

# **East Timor and the United Nations**

Ruth Wedgwood

Professor of Law, Yale University Law School

Edward Burling Professor of International Law and Diplomacy,

Nitze School of Advanced International Studies,

Johns Hopkins University, 2001-2002

Prepared for the Columbia International Affairs Online Curriculum Modules, August 2001

## **Introduction**

East Timor has been buffeted for decades by the winds of world power politics. Indonesia's invasion across the border from West Timor in 1975 overran the political space created by the precipitous withdrawal of the colony's former Portuguese administrators. The small island state, fabled for its sandalwood and coffee, held little continued interest for Lisbon amidst the distractions of its own "Carnation Revolution." Jakarta found an excuse for the intervention by claiming the right to police a burgeoning civil conflict between socialist, pro-Portuguese, and pro-Indonesian factions in East Timor. And while Security Council members voted in the United Nations to condemn Indonesia's invasion, the attention given to East Timor dwindled over the years, confined to the General Assembly and non-governmental organizations.

During the Cold War, the West rationalized its commitment to the Suharto regime by viewing the regime as essential to regional stability and commerce, though this approach left the East Timorese to a difficult fate. Indonesia's assets of rubber and oil were attractive to the West, and its sea lanes are essential for passage from the Indian Ocean to the Sea of Japan for commercial shipping and naval deployments. East Timor is on the outer edge of the Indonesian archipelago, four hundred miles northwest of

Australia, yet its northern coast abuts the deep-water Ombai-Wetar strait, the most secure route through the archipelago for nuclear submarines patrolling the Pacific as part of America's nuclear triad. In the midst of the war in Vietnam, and the accompanying heightened concerns about the influence of communism in the region, General Suharto's anti-communist policies were valued by Washington. The challenges of unifying an ethnically diverse population scattered among eleven major islands, and Jakarta's fears that the glue might come unstuck, persuaded the Western allies to tolerate Indonesian policies in East Timor. West Papua was transferred to Indonesian control in 1969, after a controversial U.N.-supervised "consultation" with local leaders. Jakarta also used its army to repress an ongoing rebellion on the island of Sumatra, in the Muslim oil-producing region of Aceh, adjacent to the strategic Straits of Malacca and a locus of significant western investment.

### **East Timor and the International Community**

Even within the region, there was no obvious counterweight to Indonesia's heft in East Timor (Indonesia is the regional giant, with a population of 200 million). Australia occupied East Timor in World War Two as part of a defensive perimeter against Japan, but the island was quickly conquered by Japan. Australia's armed forces are modest, currently totaling 48,000 personnel, and its major population centers are 2500 miles away from East Timor, on the southern coast of the continent. The regional powers of Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, have not attempted to review the domestic policies of other member governments, and Japan has been disqualified from a more active role. Jakarta's continued repression of the East Timorese independence movement was unrelenting, but the "missing" population of East Timor was dismissed by Jakarta as a matter of changed census methodology, rather than the result of ill-treatment and counter-insurgency. International journalists were excluded from East Timor during most of the occupation, and the intelligentsia of the island were forced into exile or killed. Not even the Santa Cruz cemetery massacre in 1991, with the police killing of 271 demonstrators in front of international journalists, was enough to alter the sense that Indonesia would remain in control of East Timor for the foreseeable future. Indonesian foreign minister Ali Alatas

continued to win admiration for his work on behalf of ASEAN in crafting the Cambodian peace accords and mediating regional conflicts over the Spratly Islands, and was even mentioned as a candidate for U.N. Secretary-General. Australia's interest in good relations with Indonesia extended to the development of natural gas and oil reserves in northern offshore areas, and in 1991, the Labor government in Canberra decided to enter into a joint production agreement with Jakarta for exploitation of reserves off East Timor's southern coast. Australia's treaty with Jakarta for development of the so-called "Timor Gap" formally recognized East Timor as an Indonesian province. (Australia used an argument of "effectivity" – that there was no foreseeable chance of reversing Indonesian control of the area.) The Timor Gap treaty crowned Australia as the first country in the world to recognize Indonesia's claim to the territory.

