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East Timor's Tragedy and Triumph

Stephen Zunes

East Timor is largely in ruins as a result of the Indonesian-led destruction and massacres of September 1999. Yet the East Timorese are finally free. That such carnage was allowed to take place is yet another indictment of U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia, yet the ultimate victory of the population of East Timor is a triumphant reflection of the power of ordinary people—in both East Timor and around the world—to triumph against enormous odds.

This final wave of repression escalated dramatically following the August 30 United-Nations-supervised referendum, when the East Timorese voted by a nearly 4:1 margin for independence with a turnout of more than 98%. With many thousands still missing, the final death toll from the weeks of terror by Indonesian-backed pro-integration militias and the Indonesian forces themselves may never be known. Most of the downtown of East Timor's capital city was destroyed as were many other towns and villages. As many as 400,000 refugees fled. The main targets of the death squads were journalists, human rights activists, U.N. workers, supporters of independence, and priests and nuns.

East Timor is a predominantly Catholic country, where the church—like in Poland and El Salvador during the 1980s—was the center of resistance against Indonesia's brutal 24-year occupation. Dozens of priests and nuns were murdered and churches and convents burned to the ground, even with the religious and their parishioners inside. Dili's bishop, Carlos Belo, winner of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize, temporarily fled the country, barely escaping with his life, and Bacau's bishop, Basilio do Nascimento, was stabbed.

In terms of deaths, property destruction and people made refugees, the repression surpassed that of Kosovo earlier that year. The response of the United States and other Western nations could not have been more different, however. Indeed, the reaction of the Clinton administration was quite timid. And the case for intervention was actually far stronger: while Kosovo was universally recognized as part of Serbia, the United Nations and virtually all the nations of the world recognized East Timor as being under an illegal foreign occupation. No one suggested bombing the Indonesian capital of Jakarta; that would not have been necessary. Simply ceasing military cooperation and threatening to cut off further international loans to Indonesia's struggling economy were all it took to force that government to stop the slaughter. But the Clinton administration did not take these steps until a full nine days after the slaughter began. At no point did Clinton or other international leaders threaten to freeze the extensive overseas assets of Indonesia's generals, which would have likely stopped the assault in its tracks.

Much of the delay was a result of the United States' insistence that the international community needed Indonesia's permission to intervene with peacekeeping forces. Yet East Timor was no more the 27th province of Indonesia than Kuwait was the 19th province of Iraq when Iraqi forces controlled that sheikdom nine years earlier. Since unilaterally annexing a territory seized by military force does not give the occupier the legal right of sovereignty, Indonesia had no legal standing in determining whether peacekeeping forces should be allowed to enter the territory. Even as the multinational peacekeeping forces were arriving, air drops of food to starving East Timorese who had fled to the mountains to escape the Indonesians' reign of terror were delayed due to U.S. insistence that the Indonesian demand that their personnel be allowed to accompany the relief flights be honored, which required landing in Dili's small airport—made difficult by the stream of incoming peacekeeping forces—instead of flying directly from nearby Australia.

After ignoring one of the most serious violations of international law and human rights of the past quarter-century, the media finally started paying attention to East Timor as the violence escalated. Unfortunately, they often got their facts wrong, such as referring to the pro-independence East Timorese as "secessionists" and East Timor as a "breakaway province." "Secession" can only be used if one is referring to separation from a country of which one is legally a part. (For example, one does not generally hear Palestinians seeking statehood referred to as "secessionists" from Israel.) This is what distinguishes East Timor from anti-Jakarta rebellions in Aceh and West Irian, which—unlike the Portuguese colony of East Timor—were part of the Dutch East Indies, all of which became the modern state of Indonesia. (Interestingly, the strong centralist tendencies of both rightist military officers and more left-leaning nationalists in Indonesia which has prompted such movements, is, in part, a reaction to the CIA organized and supported rebellions on some of the outer islands during the late 1950s against Sukarno.)

