

## In solidarity with West Papua



The West Papuans want their freedom...  
“Merdeka!!” “Freedom!!” they cry.

West Papua, the western half of the island of New Guinea, has been under Indonesian rule since 1961. For over fifty years the West Papuan people, who are geographically separate and ethnically distinct from Indonesians, have been demanding their independence; open displays of defiance, however, come at great personal cost (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/23/west-papuans-face-jail-banned-flag>).

### Background

In 1961, Indonesia initiated several military incursions into the territory of West Papua, and threatened invasion. Fearing that the aggression might turn the Indonesian nation towards communism, the United States sponsored talks between the Netherlands (the former colonist) and Indonesia. The outcome of the talks, the *New York Agreement*, gave Indonesia control over West New Guinea on the understanding that a referendum of self-determination would be conducted by 1969. Under article 17 of the agreement, all Papuan adults had the right to vote in the election. Prior to the ballot, the Indonesian government selected just over a thousand Papuan men to vote in the *Act of free choice*. Allegedly representing their 800,000 fellow West Papuans, and under threat themselves, they voted *publically* and unanimously to remain with Indonesia. The United Nations upheld the vote.

### Current-day situation

Pressure is building in the Pacific in support of West Papuan independence; at the same time, Indonesia, the largest economy in South East Asia and a member of the G20 major economies, is pushing to develop its international relationships in the region.

This month, the Indonesian president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, opened the second summit of the Pacific Islands Development Forum, in Fiji. Such a high-profile president at such a low-key event has led some in the region to question the real reasons behind his attendance. The general secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), Revd. Francois Pihaatae, quoted in the Fiji Times, asked whether such a critical point had been reached in the level of support for West Papuan independence that the Indonesian government saw it necessary for a high-level visit to the region.

Equally, others have responded to the presidential visit by seeing the chance to speak out in solidarity with the West Papuans.

The church has been especially vocal.

### **Mounting support for West Papua**

Spokesperson for the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma, Revd. James Bhagwan, said: “we support the call for the end of human rights abuses in Tanah Papua, for their social, economic and political empowerment and for self-determination. We stand in solidarity with our brothers, sisters and children of Tanah Papua. We have received their cry and we will echo it and speak this truth to power.” Anglican Archbishop of Polynesia, The Most Revd. Dr. Winston Halapua, added that the time for complacency on West Papua was over: “They are part of us.”

The visit of the Indonesian president also provided the opportunity for visual expressions of solidarity. The Fiji women’s crisis centre in Suva, located opposite the Indonesian Embassy, was adorned with a bold, hand-written ‘Free West Papua’ banner along its most prominent railings, and the youth members of staff of the Pacific Conference of Churches and the Pacific Network of Globalisation launched the pro-democracy WE BLEED BLACK AND RED campaign in support of their West Papuan sisters and brothers.



For the campaign, everyone is encouraged to wear black and red each Wednesday – black, to symbolise life, and red, the blood, shed over the half century of struggle. Black and red ribbon badges were also distributed to represent the West Papuan flag of independence, the Morning Star.

**Methodist Church Supports West Papua:** (L to R) Revd. Jerry Waqainabete, Superintendent Wesley Division; Revd. Dr. Immanuel Reuben, Superintendent Indian Division; Revd. Dr. Epineri Vakadewavosa, Acting General Secretary and Mr. Livai Tuisaravere, Methodist Church Trust Secretary wear their West Papua Solidarity ribbon. Photo: Revd. James Bhagwan.



Some very high profile Methodist ministers donned the badges in support, and one Facebook entrant upon seeing the photo on the homepage of the Methodist Church declared: “The Methodist Church rocks, I’m going back to church!”

Last night, it was reported that police intelligence officers in Fiji were on alert against further protests – the Indonesian Embassy was considered a likely target for future demonstrations.

**Prayer Points:**

- Pray for all who live under oppression and whose freedom of expression is controlled.
- Pray for all who yearn democracy, and struggle for independence from a political power.
- Give thanks for the solidarity shown towards the people of West Papua in the Pacific region and the wider world.
- Pray for the activism of young people and for their continued engagement and support in the West Papuan struggle.
- Pray for the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma that it may continue to speak truth to power.
- Openly support a campaign that you feel passionate about, and give thanks for the ability to do so unhindered and without fear.
- Wear black and red each Wednesday.

