



East Timor Burning
Latin America: 500 Years of Resistance

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Seven Marched

Unfurl the banner,
Move onto the street.
Only Seven,
But seven marched

It was a time of rage
Rage forgotten
People forgotten

Students had been there
Seen the people mass
Their eyes were alight
Hundreds of years of poverty
The shackles broken
Independence the banner
Revolution so near
Our own Cuba, our own Castro
Our own Guevara.

Posters banners to all unions
Australia's Union of Students last
act
A last call.
Workers Students Unite!
Solidarity across the sea.
Darwin's wharf unions were firm.
The tyrant must be stopped,
Black ban his country,
Stop our country's folly
Whitlam's last, Fraser's first
Not for Oil, Diplomacy, Security

But we were not organised
Most students had gone home,
Christmas holidays were near.
It was only spontaneous action.
Only seven there
Why not the street?

The monster would invade a small country
Eat its people
Let us take this Brisbane Street
Just for a moment.
For the people of East Timor.

Unfurl the banner
Onto the street
Only seven
But seven marched
For a peoples freedom.

Poem by Joseph Monsour

East Timor Burning

The question of East Timor has burnt for 16 years with resolution seeming as distant as ever, perhaps even more distant than was envisaged by those involved in the campaign for an independent East Timor in 1975-76. The intransigence of the Indonesian government and the preparedness of the military to use whatever force necessary to crush the population is met by the indomitable spirit of the East Timorese, who have waged an unremitting guerilla war against the invasion.

Since the massacre of November 12, 1991, when Indonesian troops opened fire on a funeral procession, East Timor has again come into focus in Australia. There has been a series of demonstrations in most of the capital cities, forums and cultural events. As well, in international forums the East Timorese has received renewed attention, there is action pending in the International Court of Justice, the Netherlands has suspended aid to Indonesia, the European Parliament is also considering action. However the Australian Government remains unmoved by the widespread condemnation of the Indonesian action, rather it has chosen to describe the internal investigation by the Indonesian military as 'credible'. Essentially the issue of sovereignty is regarded as *fait-accompli*, reaffirming the joint Australian - Indonesian position agreed to in the Whitlam - Suharto talks of September, 1974. (At this meeting Whitlam described an independent East Timor as 'unviable'. Indonesia who a month earlier had given written assurance to FRETILIN representatives that they would support an independent state began claiming East Timor to be an integral part of Indonesia, and put into place plans for the annexation of the territory.)

For many in Australia the position of their government seems surprising if not beyond reason. It is not reason however that drives the foreign policy of Australia and Indonesia but the political and economic interests of a small group of people in each country. As history has shown, these people have been more than willing to sacrifice the rights of East Timorese in pursuit of their interests.

Indonesian Interest in East Timor

It's worth restating what, for the East Timorese, is a truism: Indonesia has no historic claim to East Timor. This is clearly evident that, in spite of strong nationalist sentiment inside the Indonesian military it expressed no interest in East Timor during the thirty years prior to the annexation. This is in spite of the

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Portugal had been driven from Goa by India in 1961, a signal that, should Indonesia have viewed East Timor as an integral part of its territory, it could have followed suit with little opposition. But it was only when this tiny colony was about to gain its independence that Indonesia acted. What, then was the motivating force?

Military regimes rule by fear, it is their language.

It is a strange irony that large and powerful military machines are driven by their own fears, fear of subversion, fear of their own population rising up against them, fear of neighbours undermining their own power. There can be no doubt that in the climate of 1975, after the fall of Saigon the Indonesians feared an independent and possibly socialist East Timor. They did their best to avert the latter possibility by actively supporting a pro-Indonesian political grouping inside East Timor - APODETI - but must have been dismayed to see how little support it could muster, and the overwhelming support for socialist FRETILIN. So, in spite of the fact that Indonesia had a population of 100 million, the largest army in South East Asia, and the fact that East Timor had a population of less than one million they were obsessed by their fears. (It compares with the situation Cuba finds itself in with relation to the U.S.) It does not matter how irrational one may view this, there can be few other explanations for the invasion other than the perceived threat that an independent East Timor posed to Indonesia's security.

There was another fear that the regime had - would they risk their position in the world community by launching an invasion? Two countries played key roles in giving Indonesia the green light: Australia in the talks between Suharto and Whitlam, and the U.S. (President Ford left Indonesia just hours before the invasion.) Thus this fear was allayed.

Later, with the rise of a national bourgeoisie inside Indonesia and the exploitation of the wealth of East Timor - oil and coffee, economic considerations became enmeshed with Indonesia's security fears, reasons for continued occupation became more compelling. By this time there could be no going back. The ultimate humiliation for a military regime is failing to do what they were trained to do, that is, win wars. The fate of the Argentinian junta after the Falkland/Malvinas War bears testimony to this. To this day the military remains intransigent, driven by greed and fear.

Australia's Role

In his recent visit to Indonesia, Australia's Prime Minister Keating declared his support for the Suharto regime praising it for the stability it has brought to the region. How was it possible for him to turn a blind eye to the terrible human rights record that so concerns many other countries and organisations? Far from being an honest broker on this question, the Australian government is pursuing its own vested interests.

Some have suggested that individual interests have also contributed to the present situation. Certainly some individuals have stood out as apologists for the Indonesian regime - it seems to be part of the job for the Foreign Affairs Minister. The present one, Gareth Evans has amazed many with his mental somersaults and contortions. His stance on Kampuchea had put him in the limelight of the world stage, his utterings on East Timor showed that he failed the audition.