There was some criticism in the media and elsewhere about the ineffectiveness and naiveté of the United Nations in promising the East Timorese that they would stay and protect the people after the vote, even though they had no forces of their own and they had allowed the Indonesian occupation forces to provide security. While some blame does indeed lie with the U.N., most of the fault lies with the United States and other member states of the Security Council, which refused to authorize the U.N. to have the kind of presence necessary to maintain the peace and to insist that Indonesian forces withdraw prior to the referendum.

As evidence increased in the months prior to the referendum that the Indonesian armed forces were arming and training pro-integration militias, pressure mounted on the Clinton administration to insist that the Indonesians cut their ties. Cables intercepted by journalists indicated that Admiral Dennis Blair, chief of the U.S. Pacific Command, along with the U.S. military attaché at the U.S. embassy in Jakarta, had offered reassurances to the Indonesian military of ongoing strategic cooperation just as the Clinton administration was claiming that it was finally getting tough with Jakarta. Such perfidy was not new. On two occasions since Indonesia's invasion of East Timor in 1975, the U.S. had publically announced suspension of certain arms transfers and military training, only to be exposed later as having continued them through some other program.

As the violence escalated in early September, the Clinton administration initially denied the overwhelming evidence that the pro-integration militias were working closely with the Indonesian armed forces and engaging in the terror directly, despite intercepted radio transmissions and eyewitness accounts fully available to U.S. officials. The Clinton administration also issued false reports that the Indonesians were getting the situation under control during the first few days after the referendum results were announced, even praising the Indonesian imposition of martial law, the impact of which was primarily to limit communication from the island to the outside world. Eventually, the U.S. acknowledged that "some rogue elements" of the Indonesian forces were involved, even though evidence suggests that the actions came from the very top of the armed forces and that General Wiranto, commander of the Indonesian armed forces, was playing a conscious game of brinkmanship to see how far he could go before prompting a Western reaction. By mid-September, the U.S. had forced Indonesia to accept an Australian-led United Nations force into the territory. The U.S. and U.N. allowed Indonesian forces to remain, however, until the end of October.

Since that time, the Clinton administration has tried to renew its close relations with the Indonesian military, which still wields great power in that large country despite Indonesia's tentative steps towards democracy. In addition, in contrast to U.S. demands that Iraq pay compensation to Kuwait—one of the richest countries in the world—for its six-month occupation, the Clinton administration has refused to similarly demand reparations by Indonesians for East Timor—one of the poorest countries in the world—for the enormous destruction and looting during the final days of its occupation, well-documented by the international media. To this day, tens of thousands of East Timorese driven out of their country by the Indonesians are effectively being held hostage in West Timor and other parts of Indonesia, yet the Clinton administration defers to Indonesian sovereignty instead of demanding the return of the East Timorese who were essentially kidnapped.

The history of U.S. policy towards Indonesia is one of the most scandalous in modern history. In December 1975, President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger visited the Indonesian capital of Jakarta. At that time, Indonesian forces had already begun to support a tiny pro-annexationist faction in East Timor, which had just won independence from Portugal. By all accounts, in the meeting with the Indonesian dictator Suharto, Ford gave the green light for a full-scale invasion, which began within 24 hours. Kissinger publicly stated that the United States "understands Indonesia's position on East Timor," namely, that it not be allowed its right of self-determination under international law.

While the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously for Indonesia to halt its invasion and withdraw to within its internationally recognized borders, the U.S. blocked the U.N. from imposing economic sanctions or any other means of enforcing its mandate. Then-U.S. ambassador to the U.N., Daniel Patrick Moynihan, later bragged how, under State Department instructions, he had made the U.N. "totally ineffectual" in bringing a halt to the invasion.

During his first year in office, President Jimmy Carter ordered a 79% increase

in military aid to Indonesia, including deliveries of counter-insurgency aircraft which allowed the Indonesians to dramatically expand the air war with devastating consequences. By the end of the decade, as many as 200,000 East Timorese—more than one-third of the island's population—were dead from Indonesian massacres, forced starvation and preventable diseases. When asked about U.S. law prohibiting arms transfers to such aggressor nations, a Carter State Department official stated that, since Indonesia had annexed East Timor, the conflict was no longer an invasion but an internal rebellion. As Carter's Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Richard Holbrooke played a major role in the Carter administration's pro-Indonesia tilt and the military aid package that helped make possible the wholesale slaughter of the late 1970s. He also took part in the Carter administration's cover-up that followed: for example, in testimony before Congress on December 4, 1979, Holbrooke claimed that the mass starvation was simply due to neglect during Portuguese rule. Holbrooke has since held a number of prominent positions in the Clinton administration and became U.S. ambassador to the United Nations just prior to the 1999 massacres.

