

2009

h-diplo

H-Diplo Article REVIEWS

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No. 224

Published on 29 April 2009

H-Diplo Article Review Managing Editor: Diane N. Labrosse

H-Diplo Article Review General Editor and Web Editor: George Fujii

David Webster. "Regimes in Motion: The Kennedy Administration and Indonesia's New Frontier, 1960-1962." *Diplomatic History* 33:1 (January 2009): 95-123. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00748.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00748.x> .

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/Jones-Webster.pdf>

Review by **Matthew Jones, University of Nottingham**

The nature of the colonial state, with its arbitrarily-drawn boundary lines and often brutal disregard for pre-existing ethnic and cultural distinctions, meant that the process of European imperial withdrawal would invariably be accompanied by fractious conflict and a sense of continued dispossession by many, as successor nationalist elites moved into positions of authority and control. In the many accounts we have of the process of decolonization, the all-out losers, denied recognition and a sense of identity, are usually a neglected part of the story. The early years of Indonesian nationhood in the first two decades after independence in 1949 are one exemplar of this phenomenon, where the varied peoples of the island archipelago were moulded into a new configuration, with Java standing at the centre of their constellation. Within this setting, the territory of Western New Guinea was retained by the Dutch after Indonesian independence, a colonial anachronism in an area where occidental rule was in wholesale retreat, and the authorities in Jakarta were determined to absorb the region as the rightful heirs to a contrived imperial legacy. Having pursued the matter through diplomatic means at the United Nations for much of the 1950s, by 1960-61 the Indonesians seemed ready to resort to the use of force to evict the Dutch administration. Into this tense stand-off stepped the New Frontiersmen of the Kennedy administration, who were fearful that the conflict would fracture the precarious balance of political forces in Indonesia and deliver this strategically crucial country into the arms of the Communists. In an act of what U.S. officials liked to portray as 'preventive diplomacy', the administration helped to engineer a talks process between the recalcitrant Dutch and the Indonesians that led to West New Guinea and its indigenous peoples being passed to UN administrators in 1962, before finally being transferred to Indonesian sovereignty the following year.

The Kennedy administration had let its desire to accommodate the Indonesian regime of President Sukarno eventually outweigh its loyalties to a NATO ally. The wishes of the

local Papuan people, as David Webster's thoughtful and welcome article covering these events makes clear, played no part in this whole exercise, despite the norms of self-determination that the UN professed to uphold; this sorry state of affairs found confirmation in 1969, when the Indonesians staged a farcical 'referendum' (or 'act of free choice') where a handful of carefully selected West Papuans registered their unanimous approval of the blessings of rule from Jakarta. In this tawdry sequence, the West Papuans had become anonymous pawns in an unsavoury game, where the Cold War concerns of Washington had helped facilitate the Indonesian takeover. Against this background, Webster subjects U.S. diplomacy to a withering critique, and rather than seeing American behaviour during the dispute as a successful example of conflict resolution (as many others have done), he scorns the Kennedy administration for its crisis management approach, which ignored the longer-term problems of decolonization, and alleges that its actions contributed to subsequent instability, in the form of a long-festering insurgency in the unhappy territory (95-6, 123). 'If [U.S. intervention] prevented an immediate war,' Webster writes, 'it permitted a simmering low-intensity war that cost thousands of lives' (96). It is the word 'permitted' used in this fashion that gives pause, as it suggests that a different set of U.S. actions would have produced an outcome more favourable to the rights of the West Papuans. An alternative course, however, and one which might conceivably have been followed by the Kennedy administration is never actually spelled out, so we are left wondering how all this could have been avoided.

Opposition to Indonesian ambitions in Western New Guinea and support for Papuan independence could have been embraced, it is possible to conjecture, but this may not have averted armed conflict, the results of which were (and are) highly unpredictable. The United States and its allies took the possibility of Indonesian military action against the Dutch position in Western New Guinea in late 1961 and early 1962 very seriously indeed. Sukarno had made perfectly clear his willingness to use force to settle the dispute, the Indonesian armed forces were making active preparations for a fight, and Indonesian infiltrators were already making life uncomfortable for the small Dutch units tasked with defending the territory. It seemed to all observers that only a significant concession to Indonesian demands would prevent serious fighting breaking out in the Far East. The Kennedy administration naturally wanted to prevent this contingency occurring: as Webster points out, it was anxious over the conflict taking on an East versus West quality, but more specifically saw only the Indonesian Communist Party benefitting, as Indonesia turned even more decisively toward the Soviet Union for assistance. If the claims of West New Guinea to self-determination were to be given support, it is doubtful whether this would have led to any change in the course that Jakarta had set. Even when faced with determined opposition, Sukarno did not easily back down. In 1963, when the British sponsored the creation of the federation of Malaysia, arguing that its formation represented the wishes of the peoples of the territories of Sarawak and North Borneo, the Indonesian authorities launched on a policy of *konfrontasi*, intent on breaking up the new state. The low-intensity conflict that ensued saw British forces combating Indonesian efforts at infiltration over the next two and a half years, in an environment where British sea and air power dominated the skies and waters around Indonesia. Despite this

