



**DEBATE: Should West Papua be independent?
Melbourne University Debating Society v Monash Association of Debaters**

**SAMPARI FORUM FOR WEST PAPUA
ACU ART GALLERY, 26 Brunswick St, Fitzroy (Melbourne)**

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TRANSCRIPT: ZOE BROWN. Second speaker, Negative team

Ladies and Gentlemen, we on the negative side stand against the plight of the West Papuans and against the human rights violations that have been perpetuated against them. But we think that the best way to get more freedom for West Papuans is not by pushing for independence, is not by a violent protracted conflict with Indonesia, but rather by continuing a trend of advocating for change, increasing autonomy in the region, and increasing the power of West Papuans.

I'm going to look at a few things in this speech. I'm firstly going to look at whether West Papuans can simply declare independence and whether a non-violent approach to that is feasible. And secondly I'm going to look at what we think an alternative path is on the negative side for greater freedom and autonomy for West Papuans.

The first to say on this idea of declaring independence is that even though there are legal arguments raised on the affirmative side of the house, a country does not have sovereignty unless other countries recognize that country as sovereign. So even if West Papua is able to declare independence itself, it is ultimately going to rely on the support of the international community in order to ensure that it is a functioning state.

But second to that, even though West Papua has declared independence Indonesia and other countries around it have not shown their support for that independence movement. Nor have they agitated for any peaceful hand-over of power such as posting a referenda for the West Papua people or giving them greater autonomy over their land.

What do we think that means? We think it means that a non-violent approach to declaring independence—maybe while it's the best pathway—is something that is simply infeasible. And there are a number of reasons why Indonesia would never let this happen.

The first is to say that even if it is burdensome to suppress activists, as the affirmative side of the house tells us, West Papua is an incredibly important region geographically and also economically for Indonesia. That's because it has some of the largest natural resources in that particular region. They have one of the largest virgin rainforests in the Asian region. They have huge fish stocks, and they have huge amounts of mineral wealth that Ben has already told you in his first speech. Indonesia is incredibly reliant on the profit in this area, but also the West Papua land, because many islands around Indonesia are close to capacity, which was the justification

for the transmigration program that Ben talked about earlier. That's not to say that we agree with Indonesia exploiting West Papua. It's just to say that there are incredible incentives for Indonesia to hang onto control of that West Papuan region.

We also note that Indonesia has shown in the past that they are not afraid to use violence to crack down on activists, and they are not afraid to use violence to hold onto that West Papuna region. They've forestalled independence movements in West Papua to de-militarize. The violence perpetuated against West Papuans every day—in terms of murdering them, in terms of torturing them, in terms of imprisoning them—shows that Indonesia is not afraid to crack down. And that's not an outcome that we want on the negative side of the house, because we think that will further devastate West Papua culture and will further devastate their chance of autonomy into the future.

But the next thing to say on that, given that Indonesia will not have a peaceful hand-over of power, that also encourages and requires West Papuans to militarize and become violent in their struggle as well, which we think will further protract the conflict. What does that mean? It means that even if we are able to create a West Papuan state at the moment, we think that state will still be harmful to the West Papuan population. Why? Because firstly a protracted and violent conflict is something that may devastate many West Papuan populations. It would also make it very difficult to set up a functioning state, particularly when at the moment West Papua has a lack of civil service, but also has very poor conditions for the citizens in their region, which may make it very difficult for them to set up a state themselves.

Historically, and in the modern day, most nation-building requires the support of UN peace-keepers, of the international community, and even of the regional community around it to help that happen. We think that given Indonesia's economic importance as a trading partner to many countries in this region and around the world, it would be difficult to guarantee that support to West Papuans in order to help them set up a functioning state.

What do we think then is a better alternative path for West Papuans? I notice that there is currently very limited support for West Papua independence around the world. That's not because western countries don't care about human rights violations. It is because Indonesia is incredibly economically important in that region. It's a huge trading partner for many in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as the United States, as well as China, as well as Japan. We also see a lot of western countries advocate against those human rights violations, but which also support Indonesia. And Indonesia uses this as leverage in many instances against countries, such as using it as leverage against Australia by asking them to crack down on people who are supporting the West Papuan independence movement. That means, we think, that West Papua declaring independence will actually ruin a trajectory towards improvement that we are currently seeing under the status quo.

Within that, firstly, Indonesia may be respondent to some pressure from the international community to stop human rights violations and to give West Papuans more freedom. That's because even though it is quite large economically, it is still reliant on aid from countries such as Australia, from the Asian Development Fund, and from places like Japan as well. It also has huge trading routes with those particular countries which may make it respondent to pressure. And some countries are already putting pressure on Indonesia, such as New Zealand and their now-retiring Prime Minister John Key who had talks with Indonesia about stopping some of the human rights violations against West Papua. We also think the Widodo presidency has been a positive step into the future. He has taken away the foreign media restrictions that Kelvin wanted to talk about in his first speech, and now allows journalists more freedom into entering into the country and covering some of the aspects of the conflict. Previously it was very difficult for foreign media to come into this country, so we think it's a greater step towards accountability as well.

Also there are now platforms for West Papua to be recognized on an international stage. That's like the Melanesian Spearhead Group, which was one of the first groups to grant West Papua diplomatic recognition since 1963. While there is currently a deferred vote on their full membership, West Papua has been given observer status, which is an incredible platform and recognition amongst Pacific nations of their sovereignty and independence. And these sorts of things have encouraged other nations to advocate on behalf of West Papua against the human rights violations that have been perpetrated against them. Vanuatu and Tonga both made statements against this at the Human Rights Council in Geneva. And seven countries have raised the situation in West Papua as a matter for concern at the latest UN General Assembly.

We think this means that there is a better path forward in terms of getting greater autonomy and less human rights violations for the people of West Papua. That looks like using grass-roots support to mobilize political power for people in those countries. It looks like pressuring individual countries such as Australia to stop training military in Indonesia that go on to oppress citizens in the West Papuan region. But we think this will be far easier, when we have the support of Asia-Pacific Countries who are not held at the whim of Indonesia and who do not fear political repercussions.

We stand in solidarity with the West Papuans, but we think this is the best way forward for them. Very proud to oppose.