But a tone of realism was not limited to Indonesia's neighbors. In 1995, Portugal challenged Australia's role in the Timor Gap development as a violation of East Timor's sovereignty. The International Court of Justice in The Hague rather abruptly dismissed the case on jurisdictional grounds, explaining that only Australia had agreed to the court's jurisdiction and that Indonesia's actions were the real matter for examination. Some observers found it ironic that an alleged invader could qualify as a necessary party for a suit to proceed. To be sure, in 1996, the Nobel Prize committee awarded the annual peace prize to Bishop Belo of East Timor and East Timorese leader Jose Ramos Horta, but the award was controversial in some quarters, and did not itself seem likely to alter Indonesia's determination to maintain control. Though Suharto resigned in 1998, the Indonesian military retained its prominent role, with guaranteed seats in the national Parliament and broad autonomy in the regional commands.

This background made it all the more remarkable that the United Nations found a new and constructive role to play in the East Timor tragedy. Under the aegis of U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Portugal and Indonesia initiated quiet negotiations on the possibility of a "consultation" by ballot with the people of East Timor on the island's political future. Suharto's successor, President Habibie, remarkably decided to allow the Timorese people to take part in a secret ballot that would pose the alternatives of eventual

independence or continued affiliation with Indonesia. Jakarta may have supposed that a new Timorese generation, reared in Indonesian schools and speaking Bahasa Indonesian, would see a link to Jakarta as a foregone conclusion. East Timor gained some economic benefit by supplying goods to West Timor. Jakarta also subsidized local medical services and invested heavily in the island's infrastructure of roads and facilities. When it appeared that the outcome of the ballot would be less clear than expected, Habibie's decision was resisted by the Indonesian military, the TNI, and the Indonesian intelligence services, known as Kopassus.

Concern about security for the balloting was voiced throughout the preparatory process. In the spring of 1999, a number of dreadful attacks were staged by pro-Jakarta militia members, including an infamous massacre of several hundred people in the Catholic Church of Suai, on the inaccessible southern coast. Another massacre in a church sanctuary was staged in the coastal town of Liquica, near the capital city of Dili, as if to suggest that nothing would be held sacrosanct, even the authority of the Catholic Church. But the United Nations mission preparing for the election did not have gendarme authority, and Indonesia's global importance blunted any impulse to push Jakarta to accept U.N. peacekeepers. The balloting revealed that a majority of 78.5 percent favored independence. But in the immediate aftermath of the vote, the pro-Jakarta militias engaged in a prolonged and vengeful rampage of extraordinary ferocity. The militias, acting in parallel throughout the island, torched every major public building, market, and school, burned down almost all dwelling houses, and carted off every visible kind of capital equipment, including automobiles, generators, and typewriters. Most Timorese fled to the hills, and approximately 200,000 were forced to board buses and ferries taking them over the border to West Timor. At least several hundred people were killed. Any rational motive for this act of revenge was hard to discern, since the public results of the election made it improbable that Indonesia could contemplate retaining control. But many observers concluded that the Indonesian military and intelligence services helped to organize the militia activity as a demonstration to other populations in Indonesia that a push for independence would bring a future of poverty and deprivation.

The United Nations has been appropriately criticized in other settings for failing to deploy the armed force necessary for the defense of civilian populations. This criticism can be levied against the U.N.'s role in the Bosnian war, where 200,000 civilians died from 1992 through 1995. It can be applied to Rwanda, where a small U.N. peacekeeping force was withdrawn in the midst of the Hutu genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, and up to one million Tutsi were subsequently killed. The western intervention in Kosovo in 1999 is perhaps the exception, mounting a military campaign to end the Serb destruction of Albanian villages and the forced deportation of ethnic Albanians. But the modality for that decision and intervention was through NATO, not the United Nations. The Security Council was blocked by the threat of a Russian veto, and the Secretary-General's concession that diplomacy had a better chance of success if backed by force brought wide criticism from Asian and some African members.

The United Nations' response to the security crisis in East Timor may be grouped with these instances. Though repeated concerns were relayed to President Habibie, U.N. officials did not push for any more vigorous response. The Indonesian military, in the person of General Wiranto, assured the U.N. that it would guarantee security for the election, and when the rampage began, disputed the extent of the damage. Australia was the only viable source of immediate military assistance, and, though the conservative government in Canberra supported the Timorese consultation, Australia feared that Indonesia would treat any forcible intervention as an act of war. Finally, in early September, the Security Council sent a diplomatic mission to Jakarta and East Timor, and persuaded President Habibie to invite an Australian peacekeeping force to restore order. The Australian "INTERFET" force landed in late September 1999, with a handover of power from Indonesian authorities, and quickly quelled the violence. A multinational U.N. peacekeeping force was later authorized, retaining a core of Australian and New Zealand troops, together with personnel from Portugal, Brazil, and more than two a dozen other countries.

