The historical roots of special autonomy in Papua can be traced back to two major events. The first was a meeting of 100 Papuan representatives with President Habibie in Jakarta on 26 February 1999, and the second was the 2nd Papuan Congress held in Jayapura city from 29 May to 4 June 2000. In both events, Papuans expressed their demand for political independence. In response, the central government granted special autonomy through the enactment of Law No. 21/2001 (Special Autonomy Law). Although special autonomy is valid for an unspecified period of time, Article 34(6) of the Law states that special autonomy funding shall be valid for 20 years; it will come to an end in 2021. While the central government has decided to extend the allocation of special autonomy funds, various Papuan groups recently voiced their opposition. This rejection arguably has roots in differing perceptions of special autonomy between Jakarta and Papua. This In Brief examines these differences and suggests a way forward.

**Papua’s perceptions of special autonomy**

There were mixed reactions when special autonomy came into effect in Papua in 2001. Among political elites, academics, community and religious leaders, the response appeared to be positive. J.P. Solossa, governor of Papua at the time, for example, viewed the Special Autonomy Law as an opportunity not only for self-government and the welfare of Papuans (Kompas 2/5/2003), but also the ultimate solution to resolve political independence (Kompas 22/11/2003) — a view that was also shared by his successor, Barnabas Suebu. Similarly, some community and religious leaders perceived it as a ‘gift from God to enhance the well-being of Papuans’ (Kompas 21/12/2001).

Papuans also considered special autonomy as an opportunity to affirm their distinct identity and to pursue justice for human rights violations. For that reason, some Papuan nationalists supported the Law when it was formulated because it incorporated many of the values and ideas of political independence (Chauvel 2005). In this sense, special autonomy was perceived as a political instrument embedded in a legal system that could help to regain political liberation.

This positive reaction, however, was short-lived. Papuans realised that special autonomy was not a pathway to political independence. Consequently, distrust began to emerge, reaching its climax on 12 August 2005 when the Papua Customary Council (DAP) made a symbolic return of the Special Autonomy Law to Jakarta because it had failed to improve the living conditions of Papuans. Since then, Papuans have become increasingly resistant and distrustful of special autonomy.

If past governors (Solossa and Suebu) were supportive of special autonomy, the current governor of Papua, Lukas Enembe, has become increasingly sceptical, claiming that special autonomy did not solve the problems in Papua. Although Enembe did not openly oppose the renewal of special autonomy, his proposal of ‘special autonomy plus’ to provide more authority to the Papuan government has apparently not yet been answered. Likewise, if religious leaders in the past appeared to embrace the Special Autonomy Law, recently 57 Indigenous Papuan priests expressed their opposition towards special autonomy and advocated a national referendum to settle the matter on 21 July 2020.

**Jakarta’s perceptions of special autonomy**

A different view is taken by the central government. Signals from Jakarta indicate that special autonomy is seen as the best solution to promote Papua’s economic inequality. This approach underlines the continuities in Jakarta’s approach to special autonomy, starting from the Megawati presidency to the current government. For instance, while President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono focused on improving food security through the creation of a large-scale agriculture project — MIFEE (Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate) — and accelerating development through the Special Unit of Acceleration of Development for Papua and West Papua (UP4B), President Jokowi took a new turn by prioritising infrastructure development projects such as the Trans-Papua Highway, full electrification, and building seaports. For Jokowi, physical infrastructure would help reduce economic inequality.

Economic and infrastructure development remains the top priority within the context of special autonomy and how Jakarta
perceives Papua’s most pressing needs. Today, as in the past, Jakarta evinces little interest in addressing the contested history of Papua’s integration and its outstanding political and human rights issues. However, these issues are central for Papua, as demonstrated by their inclusion in Articles 45 and 46 of the Special Autonomy Law. It seems that Jakarta’s focus on those two sectors (economy and infrastructure) is based on the assumption that if economic welfare in Papua can be improved, then the other issues around human and political rights and Papuan historical claims would fade away.

Successive central governments have considered special autonomy as a means to prevent secession and have used it as a diplomatic instrument to gain international trust for territorial integrity. Indeed, Jakarta believes that the granting of special autonomy is a part of strengthening national integrity within the unitary state (ICG 2001:23). At United Nations General Assembly meetings, for instance, Jakarta pointed to the massive development and progress in both Papua and West Papua provinces and claimed that ‘Papua is, has and will always be part of Indonesia’. Owing to this, the call for a referendum to determine the political status of Papua is most unlikely to be accommodated by Jakarta; thereby, the only long-term option for Jakarta is to extend Papua’s special autonomy funds.

**Implications of the contrasting perceptions**

Papuans generally prefer a political solution while Jakarta prefers an economic solution. The divergent perceptions have led to several outcomes, such as poor implementation of special autonomy — Papua is ranked the poorest province of Indonesia and the lowest on the Human Development Index despite coming 17th out of 34 provinces in gross regional product in 2019. However, the most unresolved issue is the delay and the non-compliance by Jakarta with the provisions of the Special Autonomy Law.

Under the Law, for example, Article 5 mandates the establishment of a Papua People’s Assembly (MRP), which was delayed until 2005. Similarly, Article 45 requires not only the establishment of a Papuan representative office of the Human Rights Commission, which has been realised, but also a Human Rights Court and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (KKR). A KKR is crucial because, as specified in Article 46, it would help clarify the history of Papua within the Republic of Indonesia, and formulate and set steps for reconciliation. The Indonesian Institute of Science (LIPI) has regarded human rights violations as one of the root problems of persistent conflicts in Papua. Hence, the establishment of the KKR and Human Rights Court should provide an opportunity for the central government to demonstrate its political will to resolve human rights abuses. If the national government can establish these two human rights mechanisms, it may increase Papuan trust around the continuation of special autonomy.

However, while Papuans repeatedly express their hope for the establishment of a Human Rights Court and KKR, the Indonesian Constitution Court in 2006 cancelled the law that enacted the KKR, stating that it contradicted the constitution. This decision has in turn increased the discontent with the Indonesian government and revived the view that Jakarta lacks political will to implement all of the political provisions in the Special Autonomy Law.

**Conclusion**

Overall, key provisions in the Special Autonomy Law have not yet been fully realised since its introduction 19 years ago. This means that although further transfer payments have been agreed upon by central government, the continuation of special autonomy will be challenged in the near future, unless the competing perceptions can be overcome and trust restored. To reduce the tension between Jakarta and Papua over special autonomy, it is suggested that there be (1) an open and constructive dialogue about all political provisions specified in the text, and (2) a comprehensive evaluation before special autonomy fund is due next year, and annual evaluations afterwards, as mandated by Article 78.

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**Endnotes**

1. The term ‘Papua’ here refers to Papua Province of Indonesia, distinct from West Papua Province, which gained special autonomy status in 2008 following the issuance of Law No. 35/2008.
2. This fund amounts to 2 per cent of the national general allocation fund.
3. There have been evaluations by many agencies over the years, including by the DAP, but they are not conducted annually.

**References**