The argument he makes: that it is not realistic to talk up the prospects of independence for East Timor reduces to the Foreign Affairs position (held since 1975) that Australia's national interest (read business interest) would be threatened by supporting independence. Doesn't he realise that it is equally unrealistic to ask a people to accept genocide? (Estimates suggest that the population of East Timor has declined by one-third since annexation.) Each day that he went to the parliament he was reminded of Australia's complicity in deaths caused by the Indonesian military by rows of crosses erected by supporters of the East Timorese. Now he is attempting to have the crosses removed. Do they also represent a serious threat to the 'national interest' or is it that he suffers from an attack of bad conscience each time he sees them?

It would be wrong of course to suggest, as some have, that Australia's foreign policy is the result of a minister's overblown ego. In fact it is quite interesting that the Australian position on East Timor has remained virtually unchanged during the last four governments, suggesting the pro-Indonesian lobby wields considerable power. In fact this group has held total sway when it comes to Australian policy. There are two components to this policy, regional security and economic considerations, which overlap but are not identical.

Regional Security

Prior to the invasion, sections of Australia's Defence Department expressed opposition to integration of East Timor into Indonesia, fearing a militarily strong neighbour. They also recalled the significant role East Timor played in World War II as part of Australia's defence. However other sections of Australian policy makers prevailed, including the Joint Intelligence Organisation and the Foreign Affairs Department. Their primary concern was the protection of Australian business interests in Indonesia and the prospect of a socialist neighbour must have been particularly galling.

Economic factors

It is only necessary to reprint a statement by the Australian-Indonesia Business Co-operation Committee following the killing of five Australian journalists in East Timor by Indonesian troops prior to the full-scale invasion to see the attitude of Australian business. It reads as follows:

On behalf of 160 Australian member companies of the Australia-Indonesia Business Cooperation committee I urge you to have regard for strong commercial and investment links existing between Australia and Indonesia as the basis on which future cordial relations must be built. AIBCC regards Indonesian response to date in Timor as most tolerant and responsible and abhors actions and attitudes of minorities in both countries aimed at prejudicing Australia-Indonesia relations. AIBCC urges government to resist pressures for any form of censure by Australia. (from Indonesian Newsletter November 7 1975)

Now it is true that the Australian government need not have been swayed by this group to the extent that the human rights considerations were all but forgotten. However it has been seen by a series of governments as:-

- a) progressive to form regional trading links, and
- b) a measure to reduce the security threat from Indonesia by establishing common interest between the two countries.

Under the Labor Party it has become government strategy to build up the Australian bourgeoisie, in order, using the language of Keating, to end the branch office mentality inside Australia, and so strengthen Australia as a regional power. The Keating trip and the prior agreement reached between Australia and Indonesia over the Timor Gap and the division of profits from oil in the region brought to fruition many years of politicking. Nowhere in all

this do the aspirations of the East Timorese figure, the right of a people to self-determination is cast aside in the pursuit of economic gain.

The opposition within Australia

Because of Australia's critical role in the future of East Timor, the Australian Left wing and supporters of East Timor had (and continue to have) a particularly onerous responsibility in attempting to shift Australia's foreign policy. It has been an unfortunate fact that in spite of widespread anti-Indonesian sentiment the Left could not rise to the occasion. The original campaign in 1975-76 came in the wake of the defeat of the Whitlam government. At this time the Left had suffered a big reduction in strength since the mass mobilisations which occurred during the Vietnam War. However, when one considers the letters, pamphlets and minutes of meetings from that era and compares them with the current situation one would have to suspect that the Left has suffered even a greater reduction in capacity. We can judge this by the level of worker action in support of the East Timorese. Immediately following the invasion numerous bans were put in place by various unions, including bans by waterside workers on all cargo for Indonesia, some bans by transport workers on *Garuda* flights, and bans by meat workers on meat and livestock for Indonesia. The steady decline in union membership and militancy and the alienation of the membership from the hierarchy during the intervening period meant that very little action by trade unions was possible following the November 12 (1991) massacre. It is also an indication that the Left wing is increasingly removed from worker organisations. The comparison is even more dramatic when one considers that bans by Australian waterside workers in 1949 hastened Indonesia's own independence.

One problem is that solidarity campaigns are invariably formed as a response to an urgent situation, a sense of immediacy drives the campaign and there are few places for discussion of deeper issues. One can't help but wonder if those participating in the 1975-76 campaign would have known that 16 years later Indonesia would still be committing atrocities under the complicit gaze of Australian government and business, they would have done things differently. Will the people in the present campaign still be organising in another 16 years time? We know the East Timorese will still be fighting, or, if successful in driving out the Indonesians, building a new society which will need international support. The answer to these questions necessarily involves debates on a different level than focusing on the immediate situation. It is not intended to cast aspersions on the present solidarity grouping organising around the East

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Timor issue nor to preach any glib prescriptions, but to raise serious questions about the whole style of functioning of Leftist political groupings, solidarity organisations and their relation with the rest of Australian society, particularly the workers movement. The first step in the process is to recognise that there is a problem, in order to solve it.

Sources.

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plus: numerous pamphlets, correspondence and minutes of meetings from the Campaign for an Independent East Timor and Australia - East Timor Association.