

# Presidential Elections in Papua: A Battle Between 'New' and 'Old'?



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Presidential elections will be held in Indonesia on 9 July 2014. The two candidates seem to offer a choice that Papuans have not previously encountered in an election: between the old military guard and a new face of populist leadership. Following Richard Chauvel (2011, 106),

Papua has become a battle ground in a struggle between a 'new' and an 'old' Indonesia. The 'old' Indonesia considers that its soldiers' torturing fellow Indonesian citizens in a most barbaric manner is an 'incident'. The 'new' Indonesia aspires to the ideals of its original founders in becoming a progressive outward looking cosmopolitan, multi ethnic and multi faith society. The influence of 'old' Indonesia has made Papua the exception to many of the nationwide processes of democratisation.

This *In Brief* describes some of the forces at play in the presidential election in Papua, including various calls for a [boycott](#) by [separatist/nationalist](#) organisations that want Papuans to agitate for self-determination rather than legitimise a colonial state, as well as [student groups](#) and [district-level officials](#) who have grievances regarding the legislative elections that took place in April 2014. It suggests that the contest between 'new' and 'old' can be seen not so much in the choice between two very different candidates but rather in the choice by government officials to support a militarised electoral process rather than a civilian effort to manage the election and promote voting.

Edward Aspinall writes, '[the two candidates ... embody very different aspects of Indonesia's recent political history](#)'. The leading presidential candidate, Joko Widodo (commonly referred to as Jokowi), is the innovative governor of Jakarta who gained reputation and public support for his fresh ideas and tactics for social development. Jokowi made history in June 2014 as the first presidential candidate to ever campaign in Papua. [Jokowi has said](#) that campaigning in Papua reflects his concern

for Papua, which is 'remote' (*terpencil*) but should not feel 'isolated' (*terkucil*).

The other candidate, Prabowo Subianto (popularly known as Prabowo), is a former military general (and former son-in-law of autocrat Suharto), who is suspected to have committed/facilitated [human rights violations](#) in Jakarta, East Timor and Papua (see Van Klinken 2014 and Hernawan 2014). As a former Special Forces (*Kopassus*) commander in Papua, he is reported to have been involved in violence against civilians in Mapenduma (1996) and Wamena (1977).

While the two candidates seem to have little in common, commentators have pointed out that Jokowi also has [many high-ranking military officers as supporters](#), and that neither candidate has discussed a political settlement of Papuan grievances or the need for dialogue regarding the conflict (Hernawan 2014).

My Papuan colleagues speak of ongoing feelings of 'trauma' in relation to Prabowo and *Kopassus*, and their reading of public opinion is that Jokowi is the more palatable choice between the two candidates. He represents the sort of democratic progression that has not yet been achieved in Papua. Also, Jokowi's wife, Iriana, is named after Papua province (formerly called Irian Jaya), where her grandfather taught school for a time. In a country where political leaders are almost exclusively Javanese, even a minor connection to a candidate offers Papuans a chance to read a touch of their history and present-day realities in what is normally distant national politics.

Unfortunately, many Papuans are disillusioned with Indonesian and Papuan leadership and may not see a more democratic future with either Jokowi or Prabowo. Among them are the young, educated men and women who came of age as the 'Papuan Spring' — a period of relative openness after the fall of Suharto — came to an end and increasingly repressive tactics returned (Chauvel 2011). These are the youth who have endured the failure of

the government's Special Autonomy solution (see Bertrand 2014), which has created resentment and internal divisions. Papuan institutions they supported have also been challenged over the past decade — from the Papua Presidium Council, which gradually dissolved after the assassination of leader Theys Eluay by *Kopassus*, to the Papua Peoples' Assembly, which has faced numerous challenges to its (limited) mandate to promote Papuan culture and rights, and the Papua Customary Council, whose chairman, Forkorus Yaboisembut, was convicted of treason in 2012 for his role in organising the third Papuan Peoples' Congress.

My own research has documented how, during the 2000s, a groups of highland university students lost their sense of enthusiasm and optimism that an emerging generation of educated Papuans could improve social and political conditions in the troubled region (Munro 2013; 2009). In thinking about how the presidential race might look to some of these young men and women, I suspect that their aspirations for democratisation have been further eroded by the way that the election process in Papua has been militarised and politicised, with those calling for a boycott, for example, branded as 'provocateurs' and 'security threats'.

Ten thousand police officers will be providing security in the lead up to the election in designated areas: Jayapura (the provincial capital), throughout the highlands and along the border with Papua New Guinea. These are areas where Papua Police Commissioner, Tito Karnavian, says there are 'ideologies that depart from the ideologies of the Indonesian state'. Three thousand of those police officers will provide 'logistical support' while an additional five thousand military personnel will 'support' the police. Images of army commanders shepherding ballot boxes through the jungle have peppered media coverage.

A build-up of security forces heading into remote areas and the targeting of non-state ideologies seems to reflect the practices of the 'old' Indonesia, and are actions that are unlikely to impress either those Papuans who believe that engaging in the democratic process of electing

Jokowi for president might represent a step towards a 'new' Papua, or those who find little reason to engage in the election in the first place.

In Papua, it is not necessarily the presidential candidates who reflect the battle between 'old' and 'new' Indonesia. Rather, it is the election process itself. Re-engaging with critical, educated youth is essential to achieving the aims of a 'new' Indonesia in Papua, and doing so demands a consideration of process and context, not just form and results. Working towards a demilitarised electoral space, particularly by engaging civil society organisations rather than security forces in election activities, is an important way that the government and development partners can promote the sort of democratisation that may build confidence and optimism among Papuans.

### Author Notes

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