Holbrook was not the only high Clinton official who had long served as an apologist for the Jakarta regime: Stanley Roth, Clinton's Assistant Secretary of State for Asia, had maintained close personal friendships with top Indonesian officials since the late 1970s, when he visited the country at the invitation of the Jakarta-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He was particularly close to Yusuf Wanandi, a top official at the CSIS who played a key role in secretly lining up U.S. support for the invasion of East Timor. After the 1991 massacre of 270 unarmed East Timorese protestors by U.S.-armed Indonesian occupation forces led to widespread public outcry, Roth, then the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, led the Pentagon's campaign to defeat the Feingold Amendment, which would have conditioned U.S. arms sales to Indonesia on human rights improvements in East Timor. During the debate, Roth said the U.S. would consider reducing arms sales only after Indonesia staged another massacre. After a stint as senior director for Asia on the National Security Council, Roth acknowledged in the *Washington Post* that the "driving dynamic" of U.S. policy towards Indonesia was Washington's desire "not to totally screw up the trade relationship" over human rights concerns or Indonesia's ongoing violations of United Nations Security Council resolutions.

With a team like that, it is not surprising that Clinton refused to demand that Indonesia withdraw its troops from East Timor, as was required by two 1975 Security Council resolutions. As Clinton's ambassador to Indonesia, Stapleton Roy, put it, "Indonesia matters, East Timor does not." Yet neither had previous administrations cared about East Timor. Since the 1975 invasion, the U.S. voted repeatedly with a minority of countries in the U.N. General Assembly opposing self-determination for East Timor. Despite close diplomatic contacts, including several summit meetings, the United States rarely raised the issue with the Indonesian authorities prior to 1999 and the U.S. was one of the few countries to recognize Indonesian sovereignty over the territory, albeit with the acknowledgment that the population was not consulted.

The large-scale arms transfers initiated under Carter continued to flow under

the Reagan, Bush and Clinton administrations. Congress had restricted taxpayer-funded U.S. training of the Indonesian military since 1992, but the Clinton administration repeatedly pushed for a resumption of full unrestricted military instruction and continued much of the training through new programs in an attempt to bypass the Congressional restrictions.

Indonesia is not the only country to use American weapons to invade and occupy neighboring states, oppress the indigenous population, and violate U.N. Security Council resolutions calling for the withdrawal of occupation forces. Indeed, Turkey, Morocco and Israel all share this notorious distinction with Indonesia's military-dominated government, though none comes close to the level of brutality inflicted upon East Timor.

For 24 years, this policy challenged Americans of conscience. Many Americans began to wonder: if the United States could fail to take leadership on an issue where right and wrong was so obvious, how could the U.S. ever hope to resolve more complicated issues like Israel/Palestine or the Balkans?

The awarding of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize to two East Timorese activists—Bishop Carlos Belo and the *de facto* foreign minister in exile, Jose Ramos Horta—helped mobilized public opinion in democratic countries around the world in support of the East Timorese cause. The tiny East Timor solidarity movement had been growing steadily, in part due to fallout from the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre in Dili, where hundreds of civilians were gunned down before a small group of Western journalists, and in part due to an award-winning Canadian documentary on Noam Chomsky which prominently featured the tragedy of East Timor.

By 1997, after years of silence, editorials in influential Western media, such as the *New York Times* and *The Economist*, finally called for self-determination for East Timor. The Roman Catholic Church began taking an increasingly active role in supporting the rights of the East Timorese. The Portuguese and other governments became more emboldened to press the issue at international forums. In Great Britain, Australia, the United States and several European countries, opposition parties on both the left and the right found it politically expedient to challenge their governments' support of the Indonesian regime over the East Timor issue. Australia—one of the few countries to fully recognize Indonesia's annexation (securing a major oil concession as a result)—finally called for East Timorese self-determination and both the European Union and the U.S. Congress passed resolutions supporting a referendum.

