The East Timor Truth Commission Report shines

Recommended Citation

"The East Timor Truth Commission Report shines", APSNet Policy Forum, February 06, 2006, https://nautilus.org/apsnet/0601a-vanklinken-html/

The East Timor Truth Commission Report shines

Gerry van Klinken,
Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV)

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Essay
3. Related links
4. Nautilus invites your response

Introduction

Australian historian and editor of *Inside Indonesia*, Gerry van Klinken, writes that the light from the 2000 page *Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor*

> "...is dazzling. That a tortured little place like East Timor could produce such a shining beacon as this truth commission report seems out of proportion with reality. Who would have expected this from one of the world's poorest countries, traumatised by decades of brutal occupation by the army of its almost equally poor neighbour Indonesia, from a microstate for which the pundits are already predicting failure? Miracles still happen. The report's recommendations are luminescent in their simplicity. The denial of East

> Timor's right to self-determination - always acknowledged by the UN - was an international project, and it's only fair the world should make amends."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

Essay

That a tortured little place like East Timor could produce such a shining beacon as this truth commission report seems out of proportion with reality. Who would have expected this from one of the world's poorest countries, traumatised by decades of brutal occupation by the army of its almost equally poor neighbour Indonesia, from a microstate for which the pundits are already predicting failure? Miracles still happen.

So far the 2000 page report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor (CAVR) has not received overwhelming media attention. In one sense it hardly matters if no one else reads it. It was written by and for the Timorese (with some foreign expert help). Over the last three years its public hearings, broadcast live on radio and TV, have moved them to tears even in remote mountain villages. Now they have a history of the long war. It begins with the courageous but mutually hostile Timorese political parties of 1974, proceeds through the massed Indonesian invasion of December 1975, and climaxes with their vote against Indonesia in August 1999 and thence independence. Over six years after that vote, schools still have no history textbook for the period. Now they do.

Now Timorese know what brought the parties to blows in August 1975, and what happened around the country. They can read the stories of the flight to the mountains as Indonesian troops, ostensibly invited by one of those feuding parties, advanced into their country; how people at first had it alright under their own Fretilin leaders, but how food became scarce from late 1977 as the Indonesians forced them time and again to move, until those who still refused to surrender were trapped in a few mountain redoubts.

They can read the moving, dignified words of one old man who was part of one of those desperate final marches:

> "As we walked, death stalked us. Death was behind us as we walked, and people died. Not only old people, but children, through lack of food ... Others died from the mortars, 80 to 100 a day. We wanted to bury them, but the enemy kept shooting, so how could we bury them? We ran on. An old woman said: 'Please my son, dig a hole to bury my child's body.' We dug a hole, but less than half a metre deep. Before lowering the little angel into the hole we wrapped it in a mat to the sound of continuing gunfire. How could we bury it? We bent our heads and buried it with our hands. Those we could, we buried. Otherwise they were left behind. How can we now find their bones? They rotted just as they were."

After capture they - about half the population - were placed in isolation in camps under a guard so tight they continued to die. Now the Timorese know how many perished due to famine in those years - at least 100,000 - and how, where and why they died. They also know how many were executed and why and by whom - including by the Resistance. They know in agonising details about the torture,

and the rape - systematic sexual slavery by Indonesian military officers is one of the most shocking new truths told here. They know about the children forcibly recruited by combat soldiers to carry ammunition, the coffee seized by a military-backed company to fund the occupation, the forests cut down, the land seized for transmigrants. Now they know the Indonesian military units, and the names of their commanders, that carried out a reign of evil, especially in the darkest years 1975-1984 when almost no foreigner came to see. They have also seen beauty with their own eyes - hundreds of community reconciliation events, where small-time militia men owned up to their misdeeds and were forgiven; a televised meeting where their own political leaders apologised for the abuses committed in the past by Fretilin, UDT and Apodeti.

This was one of the most democratic of truth commissions. It worked in complete openness and enjoyed official support while remaining wholly independent. But of course it does matter that others should read it. In fact many Indonesians will read the Indonesian version eagerly. East Timor is the first part of Indonesia where the blanket of fear, propaganda and impunity has been lifted to reveal in detail how deeply corrosive the militarisation of a society can be. Many human rights activists around the world will read it to know what they were fighting for all that time - it honours them for their persistent solidarity. The ageing generals in Jakarta who ran the occupation will squirm when they read it (and they should read it all). East Timor's president Xanana Gusmao is already squirming, vicariously, because he needs to remain their friend. Other Indonesians will squirm who still cannot think of their country as a failed colonial power. And so will the Western arms manufacturers who benefited from the occupation, and the diplomats, journalists and academics around the world who defended it. They had better wear shades while they read, because the light is dazzling. The report's recommendations are luminescent in their simplicity. The denial of East Timor's right to self-determination - always acknowledged by the UN - was an international project, and it's only fair the world should make amends. This is the 'to do' list: contribute the relevant archives to East Timor, cough up (from the profits of arms sales!) for victim compensation, table the CAVR report publicly (this one aimed at Indonesian school textbooks), and help prosecute all those responsible.

Another 'to do' list is for the Timorese themselves - institutionalise a culture of non-violence, memorialise significant sites, exhume mass graves, start a national register of the disappeared - the list is long and Timorese have a head start.

Gerry van Klinken is a research fellow with the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV). He is editor of the magazine Inside Indonesia, writing a book on post-New Order ethnic conflict outside Java. In 2002-2004 he spent nine months as research advisor to the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor (CAVR). In 2003 his Minorities, modernity and the emerging nation; Christians in Indonesia, a biographical approach. was published by KITLV Press. He co-edited the second edition of Masters of Terror: the Indonesian military in East Timor in 1999 , to be published this year by Rowman and Littlefield.

Related links

1. Final Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor
2. Transitional Justice Approaches
3. Truth Commissions Digital Collection
4. APSNet 2006-01-19
   Gusmao To Hand Report To UN, AAP, Age, 2006-01-19

Nautilus invites your response

The Austral Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: austral@rmit.edu.au. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by the Nautilus Institute at RMIT, Austral Peace and Security Network (APSNet). You can review the 2007 archives. You might like to subscribe to the free bi-weekly newsletter.

View this online at: https://nautilus.org/apsnet/0601a-vanklinken-html/

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