The withdrawal of Indonesia from the island has also left the United Nations with the unprecedented task of attempting to equip a country for independence in a

compressed period. In 1993, Jose Ramos Horta proposed that East Timor should have a transitional period of up to seven years before independence. The mandate of the United Nations, following the militia violence, has been to reconstruct a public administration in a far shorter time, and under more difficult circumstances. There are almost no East Timorese trained in administration, and few with a college or professional school education. During the 25-year occupation, Indonesian civil servants held all senior administrative positions in East Timor, and they fled the country with the retreat of the Indonesian army. Some East Timorese held minor positions, but many who worked with the Jakarta regime are wary of returning and remain in West Timor as refugees. The business community in East Timor was predominantly Chinese, and almost all have left. The Timorese who went into exile during the occupation have established lives in Australia and elsewhere, and it is difficult to induce people to return to an uncertain situation and depressed economy.

East Timor has a wrecked infrastructure, as a result of the militia rampage, and the simple necessities of housing materials and school supplies are difficult to obtain. It is not at all clear how to build a viable economy for its one million people. Per capita income, even before the militia violence, was only \$400 per year. Coffee cultivation offers limited employment, and as a labor pool for light manufacture, East Timor's remote location and lack of transportation facilities present sharp obstacles. Tourism is also hindered by the distance from Jakarta and Australia's major cities, and the island's small size, as well as by the established international reputations of Indonesian islands such as Bali and Sulawesi. The political optimism of East Timor has been dampened by local realization that an international presence does not promise international standards of living.

The contrast with the prosperity of the international community is also galling to the Timorese. At the center of the harbor in Dili, the long white government building formerly used by the Indonesians now houses U.N. administrators, restyled as the U.N. Transitional Administration in East Timor, or "UNTAET." The 8000 soldiers of the multinational peacekeeping force and approximately 1400 international civilian police

hired by the United Nations add to the complement of international non-Timorese who have money to spend and Land Rovers to drive. Initially, UNTAET had no East Timorese in senior positions, and this course was precipitously changed only after public criticism by Jose Ramos Horta. Senior U.N. staff members betray a lack of experience in the delivery of basic government services, and the U.N.'s centralized administrative procedures are unsuited for a country that lacks any infrastructure or working commercial telephone system. International aid agencies have gradually learned to avoid funneling aid through the U.N. administration, preferring to deliver aid monies directly to local areas.

The budgets for the peacekeeping and UNTAET missions have exceeded \$500 million per year. In contrast, the new East Timorese government has been put on a skimpy budget of \$59 million for all government services. The U.N. designated a nominee of the International Monetary Fund to serve as the U.N. mission's chief fiscal officer, and embraced the argument that even in a period of rebuilding wrecked infrastructure, the government should be limited to an annual budget sustainable for the long term. One of UNTAET's early acts was to dismiss thousands of secondary school teachers and nurses, because of the stringency of the local budget. The only source of amelioration may lie in the Timor Gap reserves of natural gas and oil. UNTAET (acting for East Timor) recently completed negotiations with Australia for a larger share of the revenues from the joint development zone. The East Timor share of royalties may amount to \$3.5 billion over twenty years. (That, of course, would amount to \$3500 per citizen—hardly a windfall).

In addition, the security situation has remained uncertain. East Timor serves as a lesson for defense planners, showing that few peacekeeping commitments are ever really short-term. In the summer of 2000, in several fatal incidents, U.N. peacekeepers were attacked in the border area by infiltrating West Timorese militia. These attacks have died down, but the political transition in Indonesia, with the replacement of President Wahid by Megawati Sukarnoputri, may further enhance the power of Indonesia's military and intelligence services. East Timor's allocated \$59 million budget cannot sustain a large

force; current plans are for 1500 in a domestic defense force, with 1500 reservists. East Timor's long-term security requires at least informal security commitments from international partners. Australia plans to keep a core force in East Timor, even after the departure or scaling back of the multinational force. In the view of Australian defense planners, pro-Jakarta militias may attempt to reassert power in the absence of the international gendarmerie.

