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Jakarta's Dismal Record in Papua

A recent case shows how Indonesia is abusing the rights of citizens in West Papua.

In Indonesia, there has been much to celebrate since the democratic *reformasi* began in May 1998. Most Indonesians are freer under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono than they ever were under the "Guided Democracy" of Sukarno or the "New Order" of Suharto. But for many West Papuans like me, the old regime dies hard. Indonesia has yet to realize the promise of democracy and human rights for all of its citizens.

In 2001, President Megawati Sukarnoputri promised West Papuans autonomy. But real autonomy has been denied. Worse, the government has systematically persecuted West Papuans for calling attention to this broken promise.

Only months ago, grisly video footage forced Indonesian authorities to admit that their soldiers had brutally tortured Papuan civilians, including by burning their genitals. The Indonesian soldiers were found guilty of torture and sentenced to months in prison, but Papuans who peacefully express dissent are punished with more than a decade of imprisonment.

My father, Filep Karma, is one of them. In 2005, a Jayapura District Court sentenced him to 15 years in prison for speaking about our survival as a nation and raising the West Papuan Morning Star flag at a ceremony organized to commemorate West Papua's liberation from Dutch rule back in 1961.

I suppose it is no coincidence that my father came to his pro-independence views in 1998, when freedom seemed within reach for all of Indonesia's citizens. But he was, and is, hardly a radical. Until his arrest in 2004, he was a civil servant of West Papua's Indonesian administration.

Despite the conviction, my sister and I were initially optimistic. My father's case garnered national and international media attention, and it quickly became a cause célèbre for West Papuan human rights activists. The U.S. State Department even cited his arrest as a violation of international human rights law. And his condemnation of violent tactics seemed like a welcome antidote to an emerging militant West Papuan insurgency. We thought that the Indonesian authorities, wary of martyring my father, would grant him an early release.

Instead, they transformed a humble civil servant into an icon of political persecution. An unabashedly biased judge gave him a sentence three times the one recommended by prosecutors.

His Christian faith was openly ridiculed in court. A bloody dog head appeared at the doorstep of his lawyers' office.

The appeals process was just as unfair. The court ruled against him even though the lower court failed to forward his legal brief. And the Indonesian Supreme Court summarily dismissed his case despite these glaring violations of due process.

Not long after my father was imprisoned, he began to suffer from a severe prostate ailment. It became clear that he urgently needed surgery, but he was told to drink more water. My father was lucky. Because word of his case had spread, West Papuan, Indonesian and international organizations managed to help us raise money and pressure Jakarta to allow him the surgery he needed.

Then last December, my father was punished for trying to mediate a peaceful resolution in a prison riot. Since then, our family has had very limited access to him. My grandmother worries she will survive him.

My father is only one of more than 130 political prisoners in Indonesia. Many have been tortured. And many are being held in violation of not only international legal standards, but also Indonesian laws.

In 2007, Indonesia's Supreme Court struck down the sedition provisions of the Indonesian Criminal Code under which my father and many other political prisoners have been prosecuted. Yet none of these political prisoners has been released as a consequence. The Indonesian government seems willing to discredit its own Supreme Court in order to deny the rights of Papuans.

Last year, U.S. President Barack Obama visited Jakarta on Heroes Day in November, which commemorates Indonesia's struggle for independence. He rightly celebrated the country's democratic development. But he also said that the rights of citizens in Indonesia require that "every child born in this country should be treated equally, whether they come from Java or Aceh; Bali or Papua."

I hope that the world holds President Yudhoyono to this standard. The Indonesian government cannot be an exemplar of democracy, human rights and the rule of law while it persecutes those who peacefully insist that it live up to those very aspirations.

Ms. Karma is the eldest daughter of West Papuan political prisoner Filep Karma, who has been held in Abepura prison, West Papua, since December 2004.