

This In Brief considers Indonesian President Joko Widodo's policy actions in Papua. It demonstrates that over the past few months of the new presidency, the rhetoric on Papua has not matched the reality of policy changes and political moves taking place. It concludes that whether the president is deliberately misleading Papuans or powerless to implement progressive changes, he is contributing to tensions amid a military build-up that could spell disaster.

Responding to calls for media freedom in Papua, the president, popularly referred to as Jokowi, announced in May 2015 that foreign journalists would no longer require special permits to visit Papua/West Papua, and that he had informed all the relevant ministers and officials, including the military, of his decision.<sup>1</sup> Yet within a day of the announcement, two ministers and a high-ranking military official made pronouncements contradicting Jokowi's decision, effectively stating permits would still be required, and that journalist's content would have to be screened to ensure 'balanced' reporting in line with '[codes of conduct](#)'. More recently, Jokowi announced an end to the controversial transmigration program that sees mainly Javanese farmers relocated to Papua and contributes to a feeling among Papuans of becoming a minority in their own land. But again his ministers publicly contradicted his announcement. These incidents affirmed that there are divergent interests and agendas at work in Indonesian politics.

Jokowi came to his presidential campaign with a reputation for being a humble problem-solver during his time as governor of Jakarta. He turned his attention to Papua, perhaps naively, as a problem worth solving. After making history as the first presidential candidate to open his campaign in Papua, Jokowi spoke of the need for a new era of openness. His attention to the region left some Papuans and others thinking that he could generate [some progress](#) on longstanding grievances. Yet after winning the election, he appointed Ryamizard Ryacudu, a former general, as Minister of Defense

and signed off [on far-reaching security policies](#). These new policies take the military into more regions of Papua/West Papua, in greater numbers, with permanent bases, and with less oversight from Jakarta — exactly the opposite of what most analysts say is needed to overcome abuses of power (e.g. Human Rights Watch 2007). Jokowi also failed to address an incident that occurred in Papua mere weeks after he took his oath when [unarmed school students were reportedly shot by police](#) during a protest against military abuses. Hopes in Jokowi were, for many, dashed, as police began to deny involvement, and there was only silence from the president, affirming what many Papuans had said during the election: that no Indonesian politician would ever really stand up for them.

Jokowi acknowledged Papuans' feelings of marginalisation within the nation during the 2014 election campaign (Munro 2014). Yet he and Foreign Minister Marsudi then spent the first few months of his presidency challenging Papuans' claims to Melanesian cultural identity, arguing that Papuans have no special relationship to Melanesia; rather, there are about 9.5 million other Melanesians in Indonesia. This claim emerged as the government redoubled its efforts to thwart [Papuans' bid for member status in the Melanesian Spearhead Group](#) (MSG) — an informal regional organisation in which several member states support Papuan independence. Instead, Jokowi proposed that Indonesia's '[five Melanesian provinces](#)' bid together for member status under Indonesia. Jokowi and Marsudi campaigned against the bid by the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) in the Pacific, [dropping millions in 'aid' promises](#) in several MSG countries. Indonesia must be deeply concerned about the prospect of the ULMWP gaining political recognition from the MSG, because politicians such as Jokowi are suddenly eager to embrace the Melanesian heritage that is often the butt of racist taunts and discriminatory practices in Indonesia (Munro 2015).

These actions do not seem to fit the pattern of a president who is powerless or naïve. Rather, they show a continuation of practices towards Papua that say one thing and do another, even if Jokowi is bent on saying and doing more than his predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Contradiction, or, some might say, duplicity, continues to define Indonesian governance in Papua, especially in matters of decentralisation (Chauvel 2011) and development (Stasch 2015). There are government officials, such as Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Tedjo Edhy Purdijatno, who continue to argue that Indonesia is implementing a [‘welfare’ policy](#) in Papua, not a ‘security’ policy, in the face of potent evidence to the contrary, including statements [from within the military](#). But these sorts of views are not contradictory if government officials actually believe in the myth of Indonesian benevolence in Papua. Recent comments concerning media freedom similarly reflect this myth, as officials argue that the only real problem in Papua is foreign [journalists looking for bad news](#). There is a reason why ‘straightening out history’ and ‘telling the truth’ are among Papuan activists and scholars foremost political demands (Giay 2000).

In the past, an atmosphere of political contradictions, elevated hopes, and high levels of militarisation contributed to the worst documented clashes between indigenous locals and Indonesian migrants in Papua’s history (Mote and Rutherford 2001). The stakes are high for ULMWP activists and their many supporters who have been working towards political recognition by the MSG, which is set to make a decision in June. Jokowi has been fanning the flames of optimism by visiting Papua, and through announcements on media freedom and transmigration, but he and those around him are also working to advance repression, particularly by expanding military powers, putting pressure on the MSG, and arresting activists. We could give Jokowi the benefit of the doubt, and say that so far his progressive, problem-solving intentions have failed to gain traction because of his lack of political capital, but the end result looks much like a continuing tradition of broken promises,

stirring rhetoric, and duplicitous actions. It is time to look more critically beyond the progress that Jokowi represented when he stood next to rival presidential candidate and former army General Prabowo Subianto. Now, as Jokowi needs to prove his nationalistic, conservative, and pro-security credentials, it seems more likely that Papua is helping him than the other way around.

### Author Notes

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### Endnotes

1. Critics say that the permit requirement, coupled with intimidation and detention of journalists, has been used to enforce a *de facto* ban on foreign media in Papua.

### References

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