It became difficult for Indonesian leaders to visit a major Western nation without being dogged by both pro-East-Timorese demonstrators and reporters questioning the country's East Timor policy. Attacks by Canadian police against participants in a peaceful pro-East-Timor demonstration at the APEC summit in Vancouver in 1997 nearly brought down the government when it was revealed that the prime minister's office had promised the Indonesians that they would not allow protesters to embarrass the visiting Suharto. Public opposition in the United States to Indonesia's occupation of East Timor was largely responsible for the Indonesian government's canceling of its request for the purchase of U.S. fighter jets and military training in May 1997. Proposed arms transfers to Indonesia became major political battles in several countries. Indeed, the United

States, which provided 90% of the weapons used in Indonesia's initial invasion, eventually prohibited use of U.S. weapons by Indonesian forces in East Timor.

This moral pressure proved increasingly embarrassing for Indonesia, for foreign companies seeking investment opportunities in the country, as well as for allied governments seeking close diplomatic, military and economic ties. This is what created the momentum for a diplomatic solution to the problem in the hope that Indonesia could somehow wash its hands of the affair. The U.S. did not want to see its ally weakened or distracted by East Timor in the wake of the far more significant economic crises that resulted from the economic collapse in Southeast Asia which began in late 1997. Already facing enormous criticisms internationally for its domestic political repression, its labor practices, environmental policies, and response to the economic crisis, moderate elements within the Indonesian leadership hoped that agreeing to a just solution on East Timor would prove to be a relatively painless way of assuaging international pressure. Indeed, some analysts trace the increased possibility of Indonesian compromise back to the 1988 decision to open up the territory to outside observers and foreign investors, which in turn was a response to negative international publicity about the repression of the population. The severe repression that followed the 1999 referendum was led by elements of the military who did not care much about international public opinion. Even they backed off, however, when the Clinton administration, under growing popular pressure at home, announced the severing of military cooperation nine days into the post-referendum attacks.

The way Indonesia eventually granted East Timor its freedom reveals an important lesson: ten, or even just five, years ago, East Timor was widely seen as the ultimate case of *realpolitik*, of the triumph of brute military force over international law and human rights. The East Timorese resistance was down to a couple of hundred lightly armed fighters in the mountains against tens of thousand Indonesian occupation forces. The major international players—the United States, Great Britain and Australia—were solidly behind Indonesia as were all of Indonesia's neighbors, the Islamic world and even major non-aligned countries like India. The U.N. had essentially given up. Even many of those inclined to be supportive of East Timor believed it was a hopeless cause. Yet, in January 1999, Indonesian President Habibie announced that he would allow a vote to take place in East Timor for the East Timorese to choose their fate. And, despite the tragic spasm of violence in the final weeks of the occupation following the vote, it is a victory to be celebrated. One priest compared this past Christmas Day in Dili—the first Christmas the East Timorese had ever celebrated free of Portuguese, Japanese or Indonesian occupation—with the Dr. Seuss story of the Whos after the grinch had stolen all their possessions: there was little to show materially due to the theft and destruction three months earlier, yet they could still sing and celebrate.

The unlikely triumph of the East Timorese is in large part a result of their own tenacity—within their country, by exiles overseas and even through students within Indonesia quietly cultivating some limited support as the autocratic system began opening up. However, much of the credit must also go to the many grassroots human rights activists around the world who kept the issue alive while most Western governments were in complicity with the repression and most of

the world's media ignored it. Human rights organizations, the religious community and solidarity groups like the East Timor Action Network lobbied, demonstrated and worked with the news media to the point where East Timor could no longer be ignored.

For all of us who have ever marched, written letters, committed civil disobedience, taken part in vigils, passed out leaflets or engaged in any other activity to challenge our government's support of repression overseas, this is a vindication. East Timor proves that we can indeed make a difference.

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