

ALT Black Portraits Stories Filep Karma

A warm breeze was gently caressing the cheeks of those watching, as the West Papuan flag was slowly, determinedly raised. Soon the thick red vertical stripe with a white star over it and the seven blue horizontal stripes were fluttering seductively in the wind, promising something better for the future. A crowd cheered and cheered again as Filep Karma strode purposefully forward to the small stage. It was 1st December 2004 and the date was auspicious. It was the anniversary of Papuan independence for the Dutch and the watching Indonesian security forces understood this only too well.

Karma was forty-five years old. He had been born into an upper class family in Biak Papua. Having become a civil servant like his father, Karma had gone to Manila to further his studies at the Asian Institute of Management. He never completed his studies. He returned home to Java in West Papua in 1997, to find it in turmoil. People were protesting in large numbers against the Indonesia President Suharto. The Papuans hated been ruled by the Indonesians. The West Papuans were Melonesians not Indonesians and Karma soon decided that he should use his education and learning to take a stand. He began to openly speak out for independence for West Papua.

This was why he was there on that fateful day. As the flag fluttered suggestively in the breeze, so Karma spoke out strongly for West Papua and for freedom. West Papua should be an independent state, not part of Indonesia. Suddenly the celebratory atmosphere was shattered into frightened pieces as shots rang out from the Indonesian security forces. Screams rang out, drowning out the benign wafting of the tepid breeze and a number of those present fell to the ground. With brutal indifference to those who were crying out for help, the security forces moved in and arrested Filep Karma.

The security forces efficiently dispersed the rest of the crowd and were soon heading back to their headquarters where their chief was waiting for them. In tow was Filep Karma.

"Did you get Karma"?

"Yes, chief, of course. It was easy."

"Good put him in the cells. We can't have him mouthing off all the time about West Papuan independence. Not with the new gas field being found just off the coast. Anyway, how could the West Papuans rule themselves? They need us. People like Karma are dreamers. Dangerous dreamers. Make sure he is well guarded." Karma went quietly to his cell ignoring the taunts of his guards.

Suddenly at the police station a young man of 25 years walked in.

"I have just come from the flag ceremony. Why have you arrested Filep Karma? What has he done wrong? He has only raised a flag and said what he believes!"

"And what is your name?"

"Yusak Pakage".

At that two further officers grabbed Yusak and took him off towards the cells.

"Well, Yusak, consider yourself arrested as well now!", the first officer shouted after him with a sly laugh.

Meanwhile Filep settled as best as he could into his routines and waited for his day in court. After all, he had only said what he believed; that West Papua should be free. At length his day did come. Charged along with Yusak with treason against the Indonesian state, he was sentenced to 15 years in prison and packed off to Abepura Prison in Jayapura.

When it was Yusak's turn in the dock, the prosecutor looked sternly at Yusak.

"You have damaged the sovereignty of Indonesia", the prosecutor said and almost before he knew what had happened, Yusak had also been given a prison sentence for treason. He was sent down for 10 years. Then one day in 2005, he saw his chance. He was being escorted home to collect a book, when he got the opportunity to break away. He ran as fast as he could and found shelter at the office of Elsham Papua. He was still there when the police arrived a few hours later and took Yusak back to prison. He was released on 8th July after serving half of his ten-year sentence.

Once the shock of his own 15-year sentence had gone, Karma settled back into the prison routines. He was even given some leave to go home. Then one day in 2009 he arrived late back from this prison break.

"You are late", a prison guard barked at Filep.

"Yes, I know, I'm sorry", Filep replied.

"Well, that isn't good enough", the guard replied as one of his colleagues began to hover round menacingly.

At that the first guard hit Filep who staggered forward. He was hit again, in the face and his glasses were broken. One of his eyelids was badly torn. He was seen by a doctor and said that he needed proper hospital treatment. His doctor agreed but nothing was done. Filep had always spoken out against violence being used as a tactic to win independence for West Papua.

The following year, Filep appeared on local radio.

"How have you been treated in prison?" asked the interviewer.

"I have been punched, kicked, pulled. But what hurts more is the mental torture we are subjected to."¹

Later that week a BBC News journalist interviewed a spokesman for the Indonesian Foreign Ministry.

"What about these accusations made by Filep Karma, that he has been punched kicked, pulled and subjected to mental torture?"

"Allegations of prisoner abuse were always investigated and dealt with properly", the spokesman calmly replied .

Meanwhile Filep had another problem. One day he found that he had a terrible pain in his stomach. He asked if he could see the prison doctor.

"No. You can't see the prison doctor".

"But I am in terrible pain."

"You still can't see the prison doctor".

Filep was suffering from internal bleeding, a suspected tumour on his colon and inflammation of the stomach. The prison authorities were obliged under international standards to pay for his transport to a hospital where he could be treated properly. Again, however they refused to do so. Then one day a guard came to see Filep:

"Get ready. You can go to hospital".

"How can I go hospital now?"

"People from other countries have raised the money. Come on get ready".

Filep was then able to go to hospital and was reported to be treated well throughout the time he was there.

Today the sun rose as usual over the prison where Filep is being kept. He still has years to go, until he completes his 15-year sentence. All for raising a flag and saying what he believed.

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