The problem of demobilizing and reemploying former insurgents also has not proved easy. The 25-year long Timorese armed resistance was led by the guerrilla force of the Falintil. Its veterans remain, with their weapons, in an encampment in the town of Aileu, 90 minutes from the capital city of Dili. Some local observers fear that the Falintil could become an enforcement arm for political factions, in particular, an instrument of power for the allied political party known as FREITILIN (Frente Revolucionaria Timore Leste, or "Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor"). Alternative employment is unlikely. Any wholesale redeployment of the Falintil along the border would be provocative to Indonesia. Veterans of the Falintil are eligible to become members of the new defense force, but many have been disqualified for medical disabilities incurred in prior service. The U.N. and the NGO's decline to give food or economic assistance to any armed group, and there is concern that unemployed men with guns will exacerbate the coarsening atmosphere in some Timorese towns.

There is, as well, the difficulty of sorting out the nature of East Timor's political identity. To be sure, some of the sources of ideological stress from the early 1970's now seem quite antiquated. The rhetoric of "people's liberation" has been replaced with U.N. acronyms. A political coalition called the CNRT ("National Council of Timorese Resistance") hung together throughout the period of the U.N.-supervised referendum, and though it is now disbanded, there is still the firm expectation that either former Falintil commander Xanana Gusmao or FREITILIN leader Jose Ramos Horta will serve as the country's first president. But there are still deep tensions over cultural affiliation and long-term political strategy. Portugal's career as earlier colonial power and later as international ombudsman has induced CNRT leaders such as Gusmao and Horta to insist



that Portuguese should be the national language, even if most Timorese are unable to speak the tongue. The choice of English as one of several national languages would make commercial sense, but may be seen as a provocative affiliation with Australia. The CNRT coalition has been treated by UNTAET as a shadow government. Yet some excluded political groups, such as the youth-based CPD-RDTL (People's Council for Defense of the Democratic Republic of East-Timor), though dismissed as instruments of Jakarta, may have more support than either the U.N. or CNRT realize. In the midst of a shattered economy, the employment dispensed through CNRT patronage politics may also cause resentment. The national elections scheduled for August 2001, as prelude to writing a constitution, may reveal more party rivalry than expected.

Finally, the U.N. and Timorese communities are seeking a middle ground on how to deal with past offenses. In a system resembling the Rwandan “gacaca,” UNTAET has created “community reconciliation procedures,” enlisting traditional and religious leaders to hear individual admissions of guilt from returning militia members and impose reviewable penalties of apology or economic reparation. This choice of a truth commission, instead of criminal trials, will apply only to lesser offenses such as arson and looting, and not to acts of direct violence against civilians such as murder and rape. East Timorese society may face the additional shock of realizing how many of its former citizens were involved in the startling acts of violence.

The lessons of the United Nations’ experience with East Timor are several. First, the United Nations’ measured response to the Indonesian occupation during most of the 25 years shows the influence of major states in determining the use of multilateral machinery. Enthusiasm for “multilateralism” cannot obscure the realist’s truth that international organizations will take account of the perceived interests of their major supporters. Second, the halting progress of UNTAET shows the unflattering tendency of international organizations to substitute structure and procedure for results. Performance-based standards are wanting in the bureaucratic culture of the U.N. and many of its agencies. The difficulty of creating a workable corporate culture in a contract crew cobbled together on six-month rotations may inspire some to look to the alternative of

regionally-based organizations for administering post-conflict reconstruction. Third, the failure of the United Nations to act upon warnings about militia violence shows the organization's uncured naïveté about the necessary use of protective force in international relations. The opportunity for the East Timorese people to choose a political future was extraordinary, but need not have penalized the country with an unchecked political pogrom. Ending the militia violence depended entirely on the willingness of Australia to intervene, with logistical support from the United States. It was not even part of the U.N.'s planning for the mission. In spite of these failures, the usefulness of the United Nations as a bully pulpit and as a quiet venue for delicate negotiations was shown by the successful talks that gave rise to the 1999 election.

The experience of East Timor can also be taken as a reminder of the limited regional security architecture currently in place in Southeast Asia. Political and ethnic instability may continue in Indonesia, with violence and refugee flows from Aceh, Irian Jaya, and the Moluccas. Instability in the Solomon Islands and Fiji also show the unsteady balance among ethnic communities in many Southeast Asian and Pacific societies. There is no effective single power in the region outfitted to respond to humanitarian crises, though the East Timor peacekeeping force ultimately included troops from the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, as well as Australia and New Zealand. The continued presence of the Asian Regional Forum as a complement to the Asian Pacific Economic Forum can provide a venue for coordinating military capabilities in the event of future crises. But the United States and United Nations may find themselves without any major regional power to serve as a leader for exigent interventions. American projection of power in the Pacific is limited by U.S. commitments in northeast Asia, and the absence of obvious regional partners for humanitarian emergencies.

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