

# Chinese-Indonesians must support '#PapuanLivesMatter'

**T**he giant wave of the United States' #BlackLivesMatter campaign has now swept across Indonesia. A number of groups have begun to discuss racism in the country and have touched upon a rarely discussed topic: racism against Papuans.

For a long time, racism against Indonesians of Chinese descent, also called Tionghoa, has dominated the nation's discourse on the subject. When someone says the word racism in the Indonesian context, many recall the May 1998 riots, about which considerable documentation and research exist.

As a fourth-generation Chinese-Indonesian myself, I have benefited from progress in the relationship between Chinese-Indonesians and the rest of the population. There have been ups and downs, and racism has not disappeared completely.

But progress has been made because we have been discussing the problem openly; we are aware that it is a problem. Many people have yet to recognize the rape of Chinese-Indonesian women in May 1998, but generally, we have acknowledged the victims' deaths, blood and tears.

This does not apply to racism against Papuans.

Even talking about it risks accusations of supporting Papuan separatism. At the very least, we will face a bevy of deniers saying there is no racism in Papua or that the deaths, blood and tears of Papuans are not the result of racism but rather a just punishment for separatists.

To say so is akin to saying that seeking to end racism against Chinese-Indonesians is the same as supporting communism. Fortunately, we left that phase long ago.

Many people are not happy with the #PapuanLivesMatter topic.

On June 5, for example, Amnesty International Indonesia held talks on human rights and freedom of expression in Papua. The discussion, which used the hashtag #PapuanLivesMatter, was bombarded by spammers. The speakers, who joined the discussion by phone, received incessant calls from unknown sources, mostly from foreign numbers – or numbers made to look foreign – as if from the US.

As of Saturday, we remain in the dark about who was responsible and what their possible motivations were. One thing is clear, however. There are people who



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**Cultural collective:** Dozens of Chinese-Indonesian women from a community called Cina Benteng take part in a *kebaya* (traditional blouse) festival at Old Market in Tangerang, Banten, on Dec. 21, 2019. Racism against Indonesians of Chinese descent remains a challenge in the culturally diverse nation.



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do not want us to talk about racism against Papuans because the issue relates to many unresolved human rights violations.

On Feb. 17, the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) released a report on its investigation of an incident that occurred five years ago called the Bloody Panial case, in which high school students were gunned down during a protest in Panial, Papua. Komnas HAM concluded that rank-and-file soldiers and their superiors carried the blame for the deaths of the students, aged 17 and 18, as well as for "torturing" another 21 protesting Papuans. They called the deaths a "gross human rights violation". The next day, Presidential Chief of Staff Moeldoko denied that this episode was a gross human rights violation.

There are those who say that it is ridiculous to compare the racism experienced by African-Americans to that experienced by Papuans. They claim racism in the US is worse. But how can we possibly know that when freedom of speech has been muffled in the provinces of Papua and West Papua? How can we understand the

gravity of the situation if we prevent Papuans from speaking and refuse to listen when they manage to make their voices heard?

What we know so far is that there are reports of extra-judicial killings, torture and persistent inequality in the social, economic, educational, health and technology spheres. That is easily bad enough, and we must end the injustice.

Others have said on social media that "All Lives Matter", that racism against Papuans does not merit particular attention given the number of other victims of injustice in Indonesia. Proponents of "All Lives Matter" seem to think there is no urgency to discuss racism against African-Americans in the US or against Papuans in Indonesia.

They're wrong. At the moment, racism against Papuans is an urgent matter in Indonesia, and as a victim of racism against Chinese-Indonesians, I'm saying we have to talk more about racism against Papuans.

Unfortunately, solidarity among victims does not come naturally to most people. I have learned from both textbooks and

real life that the experience of being a victim does not necessarily mean you will extend your empathy to others.

There are even instances where victims of injustice do further injustice to others, like a man who is a victim of racism but beats his wife or children at home.

To join together in solidarity is a conscious choice. And we should do so because we believe in the cause: that human beings should be able to live safely amid their differences and give equal respect to everyone, regardless of skin color. No one should die or suffer because of their physical traits.

I make the call to fellow Indonesians, regardless of their race, to recognize racism against Papuans and talk about it more extensively and deeply.

Specifically, I call upon fellow Chinese-Indonesians. We are victims who have come a long way in improving the situation. Support from fellow victims of racism lends more credibility and force to the struggle to end discrimination once and for all.

Indonesia still has a lot to do to combat racism against Chinese-Indonesians, especially as the rising power of China somehow gives rise to negative sentiment against the Chinese diaspora around the world.

But this does not mean we lack the space and energy to fight for justice for other victims of racism. Papuan lives matter. Let's talk about it often and loudly.