

# Big prison, little prison



Stories from Papua's political prisoners show life at the edge of freedom

## Ap Inyerop



Yusak, during one of his spells of imprisonment -  
*Private*

Otto is sitting in his cell in Abepura prison. It is early evening, and he is drinking coffee and discussing politics with his cellmates. None of them have much energy as the prison diet of low-grade rice and stewed leaves is poor. Otto is reading a book about social change, which has been smuggled in by friends. Books are treated with great suspicion by prison authorities and are hard to come by inside, so this one is cherished. He is beginning it for the third time, hoping to find some hint of a way out, not just of the 'little prison' in which he finds himself, but also of the 'big prison', which is how many Papuans now view their homeland. Otto and his friends are not robbers or murderers; they are political leaders who have peacefully challenged the Indonesian government.

Despite being imprisoned, beaten and sometimes subject to solitary confinement, they are among the lucky ones. During the last year, other political detainees in Papua have been blindfolded, beaten, gagged, threatened with death and subjected to electric shocks. Papua's political prisoners have lost teeth, eyes, limbs and lives to Indonesian law enforcers, to say nothing of their rights, their dignity, and sometimes their sanity. While Papua's political prisoners share many common experiences, they are individuals from different backgrounds, each with their own story. It is through these stories that we can start to understand what Papua's political prisoners mean when they talk about the 'big prison' and 'little prison' – and the bitter irony that, in Papua, by asking for freedom, you lose it.

## A piece of cloth

Many of Papua's political prisoners have been arrested for raising, carrying or displaying the Morning Star flag. This cheerful piece of cloth with its bright blue, white and red colours is a symbol of Papuan identity. It is raised by Papuans as an affirmation of their identity and a rejection of Indonesia – both its presence in Papua, and the violent way it has controlled the territory.

While the symbolic significance of the flag is clear, its legal status is more ambiguous. Although the symbol is allowed under Papua's Special Autonomy laws, it is forbidden under Government Regulation No. 77/2007, which prohibits the display of the Morning Star symbol in Papua, the South Maluku Republic flag in Ambon and the Crescent Moon flag in Aceh.

Local police and prosecutors are not interested in untangling the nuances in these regulations. For them, displaying the Morning Star symbol on a flag, t-shirt, bag, mobile phone case or even a cake is an act of treason, making the person in possession liable to arrest and – if the crime of treason is proved – imprisonment for up to fifteen years.

## The revolving door

Yusak is a 'revolving door' political prisoner. He has been arrested on political charges several times. First convicted for raising the Morning Star flag almost ten years ago, Yusak found imprisonment an intensely isolating experience. Human rights workers and lawyers say that the years in prison took a toll on his mental health. When he was offered clemency after a number of years, the other prisoners advised him to accept it. It was a difficult decision, as it meant signing loyalty statements which went against his deepest values, but he did so and was released.

But Yusak still did not feel free. Like many other former prisoners, he reported being watched and followed by intelligence agents. The years in prison have also made him hesitant to put his freedom on the line again. In turn this lead to isolation from his own community. As he explained in an interview: 'The community want me to step forward and they're angry that I won't.'

Yusak has instead concentrated on humanitarian activities. It was at a street action to collect money for sick political

prisoners in July last year that he came in contact with the criminal justice system again. Yusak and 14 others were arrested by the police who claimed they did not have the necessary permits for their activities. That time he was released without charges, but not long after he was arrested once again at the trial of Buchtar Tabuni, another political prisoner.

Like many political trials, Tabuni's trial was based on contentious charges. He was ostensibly arrested in connection with serious violent crimes, but was then charged for his alleged role in a prison riot which had occurred several years earlier. Becoming annoyed during Tabuni's trial, Yusak kicked a bin and caused betel nut juice to spill onto the clothes of a court official. Having searched him and discovered a penknife in his pocket, police charged him with possession of a weapon. This new 'crime' attracted another seven-month sentence.

For Yusak, the message from the dizzying range of intelligence agencies, security forces and government authorities in Papua is clear. Whichever side of the prison bars he is on, he is not free.

## **A bitter lesson**

The events leading to Meki's imprisonment also began with a Morning Star flag. In 2010, Meki and his friends were on their way to a funeral in Yalengga in Papua's central highlands. The group were not activists, but subsistence farmers, who had been asked to bring the flag so it could be buried beside their deceased relative in accordance with his political beliefs.

