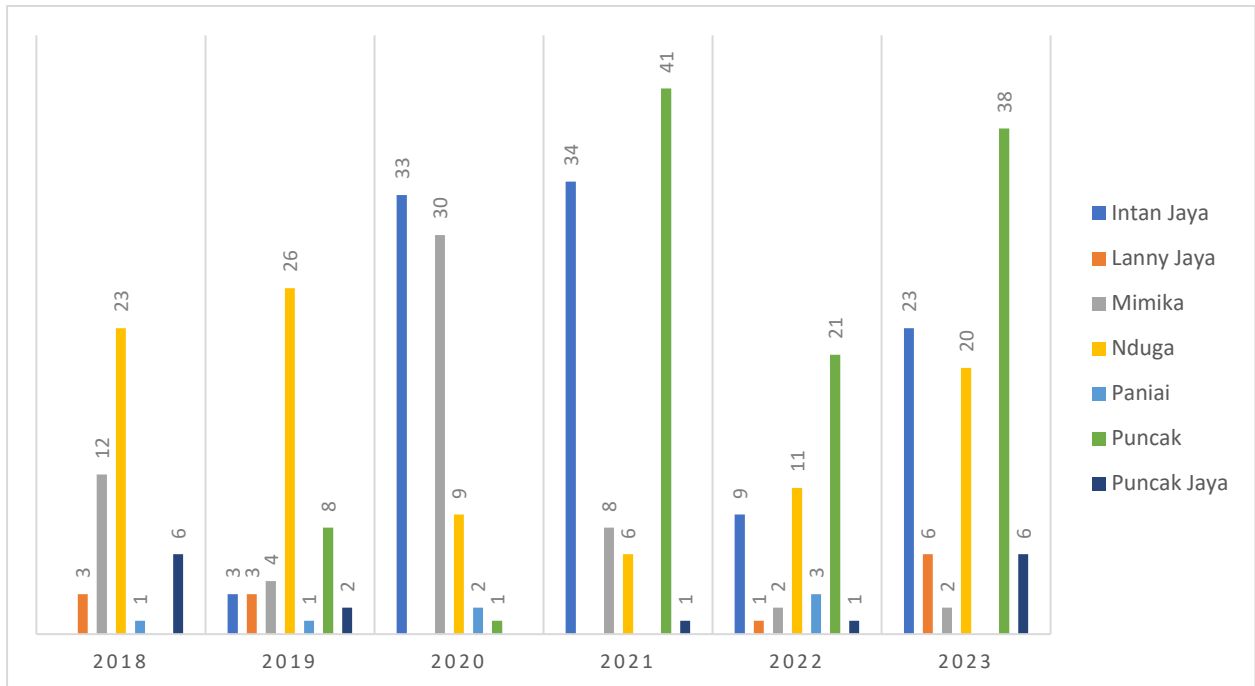
⁷⁰ “Komnas HAM Papua: Ada anggota TNI yang diduga terkait pembunuhan Michelle Kurisi,” *jubi.id*, 20 October 2023.

Local initiatives also need to identify constructive “influencers”, particularly in church and adat organisations, who can talk to all sides and find pragmatic solutions that will keep violence to a minimum.

The conflict in Papua has grown demonstrably worse on President Jokowi’s watch. His successor needs to reverse that trend.

Appendix I

Armed violence in Paniai, Lanny Jaya and surrounding *kabupaten*



Note: The incidents covered include “battles,” “explosions/remote violence”, and “violence against civilians” in the Papuan highlands between 1 January 2018 and 8 December 2023. The data is extracted from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

