



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Indonesia Permesta 1957–61

Executive Summary

On March 2, 1957, civil and military leaders in East Indonesia formed a rebel movement in response to Republic of Indonesia policies they felt were stifling local economies and disproportionately benefiting the majority Javanese ethnic group.¹ The movement initially took root in Makassar, the capital of South Sulawesi. Throughout 1957, leaders from Makassar traveled to Jakarta to meet with the officials in the Indonesian Army and the Republic of Indonesia. In January, Lieutenant Colonel Saleh Lahade and Major M. Jusuf met with the Chief of Staff of the Indonesian Army to lobby for greater regional military autonomy, including the formation of a regional military command.² On the political front, Sulawesi Governor Andi Pangerang Pettarani met with the prime minister and Minister of Home Affairs to discuss greater autonomy for regional governments.³ In late February, Andi Burhanuddin, Henk Rondonuwu, and Lieutenant Colonel Ventje Sumual visited Jakarta on behalf of the Sulawesi provincial government to make a final effort to urge reform.⁴ The lack of a meaningful response from the Indonesian government led to Sumual declaring a state of war in Eastern Indonesia on March 2, 1957.⁵ Permesta then issued the Universal Struggle Charter, which stated the goals of Permesta and clarified that the movement did not have separatist intentions but sought reform.⁶

The Sukarno regime responded by sending four high-ranking officials to meet with Sumual, whose headquarters had moved to North Sulawesi due to a lack of support in the South.⁷ The meeting resulted in the recognition of autonomous provinces in East Indonesia and the formation of a national conference to be held in September 1957. The conferences were unsuccessful, however.⁸ In February 1958, the Revolutionary Government of the Indonesian Republic (PRRI) was formed in Sumatra, and several Permesta leaders were appointed to the PRRI cabinet, thus unifying the two insurgent groups. By joining the revolutionary cause of the PRRI, Permesta formally severed itself from Jakarta, and civil conflict broke out.⁹

Between March 1958 and September 1961, Permesta and the PRRI waged an unsuccessful insurgency against the Republic of Indonesia. In January 1958, the CIA began supporting Permesta due to a concern about the vulnerability of the Indonesian government to Communism.¹⁰ Despite this support, Permesta was crushed by superior government forces and ultimately began peace negotiations in January 1960. On October 20, 1961, Sumual surrendered, and the rebellion ended.¹¹

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

Yes. During the Japanese occupation in World War II, feelings of Indonesian nationalism proliferated and resulted in an independence movement in 1940.¹² Indonesia received independence in 1949 after a violent struggle with colonial Dutch forces. While the Republic of Indonesia had some difficulty in uniting the diverse ethnicities and regions of Indonesia, nationalist sentiment was widespread.¹³

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

Yes. During the early years of the Republic of Indonesia, the diverse regions of Indonesia largely saw Jakarta as the legitimate seat of government. In the late 1950s and 1960s, however, Indonesia witnessed several insurgent movements challenging the central government. Analysis of the 1961 Indonesian census (Sensus Penduduk) reveals that the regions where such insurgencies operated held approximately 15 percent of the population—thus, it can be inferred that around 85 percent or more of the population still regarded the government as legitimate.¹⁴ In addition, three of the four insurgency groups (Permesta, PRRI, and the Indonesian Communist Party) initially accepted the central government and sought reform before turning to violence.

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

Yes. While the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) dealt with several insurgencies in various regions during the late 1950s and early 1960s, population data from the 1961 census shows that only around 15 percent of the population were in areas that saw conflict. In the case of Permesta, approximately 2.8 million people (2.9 percent of the Indonesian population) lived in the impacted regions of North Sulawesi and Maluku Islands.¹⁵

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

No. The insurgents did not maintain an external sanctuary as the conflict occurred only in the Indonesian archipelago.

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. The newly formed Indonesian Republic maintained the TNI. Although the armed forces were stretched thin during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the army was reasonably competent.¹⁶

| INDONESIA PERMESTA 1957–61 | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| NATIONAL IDENTITY | YES |
| GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY | YES |
| POPULATION SECURITY | YES |
| EXTERNAL SANCTUARY | NO |
| EXISTING SECURITY FORCES | YES |

Outcome

Government victory. In December 1960, the national government reached an agreement with Permesta to disarm.¹⁷ In 1961, Permesta forces began surrendering beginning with the Manguni Brigade.¹⁸ On October 20, 1961, Sumual and the remaining Permesta troops surrendered, and the conflict ended. Amnesty and abolition were granted to the former soldiers and leadership of Permesta, per Presidential Decree No. 322.¹⁹ The case of Permesta supports the theory, though national identity and government legitimacy are quite complex regarding Indonesia.

Endnotes

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18. Phill Manuel Sulu, *Permesta dalam romantika, kemelut & misteri* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2011).
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