

John Saltford

***The United Nations and the Indonesian Takeover
of West Papua 1962-1969***

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This is a very thorough examination of one of the most shameful events in the U.N.'s history. A decision was made to hand a territory over Indonesia in the expectation that the entire episode would soon be forgotten. However, in fact the consequences of that act continue to resonate today. Many people in West Papua continue to struggle against the decision. Possibly as many as 100,000 people have been killed in the violence. The territory is largely off-limits to international human rights observers and so it is difficult to get an accurate assessment of the situation.

Saltford, an official with the British Public Records Office and whose doctorate from the University of Hull was on the U.N. and West Papua, has ploughed through the declassified files of the U.N. and western governments (Australia, Britain, The Netherlands and the U.S.) to trace the events leading up to the handover of West Papua to Indonesia. It is a thorough examination and a commendable effort.

The Dutch took control of the western half of the massive New Guinea island in the 1820s. The Dutch East Indies, which ran from Aceh in the west to Dutch New Guinea in the east, was one of the largest empires of its day. During World War II, the Indonesian Nationalists, who were preparing to declare independence from the Netherlands, discussed what should be the extent of their new country. Some argued that they should

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settle for Java and the immediate area, which would give them most of the population and a compact area to govern. Others (including the republic's first president Sukarno) argued for all of the Dutch East Indies, even though it would make the new country difficult to govern because of its size and ethnic diversity. The latter point of view won out – and it has haunted Indonesian politics ever since. The principal task for all the presidents has been of one maintaining national unity.

Indonesia became independent on 27 December 1949. However, the Netherlands retained control over its most distant territory, Dutch New Guinea. The Dutch had various motives: it could become a place to settle Dutch colonialists fleeing the new Indonesian government, it was potentially wealthy and so the Dutch hoped to make money from it, and it was very undeveloped and so the peoples may not have fared well being governed by Jakarta. Jakarta was determined to get control over it and had an international campaign to get it.

By the early 1960s, the Dutch were looking for way out. The U.S. (as an N.A.T.O. ally) was not of much assistance and the wars in Africa were a warning of how violent struggles for independence could become. Most Third World countries supported Jakarta's claim. The prevailing doctrine of *uti possidetis juris* – whereby colonies were granted independence based on the boundaries of the colonies – meant that the Third World countries favoured Jakarta having all the territory once claimed by the Netherlands. Third World countries did not support secessionist or breakaway movements (fearing that they too could become the victims of such struggles). Indonesia was also a leader of the neutral Third World bloc in international politics and so was widely admired.

In short, by the early 1960s the indigenous peoples of West Papua had few international supporters. A mechanism had therefore to be found of saving Dutch prestige by enabling the Dutch to withdraw but without being seen to give in to Indonesian pressure. For the first time in the U.N.'s history, the territory was handed over to the U.N. to administer, with a view to there being an "act of free choice" whereby the indigenous peoples could decide what they wanted to do: become independent or join Indonesia.

This book is mainly a detailed account of the events between August 1962 (when the territory went under the U.N.'s administration) and November 1969 (when the territory was "noted" by the U.N. General Assembly as

having become part of Indonesia). It makes grim reading. The administrative machinery was soon taken over by the Indonesians. The eventual “act of free choice” was not a referendum of the people but instead a group of 1,022 pro-Indonesian tribal leaders were consulted, who naturally voted to join Indonesia.

One of the few groups supporting a real “act of free choice” was the U.N. Association of the U.K. A particular pleasure I have had in reading this book is noting how Saltford’s detective work has uncovered the British Government’s response to the work of the committee on which I then served. The British Government in June 1969 dismissed our concerns about what was happening in West Papua. However, its public statements varied from the confidential advice it was getting from its diplomats in Indonesia, who were warning about the conduct of the U.N.’s mission. The British Embassy in January 1969 advised London that “most independent observers are convinced that, given a free choice, the majority of the local inhabitants would not vote for continued incorporation in Indonesia”. That is exactly what we were saying – but our views were dismissed. The truth comes out – eventually.

In April 2002, an international campaign was launched to urge the U.N. Secretary General to review the U.N.’s role in the 1969 act of free choice. Some Dutch politicians have called on their Government to also revisit the act of free choice. It remains to be seen how successful this campaign will be. In the meantime, this book will of great assistance to anyone wanting to learn more about that act of free choice. 