A group of soldiers who were passing through the area saw the farmers and stopped them, forcing them to undress and lie face down. They were then tortured for several hours, before being delivered to a police station. At trial the men were defended by a government lawyer with the assistance of a trainee human rights lawyer. They both had to be flown in from the provincial capital at great expense because there are no lawyers in Wamena. But even with this representation the men were sentenced to eight years' imprisonment for carrying the flag. They had no money to pay for an appeal within the two-week application period, and their subsequent requests for clemency have been ignored.

Political cases represented by government lawyers are punished harshly, with the involvement of qualified human rights lawyers being essential for any hope of a lighter sentence or acquittal. But to involve human rights lawyers in cases outside the provincial capital of Jayapura involves huge sums for flights and accommodation. These sums are sometimes scraped together by the family, community and from the lawyers' own pockets. But more often than not the money cannot be found. Some prisoners do not even receive a government lawyer, and are left to defend the case themselves.

Some of the men arrested alongside Meki have since escaped. But four remain in Wamena prison. As they did not consider themselves to be political activists – and were not recognised as such within the West Papuan community – few people have heard of their arrest. While sympathisers often supplement the meagre official food allowance received by political activists, Meki and his friends receive no support, and don't know whether they will eat from one day to the next. Their families are poor and live far away in the mountains, so are seldom able to visit. One of the men has been abandoned by his wife, and the others worry about the fate of their young children.

The men may not have been politicised before their arrest, but the years in gaol are teaching them a bitter lesson about the justice they can expect under Indonesian rule.

## **Cat and mouse**

Unlike Meki and his friends, Ismael received a good education and is highly politicised. In 2008, he was involved in the early days of the West Papua National Committee (KNPB), a youth movement pushing for a referendum on Papua's political status. Arrested for his involvement in a peaceful demonstration, he was convicted of incitement to violence and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. After only one year in gaol, an administrative oversight by prison authorities meant his detention was no longer authorised and Ismael had to be released. But when he tried to leave Papua to attend human rights training overseas, he was arrested again and imprisoned to serve the remainder of his sentence.



**Prisoners from the 'Timika 6' case, recently released after eight months in prison for political activity - Private**

This is typical of the cat and mouse game which police often play with Papuan activists. When Ismael was finally released again, he too reported harassment and surveillance by intelligence agents. He eventually fled to the jungle, where he appeared to become more radical, occasionally releasing statements on behalf of armed rebels. The next time he wanted to leave the country he did so by fleeing across the PNG border.

Ismael's experiences with the law only made him more determined to continue his activities. 'We can't give up, we're committed,' he says. He believes that education is the first line of defence for Papuans in the struggle against Indonesian injustice, and the difference between his relatively light two-year punishment and the eight-year sentence handed down to Meki and friends supports this. 'We've been forced to learn international law in order to protect ourselves,' he reflects. 'People say we're stupid, poor and backwards, but I don't think so. We just didn't get the education. Those who don't understand the law don't know how to defend themselves.'

A number of Papuan political prisoners have become prominent exiles, running campaigns to expose human rights violations and advocate internationally for independence. These exiles have been a constant problem for Indonesia, often causing diplomatic bust-ups with its allies. It is possible that Ismael will follow in their footsteps – an outcome clearly at odds with the government's original motives for imprisoning him.

## **The price of freedom**

Papuan prisons are monotonous, depressing, and dangerous places. Beaten, tortured and isolated, the plight of Papuan political prisoners generates sympathy both at home and abroad. Imprisoned by the state for peaceful free expression, they gain instant moral high ground. Prisoners use this leverage effectively to attract local, national and international support. While the government is afraid to lift the lid on free expression for fear of the outcome, the mere existence of political prisoners in Papua challenges Indonesia's international credibility.

As the night draws on and the mosquitos buzz incessantly through the cells, Otto is spending another night behind bars. But despite the boredom and years of lost liberty, he is full of hope. He fills the hours by reading his book, furiously writing reports, checking on new inmates, smoking and eating betel nut. Inspired by former prisoners like Nelson Mandela and Xanana Gusmão, he is not concerned with personal liberty and has decided to reject parole, as it would involve acknowledging that he had committed a 'crime' and promising not to repeat it. This is a promise he cannot make, because with every hour that goes by he is acutely aware of the lack of freedom experienced by all Papuans.

Otto will be released in a few years. But there will be dozens more to replace him. Until the government of Indonesia gains the courage to talk to its critics, people like Otto, Meki and Ismael will continue to fill Papua's prisons.

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in Papua [www.papuansbehindbars.org](http://www.papuansbehindbars.org). Some names have been changed to protect identities.

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