Appendix II

TPNPB expansion since 2020

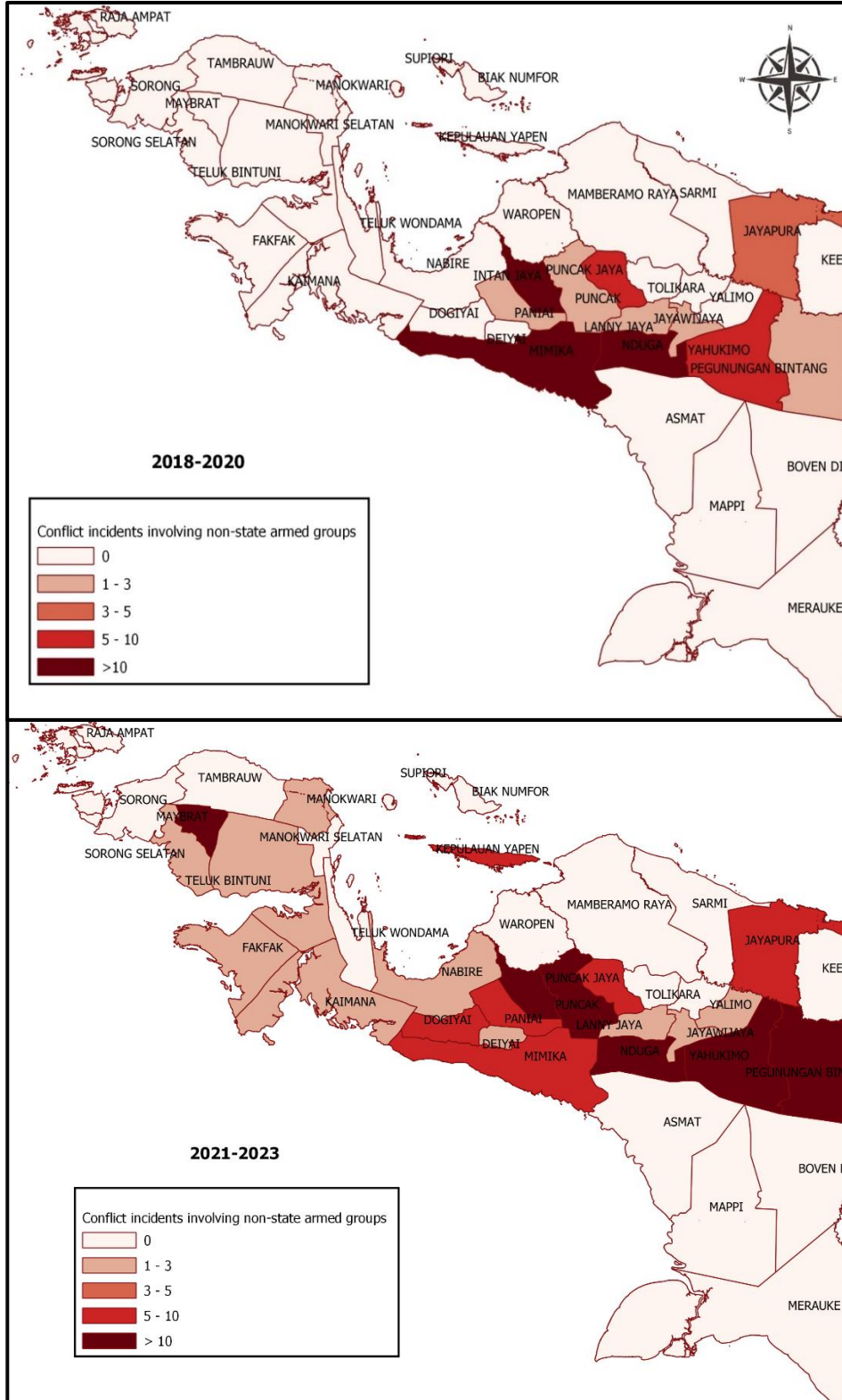
Year	Group name	Kabupaten	Notes
2020	Kodap IV Sorong Raya	Maybrat and Teluk Bintuni (Southwest Papua)	<p>Kodap IV Sorong Raya was formed sometime in 2020 in Maybrat. Some of the leading members were originally political activists from the West Papua National Committee (KNPB) chapters in Aifat areas, Maybrat. It was involved in several attacks in Teluk Bintuni, targeting migrants, security forces and local companies' assets. It also led the attack in Kisor, Aifat Selatan in 2021 (see p. 5) In December 2023, the group claimed to have killed 4 soldiers in two separate incidents.</p> <p>Notable figures: Denny Mos (regional commander), Arnold Kocu (operational commander) and Manfred Fatem (deputy operational commander).</p>
2020	Kodap XII Kegepa Nipo Paniai	Paniai (Central Papua)	<p>Kodap XII Paniai was officially established in May 2021, but members were involved in a 2020 attack on Brimob and stole three firearms in Bogobaida, Paniai. They torched a subdistrict office in Paniai Utara in September 2022 and a kabupaten public works office in December 2023.</p> <p>Notable figure: Matius Gobai (regional commander)</p>
2021	Kodap XXXI, Noukai, Deiyai	Deiyai (Central Papua)	<p>Kodap Deiyai claimed responsibility for killing a migrant in Wagete in June 2022. Kodap Deiyai is also suspected of setting fire to Wagete market on 12 December 2022 that resulted in the destruction of 50 kiosks and houses.</p> <p>Notable figure: John Badii (regional commander)</p>
2022	Kodap XI Odiyai, Dogiyai	Dogiyai (Central Papua)	<p>Kodap Dogiyai allegedly responsible for a string of arson attacks in May 2023 on migrant-owned market stalls and houses in Kamuu and Mapia. It claimed responsibility for torching the bupati's office on 8 April 2023, and Dogiyai public works office on 31 December 2023.</p> <p>Notable figure: Yonatan Makituma Pigai (regional commander)</p>
2022	Kodap XXXV Bintang Timur	Pegunungan Bintang (Highland Papua)	<p>This is the second of three commands set up in Pegunungan Bintang, after Kodap XV, Ngalum Kupel was set up in 2019. It was personally inaugurated by the TPNPB spokesman, Sebby Sambom, who secretly entered Pegunungan</p>

