

Living without a state



People in rural Papua are more interested in basic services than grand political struggles

Bobby Anderson



Indonesian Papua is not a uniform entity. When outsiders think of Papua, they imagine provincial and national-level political conflicts and protests against Indonesian rule. But this is only the reality for a minority of Papuans in the major towns of Jayapura, Wamena, and Timika, and their suburbs. Outside of select groups within these areas, most people do not engage in political issues related to referendum protests, dialogue with Jakarta, or Merdeka

The path from Lolat to Bonohaik. Every day children in Bonohaik walk back and forth to a functioning parallel school on this path. It takes them 1.5 hours, barefoot. **Bobby Anderson**

(independence).

Instead, local fissures count more in day-to-day politics. In the province, most people's primary loyalties are not to an idea of 'Papua', nor are contending loyalties to 'Indonesia'. Instead, most people are above all loyal to their clan, with even broader tribal loyalties being secondary. Loyalties to Papua or Indonesia come a distant third, at best. Whilst Jayapura and Wamena host numerous and often competing groups who agitate for independence, and while a few areas such as Puncak Jaya host active insurrectionists, most of rural Papua is an underdeveloped and detached space where political conflicts are entirely local.

In most places outside of the towns, the key issue is not that Papuans reject the Indonesian state: it is simply that the state plays little or no role in their lives, for better or for worse.

A society without a state

The subdistrict of Lolat, in the newly-created central highlands district of Yahukimo, is illustrative of conditions in the isolated areas where most indigenous Papuans live. What is important to Lolat's people, and what they lack, is much more immediate and profound than the questions of autonomy or independence that are generally assumed by outsiders to dominate the political thinking of most Papuans. The area lacks any semblance of government, and there is no access to services such as health and education.

Just as Papua ranks 33rd out of 33 Indonesian provinces with regard to Human Development Indicator measurements, so Yahukimo ranks as one of the worst of Papua's districts. Yahukimo is also one of the most remote areas of Indonesia; it is

assessable only by plane. The district has no roads (except for those found within the new district capital, Dekai), and travel within Yahukimo is only possible by foot or airplane; in the lowlands, small boats are used. Yahukimo was created in 2002 when politicians separated it from Jayawijaya district. They said doing so would improve service delivery in isolated areas, bring government closer to its constituents and make it more accountable and transparent in the process. The anticipated benefits of this process did not occur. Rather, the opposite happened, and government, for all intents and purposes, disappeared.

Lolat subdistrict can be reached only by air, from Wamena or Dekai, or by foot. The subdistrict is three days' walk from Wamena, and two days' walk from Dekai. The subdistrict centre, Kampung Lolat (elevation 1,959 metres, population 1,110) hosts an airstrip made of pulverised rock, empty government offices, a locked community health centre (puskesmas), and empty schools. Only a few of Lolat's inhabitants speak Indonesian. There are no shops: a barter economy exists in place of cash, and wealth is found in livestock, namely pigs. The area is populated by the Yali tribe.

Lolat was only 'contacted' by outsiders in late September 1968, when an Australian missionary, Stanley Albert Dale, hiked into Lolat's Seng valley from Ninia. He was killed by the Yali and eaten. Months later, the Indonesian military hiked into Lolat, killed a few men, burned a few homes, and left. No security actor has since returned.

Lolat's older men remember the killing of Dale and the state's retaliation. They have no other memory of the coercive elements of the state and they have zero experience with those groups who agitate against it. The area has no mobile phone coverage: news travels via shortwave radio only. Children in the area are visibly malnourished, with bloated stomachs and stunted growth. At the time of the author's visit, men were noticeably absent from the area, with most working in Wamena or Dekai. The men who were present were usually armed with bows, arrows, and machetes. A local NGO, Yasumat, runs five parallel schools, 19 health clinics, and four health posts. While paid teachers and health care workers are absent, a cadre of local volunteers strives to provide needed services.

From church-led development to state collapse

In Yahukimo, as in other parts of the Papuan highlands, local churches and missionaries provided health and education services prior to the end of the New Order era in 1998. Back then, schools and health centres were staffed and functional, and midwifery services, immunisation programs, and mother and child health programs were easily accessible. The system was paternalistic, but it was relatively effective.

Civil servant absenteeism, now a veritable epidemic in the highlands, was less of an issue, as civil servants were required to be at the posts to which they were assigned; dismissal due to frequent absence was, in that era, possible. Churches and NGOs worked in place of the state to provide health and education services. But they worked with the state's blessing and in cooperation with it to pay government salaries to the teachers and health care workers on-site. These workers thus did not have to leave their posts and travel to towns to collect their wages, by flight or several days' walking, as they do now. As these systems were run by local churches, management of workers was direct.