military opposition, Sukarno persisted with *konfontasi* in the ultimately mistaken expectation that a mix of pressures would eventually produce concessions. A similar situation may have occurred over Western New Guinea. Backing Papuan claims to self-determination, moreover, would have been widely seen as playing the Dutch game, and perceived as such by much of the onlooking international community at the UN, while a full-blooded conflict with Indonesia was unlikely to find much support from domestic U.S. opinion. Kennedy is also damned for his 'improvisational and reactive' response to the crisis as a whole, though it is pertinent to ask how foreign policy can be otherwise when individuals are faced with taxing and unforeseen circumstances, and where the principal players are simply not susceptible to easy manipulation or coercion. All this is not meant to defend American policy, which was hopelessly naive in its belief that it could swing Indonesia along a path of modernization and pro-Western development under Sukarno, but simply to acknowledge the limits and constraints within which the administration had to operate and the problems associated with the search for alternatives over Western New Guinea.

Webster's central and irrefutable contention is that the Americans failed to take West Papuan calls for self-determination at all seriously, and that this was primarily based on racially-grounded perceptions of Papuan backwardness. The images of primitive and 'dark-skinned' Papuans, barely equipped for the modern world, were perpetuated by contemporary writings about the region, of which Webster provides several excellent examples (114-6). These images helped form the mental maps carried by officials, and in their own particular way contributed to the policymaking process, alongside more familiar calculations of national interest and ideological conviction. 'Stone Age perceptions,' Webster notes (with irony?) 'rendered self-determination irrelevant to U.S. policymakers' (122). Despite late Dutch attempts to foster a Papuan voice through the creation of the elected New Guinea Council in early 1961, its claims to represent a nascent nationalist movement were not given any credence in Washington (103, 109-110). Indeed, there was never any real likelihood that a Papuan view would find expression in the proximity talks between the Dutch and the Indonesians convened under U.S. auspices in early 1962. One extra dimension to the picture offered by Webster here is the degree to which officials in the Kennedy administration, from the President downward, both suspected that the Dutch, who had hitherto neglected their Papuan charges, were now manufacturing a self-determination movement with the aim of thwarting an early diplomatic settlement, and also doubted how ultimately wedded was Dutch domestic opinion to maintenance of their position in the territory. Dutch rule was always conceived of by the Americans as an anachronism, and one which was certainly not worth fighting to sustain, and many administration officials believed that Dutch domestic opinion was not ready for military action (with the Netherlands still hiding the wounds of the military struggle with the Indonesian Republic between 1945 and 1949). This was one reason why the administration threatened to leak the Bunker formula for resolving the dispute in May 1962: principally because it was seen as a way to bring Dutch domestic political pressure to bear on die-hards such as Joseph Luns, the Foreign Minister.

Less successful than the sections on the missing Papuan voice in our understanding of the U.S. role in transferring West New Guinea to Indonesia, in this reviewer's opinion, is that part of the article, featured in its title, that discerns worthwhile comparisons between Kennedy's style of government and Sukarno's 'guided democracy'. Webster sees both as founded on masculine tropes of dynamism, vigor, and activism, so making these restless 'regimes in motion.' Seeing West New Guinea as a peripheral and backward 'frontier' area, they both employed 'progressive rhetorics of emancipation to underpin their foreign policy ideologies. Even as American policymakers saw Sukarno as emotional and overly leftist, there were important similarities of style and overlapping notions of progress between the two governments' (107). Such superficial comparisons do not, however, get us very far in understanding, for example, the nature of either Kennedy's policy constraints and options, or the underlying structures of power that sustained Sukarno's regime. If an effective comparison is to be made it should really be imbued with some deeper explanatory point and purpose, which the article never quite manages to convey.

These quibbles aside, it is difficult to take exception to the depressing conclusion drawn by Webster that, 'Remote, undeveloped West New Guinea was the price paid to entice Jakarta back to "constructive" paths of development' (97). Indeed, the added confidence that the transfer of West New Guinea gave to those elements in the Indonesian regime keen to assert local dominance had a wider regional significance. Even before the transfer had been completed in mid-1963, attentions were turned to challenging the Malaysian federation through the policies of *konfrontasi*, triggering a series of events that were eventually to lead to the bloody end of the Sukarno era in 1965-66 and its replacement with a military leadership that would open a new and brutal phase in Indonesia's troubled history.

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—Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux