

Short Review: West Papua New Guinea

The Rule of the Sword: The Story of West Irian, by Nonie Sharp. Available from Kibble Books, Box 210, P.O. Malmsbury, 3446, Victoria, Australia. 1977. U.S. \$2.50 postpaid, \$4.50 airmail, 76 pages.

Bulletin of Concerned Asian
Scholars 10(1): 24
1978

by Richard W. Franke

In May and June of 1977 more than 1,000 people crossed the border between Indonesian West Irian and the recently independent state of Papua New Guinea, long an Australian protectorate. Since those border crossings, people have become increasingly aware of a previously unacknowledged, little-understood liberation movement to free West Irian (or West Papua New Guinea as the rebels call it) from Indonesian control.

The movement for a free West PNG has been in existence now for more than fourteen years, but little information has previously been available. Now a political awakening in Australia, produced in large measure by the heroic and successful resistance of 650,000 East Timorese against the full force of an Indonesian military invasion, has created a new interest in the possibilities for some form of struggle to succeed among the 800,000 (West) Irianese who became part of Indonesia during big-power dealings in 1962—dealings in which the United Nations was unable to protect the population from a fixed "referendum" in 1969.

In this brief but informative booklet, LaTrobe University sociologist Nonie Sharp presents us with a lucid and well-documented summary of the evidence on continuing and expanding protest. Contained within her study is much information difficult to obtain otherwise in the U.S. Equally important, however, the factual account is sprinkled with numerous fascinating if tentative theoretical insights. We are given a brief background in the Dutch colonial period, and the indigenous millenarian movements which served in Sharp's view as foci of resistance. There is an account of the modern class composition of West PNG society, emphasizing the importance of the ethnic caste barrier set up by the Indonesian government to promote use of the region as a place to which the most impoverished peoples of other Indonesian islands might emigrate. There is material on the inevitable attempts of the people of West PNG to resist Indonesian exploitation and on the subsequent expansion of the repressive apparatus of the Suharto regime.

Sharp also informs us of the rich mineral potential of West PNG, with its off-shore oil deposits near Biak and, on the south coast, the "largest base metal outcrop in the world" which Freeport Sulphur is freely exploiting. Then there is the Gag Island nickel region under contract to PT Pacific Nickel which is 43 percent owned by U.S. Steel Corporation. Repression against union organizing, the low level of wages, and the incidence of multinational investment provide a familiar socio-economic setting.

In the last part of the study, Sharp attempts to use the data from the West PNG movement to form the outline of a political theory of what she refers to as cultural resistance

movements. This interesting approach to the problems of political organization in the widely-dispersed, kinship-based, communities of the region raises two fundamental questions which the study does not answer. First, we are left wondering just what is the political program of the OPM, the *Organisasi Papua Merdeka* or Free Papua Movement. If opposition to the brutality and exploitation of the Indonesian generals and their partners at PT Pacific Nickel is spreading, is it also leading to the formulation of a unified political theory? The implied comparison with East Timor is questionable, at least in part. Fretilin, which continues to lead the East Timorese struggle, developed both out of the local traditions of East Timorese society and contacts with the experienced revolutionary movements of Mozambique and other places. After just a few months in active politics, Fretilin had developed a national program in education, health care, land reform, women's emancipation, etc. It is not clear from Sharp's account that the OPM has as yet gone beyond opposition to the excesses of the Indonesian rulers to create a program that would rally people to build a new society.

Related to this is the question of what position will be taken on the OPM by progressive forces within the rest of Indonesia. Sharp does not comment directly, but we may presume that the issue will be much more difficult than supporting the East Timorese whose previously different colonial history and clearly progressive social program have attracted many Indonesian supporters. The Indonesian left was engaged for many years on the side of the Jakarta government precisely to wrest control of West Irian from Dutch colonialism.

Can a debate be opened within Indonesian progressive circles on the merits of cultural liberation, political autonomy, national independence, or some other approach to building solidarity between the oppressed West Papuan peoples and their potential—and perhaps crucial—allies underground on Java, elsewhere in the archipelago, and overseas? Sharp's booklet provides much of the background for this significant debate, both for Indonesians and for all others who watch and analyze from outside. ☆

MEMBER
COSMOP
COMMITTEE OF SMALL MAGAZINE
EDITORS AND PUBLISHERS
BOX 705 SAN FRANCISCO, CA. 94101