After the end of the New Order, local governments took over health and education services. But this happened without a clear rationale and in the absence of sufficient understanding in provincial and district centres as to the role that churches played in remote areas. Some government officials saw the takeover as a means to move into the provision of services which they had always viewed as being the proper responsibility of government. Others believed that church influence should be lessened. No doubt some simply wanted to gain access to the funds that these services provided.

Regardless of the reasons, the takeover resulted in the breakdown of the established system. As in the broader failures found in the creation of new districts across Papua, there was no period of transition and no handover. After the takeover, these systems were no longer managed locally, with new government administrators based in district capitals remotely running systems in places they'd never visited, with employees they'd never met. The churches played no post-2002 managerial or oversight role, instead concentrating on ecclesiastical matters. The system was further shaken by the 2001 riots in Wamena, when dozens of Indonesian migrants were killed by Papuan rioters. These killings created a reverse migration as fearful migrants – many of them teachers and health care workers – left to the cities.

The handover of the systems from Jayawijaya to the new district of Yahukimo in 2002 was the *coup de grâce*. Schools and clinics emptied of remaining teachers, health cadres, and administrators (the reasons why are elaborated upon below). In Yahukimo, with the exception of Dekai, the visible manifestations of a functioning government disappeared. This collapse of the education system has led to illiteracy rates that are much worse than the provincial average: anecdotal evidence puts the illiteracy rate in Lolat at upwards of 80 per cent.

As for health, immunisation programs do not exist in remote areas: the cold chain for vaccinations broke down in 2002 and no immunisations have been provided by the district government outside of intermittent offerings in Dekai in the last ten years. TB and HIV rates in Lolat are unknown, but the number of young men, women, and children dying of unknown causes is out of proportion to the already abysmal provincial averages. It seems likely that men working in the cities as part of the construction boom caused by the proliferation of new districts are contracting HIV and bringing it home with them. Just as HIV infection levels are unknown, so are condoms, which have never been seen in the area.

Men are also contracting malaria in lowland Dekai. When they return to Lolat, which has no mosquitoes and thus no knowledge of malaria, they die from it. Clinics are stocked with expired or unlabeled medicines, and health knowledge is low.

Problems of governance

Problems in education and health cannot be disentangled from one another: neither can they be removed from problems in governance. In Yahukimo the actual word for governance in Indonesian (pemerintahan) requires explanation. Government in Yahukimo, where it exists, is solely the realm of the Yali tribe's clan and extended family networks and their traditions. This is a complicated system. In the Lolat area, the Yali tribe is sub-divided into 11 clans (suku): Buesuk, Hwise Oholuk, Kangkin, Wom ingkik, Sukulik dindok, Sabumbo, Ngasim, Nguruni, Sahaikani, Sirik amboloak, and Suamalik. These 11 clans are further sub-divided into a minimum of 41 extended families (marga).

The clans often go to war with one another, and even the extended families within clans operate in contention with one another. These groups are all led by men, and the strongest among them serve as church leaders, village leaders, and so on. They tend to assert their authority among their own followers by coercion and patronage. In such traditional patronage systems, modern notions of corruption lose their stigma: corrupt practices allow for goods to enter the patronage system, where it disseminates through the family and clan.

Special Autonomy (known in Papua by its Indonesian abbreviation, Otsus) was introduced in 2001 with the intention of relieving pressures for independence, alleviating Papua's underdevelopment and improving service delivery. The policy has also led to a dramatic increase in government funds available for development purposes. However, an overstaffed and underperforming provincial bureaucracy absorbs the majority of Otsus funds. The primary expenditure of such funds in rural and remote areas goes toward the visible manifestations of service: building health clinics and schools.

However, the essential problem of health and education services in the highlands is not lack of physical structures, but poor management of human resources in these areas. New buildings remain empty, and although civil servants are theoretically assigned to work in these areas, the vast majority of them are not present in their duty stations. This is the norm across the highlands.

The reasons for absenteeism are manifold and vary by area, but some generalisations can be made. First, civil servants are often assigned outside their areas of origin or residence, and so are extremely resistant to being separated from their families. Locals often look down on them because their tribal or clan affiliations differ from their areas of assignment. Second, civil servant absenteeism does not result in sanctions. Third, these civil servants are not paid on-site, nor are they provided with transportation costs reflective of the cost of transport in their assigned areas. Fourth, their salaries are not adequate, often because a portion is siphoned off by the administration before they are paid (this varies by areas: in some areas, this does not occur, whilst in others, the majority of one's wages is mislaid). Fifth, necessary support structures are not in place: a teacher who wants to teach may find herself alone in a school, with no administrator, no other teachers, and no materials. A teacher assigned to a remote area might not want to relocate her family because there is no available health care; a health care worker may not want to relocate because, chances are, there will be no functioning school.

Developing the villages?