			<p>Bintang in December 2022. It has been responsible for shootings of TNI, police, and planes about to land in Oksibil, and arson around Oksibil and Serambakon. In October 2023, security forces raided the Kodap base in Serambakon, killing five combatants and seizing three firearms.</p> <p>Notable figure: Ananias Mimin (regional commander)</p>
2022	Kodap XXXVI Oktahin	Pegunungan Bintang (Highland Papua)	<p>This third Kodap was established at the same time as the second, in December 2022. It reportedly transferred Rp.1.9 billion to OPM political representative in Papua New Guinea, Jeffrey Bomanak, to purchase firearms but Bomanak never delivered, prompting the TPNPB to denounce Jeffrey as not part of the OPM.⁷¹ As of early 2024, no links to armed violence.</p> <p>Notable figure: Enos Awolmabin (regional commander)</p>
2022	Kodap XII Kaimana	Kaimana (West Papua)	<p>Information first appeared after members held a ceremony on 23 March 2022 declaring allegiance to Goliat Tabuni and readiness to implement the TPNPB's war strategy declared in January 2018. As of early 2024, no links to armed violence.</p> <p>Notable figure: Marten Murmana (regional commander)</p>

⁷¹ "TPNPB Tidak Akui Jeffrey Pagawak Sebagai Ketua OPM," tempo.co, 12 August 2023.

Appendix III

Expansion of insurgency-related violence in Papua



INSTITUTE FOR POLICY ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT (IPAC)

The Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) was founded in 2013 on the principle that accurate analysis is a critical first step toward preventing violent conflict. Our mission is to explain the dynamics of conflict—why it started, how it changed, what drives it, who benefits—and get that information quickly to people who can use it to bring about positive change.

In areas wracked by violence, accurate analysis of conflict is essential not only to peaceful settlement but also to formulating effective policies on everything from good governance to poverty alleviation. We look at six kinds of conflict: communal, land and resource, electoral, vigilante, extremist, and insurgent, understanding that one dispute can take several forms or progress from one form to another. We send experienced analysts with long-established contacts in the area to the site to meet with all parties, review primary written documentation where available, check secondary sources and produce in-depth reports, with policy recommendations or examples of best practices where appropriate.

We are registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs in Jakarta as the Foundation for Preventing International Crises (Yayasan Penanggulangan Krisis Internasional); our website is www.understandingconflict.org.
