

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Jason MacLeod:**

### **Merdeka and the Morning Star:**

### **Civil Resistance in West Papua**

*St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2015, pp. 304.*

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There are still a lot of people around the world that live under colonization and struggle for their self-determination. Major historical anticolonial process started after the Second World War and its ghosts are situated in a distant memory. The more familiar people among the ones living under such constraints are the Tibetans, Palestinians, and the Kurdish people; but, there are many others, less well known ones, for example: the Saharawis in Western Sahara, colonized by Morocco; or the Papuans in West Papua, colonized by Indonesia. In *Merdeka and the Morning Star: Civil Resistance in West Papua* (2015, by University of Queensland Press), Dr. Jason MacLeod gives us an account that is simultaneously a case study of the particular circumstances of the Papuan struggle, and a general outline on how nonviolent self-determination struggles can be conducted effectively.

MacLeod is an activist-scholar that for over two decades has devoted himself to explore the options of a self-determination struggle in West Papua against the occupying Indonesian regime. He shares with us his experiences of working together with Papuans over the years in numerous workshops and meetings. From his readings of a vast range of research literature in different fields (self-determination, West Papua/Indonesia, civil resistance, revolution, regime change, culture, etc.) MacLeod creatively develops different models of possible unarmed methods and strategies, and makes summaries of strengths and weaknesses of the current Papuan struggle.

West Papua is situated on the western part of a large island, north-east of Australia, where mountains divide two nations. Papua New Guinea constitutes the eastern part. In West Papua 1.5 million people from

several different indigenous groups live in highlands and lowland areas, as well as on surrounding small islands. Papuans were colonized by the Dutch in 1848 and became part of Indonesia in 1963 when Indonesia liberated itself. West Papua was formally recognized 1969 as a part of Indonesia by the international community after a rigged “Act of Free Choice” (named “Act of No Choice” by Papuans), where representatives of the Papuans were violently intimidated to make a public vote to belong to Indonesia, a process that was shamefully supervised by a passive and ignorant United Nations (p. 52-4).

### **Merdeka is possible through popular civil resistance**

MacLeod argues that self-determination á la ‘Merdeka’ (the Papuan version of freedom) is possible, but he recognizes all the obstacles, including those that arise from weaknesses of the Papuan struggle. MacLeod argues that diplomacy and negotiations in themselves, without a powerful position is meaningless, as they have not and thus will not lead to any meaningful change. However, if combined with an effective resistance that forces the Jakarta government to negotiations, it would make sense. Thus, the key questions are how such a Papuan resistance could be mustered and what characteristics it needs in order to constitute enough pressure. So far, the armed struggle has proven less than effective, and MacLeod don’t see any prospects for it to become more decisive. That path has been tried and failed since 1960. The answer needs to be found somewhere else. MacLeod sees an alternative path through a skilled strategy of unarmed resistance. A key reason for long-term hope is that it is increasingly clear for the younger generation that a struggle that involves broader sectors and higher participation of the Papuans as well as Indonesians in general, is needed. Only nonviolent means of struggle is able to achieve that, claims MacLeod. So, basically the whole book discusses the history of and prospects for civil resistance in West Papua.

### **An overview of the book**

*Merdeka and the Morning Star* expresses MacLeod’s engaged academic approach. It summarizes the theories and methodological perspectives

informing the study, outlines the history of West Papua and the evolution of the root causes that drives the conflict, the existing visions of freedom (“Merdeka”) among Papuans, the history of the Papuan liberation struggle (including a historical chronology of resistance acts), the transformation of armed struggle into unarmed resistance, and a detailed framework of how a nonviolent liberation would be possible. A summary of this version of engaged academia (p. 38, 42) shows how MacLeod approaches his study through a combination of research, pedagogy of solidarity and praxis. I appreciate the details given in the first chapter outlining the radical academic approach based on solidarity with the Papuan liberation dreams informing MacLeod, but 40 pages of methodological reflections would not engage everyone.

Chapter 2 gives the history of colonial rule of the indigenous people in West Papua, how it went from Dutch rule to Indonesian “liberation” in the anticolonial process, and how the UN was deeply complicit through its incompetence in creating the dilemma Papuans now face. MacLeod describes how the *root causes* of the problem of today (p. 56) – systemic injustices and violent repression, resource exploitation, racism, migration and changing demographics, and the historical denial of self-determination – combine with *proximate causes* (p. 69) – such as “corruption and competition between Papuan elites”, “deep suspicion between Papuan moderates and politicians”, “low-level horizontal conflict between Papuans and non-Papuans, between Papuans and Papuans, and between Papuan elites and grassroots” – and amounts to a “slow-motion (cultural) genocide”. As a basis for later discussions of potentials for resistance we also get a comprehensive analysis of the sources of Indonesian domination (based on the power theory of Gene Sharp), which is today maintained through a combination of in-migration from the rest of Indonesia, modernization development that serves migrants and the state, and militarized repression of Papuans. Thus, the dominance of Indonesia is built on external sources that exclude Papuans, something that makes it more difficult for them to make effective resistance. Indonesia is dependent on the territory of West Papua, but not Papuans.

Since every liberation struggle is guided by a vision of how something else is possible, chapter 3 outlines in detail the manifold visions and cultural traditions that underpins the understanding of “merdeka” (free-

dom): self-realization and welfare for all, peace and justice, and cultural resurrection. In chapter 4 MacLeod narrates the history of resistance, with a focus on the period from 1998, the “Papuan Spring” (1998-2001) that started with a brave flag raising of the Papuan independence flag – the Morning Star – that lead to a brutal reaction in the form of the “Biak massacre”, and, eventually to a partial success in the form of the “Special Autonomy” that was granted to West Papua within Indonesia. This was a success since the Indonesian regime felt pressured to give more to the Papuans than what they were originally willing. However, like in so many other similar cases, it looked good on paper but was betrayed in reality. Therefore, the liberation struggle continues. Throughout this chapter it becomes clear that Papuans built their resistance by basing it on a long history of 42 rebellions during the first hundred years from 1850. The more immediate basis of the contemporary wave of resistance is the instructive recreation of a culture of resistance by the performance group Mambosak in the 1970s, which collected and performed traditional songs and dances throughout the region, and inspired a wave of performance groups in the 1980s (p. 122-3). To me it seems this was a key process that facilitated the Papuan identity and self-awareness as a nation. In his more detailed treatment of the current wave of resistance, MacLeod analyses a number of campaigns (several of which he closely investigated over his more than 20 years of focus on West Papua), such as the church-based Land of Peace campaign (that succeeded in undermining sectarian violence mobilizations between groups), and the strong strike waves by the exploited workers at the Freeport gold mine (the biggest tax payer in Indonesia) that lead to substantial improvements, and the vital and powerful mobilization of unity articulated in the Papuan People’s Congress (that eventually in its turn lead to the hopeful broad alliance of different groupings in the unity umbrella of ULMWP formed just recently). MacLeod also engages in a detailed analysis of the fascinating process in which the armed resistance (that has proliferated into several groups, although still small and poorly equipped) transformed into a liberation movement focusing on unarmed resistance. A range of factors explains this complex, multilevel and non-linear transformation in which the focus has changed without that the armed resistance is halted and still receive popular support. In the new Papuan liberation movement

it is a new generation of younger and more urban based activists that has taken the lead and employ a range of civil resistance techniques, but becomes clear from the discussion as it proceeds: is lacking discipline, informed knowledge of civil resistance, a clear strategy and unity that would make it effective. Therefore, MacLeod spends the last chapter outlining in details his proposed framework for a nonviolent liberation of West Papua. MacLeod's hope is then that the newly created unity among different Papuan groups would adopt this strategic framework in their future liberation struggle.

## **How is self-determination through civil resistance possible?**

MacLeod suggests already in the introduction a unique model for self-determination that he advocates, a model he develops throughout the book. It is summarized in a formula: "[mass + momentum] x unity in three domains] + diplomacy + political opportunities = merdeka ('freedom')". "Mass" stands for high levels of participation and broad involvement from social groups, while "momentum" is a matter of skillful application of strategies (grand strategy, goals and objectives, leadership, etc.). This is suggested to be used in order to resist key power sources within three domains that uphold the Indonesian control of West Papua: West Papua, Indonesia, and the international domain. This basis of liberation struggle should then be assisted by active diplomacy (within the different domains) at times of raising political opportunities (as e.g. waves of political opposition and reforms within Indonesia, Indonesian economic crises, changed regional power dynamics, policy changes within superpowers, etc.).

The challenge for West Papuan self-determination is immense, and there is nothing MacLeod shies away from. The fact that Indonesia is seen as a democratic success arising from a regime change in 1998 (due to a basically unarmed uprising of Indonesians), together with the ban on media reporting from the occupied territories, obscure the authoritarian role of its army in West Papua. The weakness of Papuan mobilization is a key problem Macleod tries to address. This weakness is made visible in the form of low levels of participation (less than 3 % of the Papuan

population even during mass campaigns), as well as cautious Papuan political representatives, and a lack of consensus, understanding, and commitment for a clear civil resistance strategy and unity. Furthermore, and perhaps most decisive in the long run, is the high number and speed of migration of non-Papuan groups in to West Papua. The estimations point to Papuans being only about 15 % of the total population already 2030 (p. 228). And lastly, a point that is connected to the previous mentioned obstacles is we have an international community with very little interest that lacks commitment and awareness of the colonial situation of West Papua. UN took West Papua off the list of colonial territories after it gained Special Autonomy status, and there is only one country – Vanuatu – that recognizes West Papua as an independent territory.

The conclusion is therefore that the Papuans have a long way to go before their liberation might be possible. They were not able to utilize the opportunities that arose with the Indonesian democratization in the wake of the popular unarmed revolution of 1998, as East Timor did. But today a new unity seems to develop within the Papuan society, and the armed resistance seems to loose its momentum with a new generation of unarmed liberation warriors. To me, MacLeod's emphasis on the three domains seems to be a key insight, that it is simply not enough to wage a liberation struggle within West Papua. The struggle needs to get force from a strong mobilization within Indonesia and the international community. It is however here I do not feel convinced. I cannot see what it could be that would make Indonesians and the wider international community – both populations and governments – to care enough about Papuans to actually take on a long-term struggle with the Indonesian government and pressure them to concessions. This is perhaps the only section where I think MacLeod should have developed his thoughts a bit more.

### **A major contribution – but aiming for too much**

*Merdeka and the Morning Star* is a comprehensive historical and theoretical analysis of and developed proposal for the liberation struggle of Papuans in West Papua, which is written in an engaged and a personal reflective style. In my view the book provides an account of and serves as a model for us all; a deeply personal-political struggle by an academic to

find options for a colonized people, a model that shows how it is possible with an interdisciplinary engagement with the question of freedom struggles to apply general theories and models on a particular context, and to do that through dialogue and solidarity with the people that are oppressed. The book is a testament of hope and solidarity, and a cry for help to stop the ongoing slow-motion “cultural genocide” of the indigenous people of West Papua that risks virtually slaughtering their culture in a similar way the colonizers of Australia and the US did to the culture of the colonized. The book is rich and engaging, a kind of handbook for both students of West Papua and civil resistance. It gives a contextualized adoption of general theories, and shows a way of how to fruitfully and with sensitivity apply our models of resistance, power, and social change on a specific case.

However, the book has a weakness, but I would refrain from calling it significant. MacLeod tries to do too much at the same time. This is a book that is a report of 20+ years of work for Papuan liberation, a theoretical overview of civil resistance research, a cultural description of the worldview of these indigenous groups, an overview of the history of anticolonial resistance, an analysis of Indonesian exploitation and exercise in domination, as well as a separate study of how armed resistance transforms into civil resistance out of frustration with the huge costs and poor results of war, and a novel suggestion of how self-determination of colonized peoples could be done despite tremendous high odds, and still more. With such varied aims and broad scope it is not surprising that sometimes clarity is lacking. Sometimes it becomes a problem when the text suffers from an unclear structure in which the chronological and analytical approach is mixed (e.g. in the history of civil resistance in chapter 4), and we are quite often burdened with too much details of some events and processes, while sometimes the underlying context is not explained (or comes later), as e.g. when suddenly a ‘Freedom Flo-tilla’ is mentioned, but not explained, or when events are not dated. Still, there is a clear central thread throughout, and MacLeod moves forward in the discussion, focused on the problems and possibilities of liberation through civil resistance, and both the outline of the arguments and perspectives in the introduction and conclusions in each chapter make it easy to follow the main discussion. Thus, the unclear aspects of the text are not a major problem.

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If we had these kinds of case studies of all other self-determination cases in the world, we would have a possibility to make systematic comparisons and develop answers to why this kind of struggle is so much more difficult, both for armed and unarmed struggles. As Jason MacLeod says, we still do not know enough of why self-determination is more difficult than regime change, and there is also clearly not enough research distinguishing between different types of contexts, strategies and outcomes in self-determination struggles. With *Merdeka and the Morning Star* MacLeod has brought us one big step closer towards understanding, while also providing guidance for, liberation movements.

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