One example of how special autonomy programs run into trouble on the ground in places like Yahukimo is provided by the so-called Kampung Development Strategy Plan or RESPEK (Rencana Strategi Pembangunan Kampung) program. Created in 2007 by the then-Papua provincial governor, Barnabus Suebu, RESPEK is a recurring community development block grant allocation for every village in the province, funded by Otsus disbursements that are in turn funded by the returns from Papua's natural resource wealth. Under the scheme, every village in Papua gets a block grant of Rp. 100 million (about \$A10,000). Of this, 15 per cent is intended to be for projects that directly benefit women.



By transferring the funds directly from the province to villages, RESPEK is intended to eliminate the district layer through which fund disbursement would normally occur, therefore removing a significant opportunity for the siphoning of funds. The idea is that communities

will discuss for themselves what projects to prioritise and spend their money on. So far, the majority of programs funded



have been in infrastructure, including the construction of roads, bridges, schools, and health centres. All in all, the government has spent three trillion rupiah (about three hundred million Australian dollars) on RESPEK projects.

Despite this program reaching Yahukimo, in Lolat community access to education and health services, as well as economic opportunities, has not improved in the slightest. Though the money is

A medical clinic in Lolat. All of these medicines are expired or water damaged. **Bobby Anderson**

delivered to Lolat's villages, Lolat's people are unaware of RESPEK's community-driven development methodology. They also know nothing of the allocation for women's projects. They rank livelihood opportunities such as the provision of livestock above infrastructure, but RESPEK creates infrastructure. In Yahukimo this is because local elites within the traditional structure of 11 clans and extended families control the project selection process through direct interaction with RESPEK facilitators. RESPEK has simply been absorbed into pre-existing Yali systems based in part on patronage, and this is why infrastructure projects are popular. It is the local elites who are the contractors who work on the infrastructure programs, and the stated value of materials and costs usually differs from the actual value, with much of the funding being skimmed off and used elsewhere.

Traditional concepts of what makes a leader also determine how this money is utilised. In the Yali areas of the highlands, as in much of Melanesian society, the role of a leader – often known as a 'Big Man' – is to disseminate wealth to followers. RESPEK often partially fills the need of Big Men to access and then disseminate wealth, and therefore, this funding does trickle down to the grassroots, with funding translating into Rp. 50,000 (\$A5) per household per year, for example. And just as Big Men disseminate such wealth to followers, they exclude the followers of others. As a result, suku and marga loyalties can be re-arranged based upon the wealth their leading members make available to followers. There exists a constant battle among Big Men, and their expanding and constricting constituencies reflect this. These battles extend into elections, and suku or marga that vote for the losing candidate will find themselves cut off from development programs and other assistance as punishment.

In Lolat, village and clan leaders use RESPEK to pay pocket money for work that used to be done for free, such as maintaining the runway and trails that connect villages. This use of the funds was decided upon by those clan leaders who also serve as village leaders. The funds are not being used for health, education, or other services which might make a real long-term difference to the lives of ordinary people there. Innovative uses of RESPEK for service delivery, livelihoods and women's empowerment are found elsewhere in Papua, but not here.

To make matters worse, because so many men were working outside of Lolat in previous years, traditional gardens that families maintained to grow yams, tubers, and other staples, have been neglected. The last RESPEK allocations were used by local leaders to charter planes to fly in rice, which was then distributed freely. This rice was eaten through and ran out, and Lolat's communities are now dangerously exposed to the possibility of dependence on such imported foods. In the past, families maintained gardens that provided them with the staple foods that they needed. And so RESPEK, which was intended to deliver improvements to people's lives, has instead made them more dependent, and more exposed to risk.

Making government work

The importance of effective service delivery in Lolat, as in Papua's other rural and remote areas, where the majority of the population lives, cannot be underestimated. The lives of people in Papua are not easy and politicians' promises to make things better have not been realised. Across large parts of the highlands there is little evidence of the state, other than empty schools, health clinics and hospitals. Civil servants, police, and military are few and far between. Often the only outsiders who identify with, and work to improve the lives of, Papuans, are religious missionaries from Manado and further afield, and there are not many of them. Just as security actors are rare, so are the rebels: in Yahukimo, there is no OPM or other insurrectionist presence.

During my two visits to the area, I did not hear a single sentiment expressed for or against the Indonesian state in Lolat. But people talked a lot about their palpable needs: the need for doctors and teachers, the need for medicines and materials. People expressed a desire for a better future for themselves and their children: they want their children to understand computers and learn English, for example. And when children articulate what they wish to become, they speak of becoming teachers and doctors: exactly the people their communities both need and lack.

Papua's rural population is the purported audience for the political machinations and aspirations of the opposing elites who exist so far above them that they might as well be a part of the spirit world. So far, no politicians speak for these people. Yet Lolat's people know of events in Jayapura and further afield, even if they are not yet much interested in them. In the long term, their opinions and loyalties are up for grabs. Where they direct those loyalties will depend much on whether a functioning state can be built that tangibly benefits them.

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Regions: [Papua](#)
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Human Rights: [Political Rights](#)
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