# DON’T RUSH TO WRITE OFF OUR INDONESIAN LINKS

## Recommended Citation

Harold Crouch, "DON’T RUSH TO WRITE OFF OUR INDONESIAN LINKS", NAPSNet Special Reports, September 15, 1999, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/dont-rus--to-write-off-our-indonesian-links/

September 15, 1999

This is the latest in an ongoing series of articles on the crisis in East Timor.  This article is by Dr. Harold Crouch, senior fellow in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University and author of "The Army and Politics in Indonesia," (Cornell University Press, 1988).  This article appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on Tuesday, September 14.

A guide to all NAPSNet East Timor Special Reports is available online at:
 http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/sr/East_Timor/index.html

---

Sydney Morning Herald Tuesday, September 14, 1999

DON'T RUSH TO WRITE OFF OUR INDONESIAN LINKS

Harold Crouch

The Indonesian people, too, resent what the military is doing in their name in East Timor.

Australia's inability to prevent the devastation by the Indonesian military in East Timor following the referendum result has led to fierce condemnation of Australia's softly-softly approach to Indonesia during recent decades.

The critics claim Australia's relationship with Indonesia is at its lowest point in decades, and a former foreign minister, Bill Hayden, has

even said: "I don't think the relationship can ever be the same for this generation and probably longer."

The view that a different Australian policy in the past could have averted the present disaster is, however, based on totally unrealistic expectations about Australian influence in Indonesia.

The softly-softly approach was not designed to give Australia a voice in what the Indonesian Government - and especially its military - considers to be Indonesia's internal affairs, but to minimise the likelihood of direct confrontation between the two countries.

One of the successes of Australian foreign policy for several decades has been the virtual elimination of the Indonesian "threat." That Australia has been able to get away with such a low level of defence preparedness is one indication of this. One consequence, of course, is our inability to intervene militarily in East Timor, but I do not recall present critics demanding the trebling or quadrupling of defence spending to give us such a capability.

Similarly, critics claim Australia's support for the "fatally flawed" referendum in East Timor contributed to the present situation. But I don't recall their voices in August demanding the referendum be cancelled while Xanana Gusmao and Jose Ramos Horta were calling for it to go ahead.

Anti-Indonesian feeling is rising in Australia, as seen by attempted disruption of Garuda flights, the burning of the Indonesian flag, demands for trade boycotts and so on. While understandable, such actions miss the target, which should be the Indonesian military, not Indonesia as a whole. Flag-burning offends all Indonesians, including the passionate critics of the Indonesian military.

Many Australians seem to be shutting their eyes to the extraordinary political changes in Indonesia in the past 16 months. Indonesia is no longer ruled by a repressive military-based regime but is moving, if fitfully, in a democratic direction.

One of the results of this political change is the lifting of constraints on public debate. While the Indonesian military has been trying to give the impression its intervention in East Timor is to stop a "brutal civil war", the free press shows the military and police are backing the pro-integration militias responsible for the killing and arson.

As the full extent of the atrocities are revealed to the Indonesian public in the next few weeks, it is likely that anti-military sentiment will be strengthened.

Meanwhile, debate in the Indonesian Parliament last week on a new emergency law showed once again widespread public distrust of, and antagonism towards, the military, which is suspected of trying to find a way to restore its old powers.

General Wiranto's success last week in obtaining President Habibie's endorsement of martial law in East Timor was interpreted in some quarters as indicating that the military runs the Indonesian Government.  But Sunday's decision to accept UN peacekeepers runs counter to that interpretation.

During the past 16 months the military has been hugely discredited in the eyes of the Indonesian public and forced to carry out significant reforms.  Serving military officers can no longer be appointed to civilian positions in the Government, the police have been separated from the armed forces and the military refrained from interfering in the recent general election.  The military, however, is still a significant political force and is represented in the Parliament and the People's Consultative Assembly, which will elect the president and determine the future of East Timor.

Most crucially, President B.J.Habibie has not been able to assert his authority over internal military operations in East Timor or other troubled provinces like Aceh, Irian Jaya and Ambon.

But the military is still far short of controlling the Government.  It is doubtful that the military today has the capacity to carry out a coup, even against the increasingly discredited Habibie Government.

Such an action would be met by massive opposition in the streets of Jakarta and other cities.  This would make government unworkable and put an end to any hope of economic recovery.

The future depends a great deal on the presidential election in November. Even without East Timor, Habibie's prospects seem to have been fatally wounded by the scandal involving Bank Bali.

It is likely that his own party, Golkar, will drop him as its candidate and it is possible the party's anti-Habibie wing will support Megawati Sukarnoputri, thereby reducing her dependence on military votes.

Prediction is risky in Indonesian politics, but we should not dismiss the possibility that the new government will reflect the anti-military sentiment that is so widespread in Indonesian society.  This, of course, provides no immediate relief for the people of East Timor, but it surely needs to be taken into account by those who seem to be writing off Indonesia for the next generation.

Anti-Australian sentiment has been growing in Indonesia partly because too many Australians are expressing anti-Indonesian attitudes, when the target should be the military that inspired and supported the atrocities in East Timor.

---

View this online at: https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/dont-rush-to-write--

ff-our-indonesian-links/

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org