# A Dark Scenario

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This is the fourth in an ongoing series of articles on the crisis in East Timor.
This article is by Gerry van Klinken, editor of "Inside Indonesia" magazine in Australia.
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A dark scenario

Gerry van Klinken, editor, 'Inside Indonesia' magazine.
06 September, 1999

The horrible events unfolding in East Timor may have as much to do with Jakarta as they do with that troubled island.  It is too early to be certain, but I would not be surprised to discover that a powerful faction within the armed forces has launched Plan B - the recovery of East Timor for Indonesia.

Plan A was to win the ballot.  The answer to the question why the army permitted the UN ballot to go ahead peacefully on Monday last week is that they hoped to win it.  On Saturday it was obvious Plan A had failed.

Plan B could be designed to recover East Timor for Indonesia by violent means.  It consists of several elements.  First get rid of the media.  Second get rid of UN personnel.  Third create a refugee flood to reinforce the perennial stereotype of East Timor as a riven society.  Fourth provoke the East Timorese guerrilla army Falintil to strike back.  This is a rather unimaginative plan - it is essentially the one that

applied when Indonesia first invaded in 1975.

The militias are not the essential players in this scenario. Too much evidence has now emerged that portrays Indonesian military intelligence as the real players in a well-coordinated strategy. The evidence points to an effort more determined than mere bloody-mindedness, indulgence of old militia friends, or even a rearguard scorched-earth retreat to teach other separatist movements a lesson.

Considerable military and bureaucratic resources are being committed to Plan B. The government is offering free transport for large numbers of people being encouraged to flee. That suggests a degree of unanimity within the government that this is a workable strategy.

Plan B, if it really exists, must strike any observer as a desperate and foolish one. Anyone can see that the world in 1999 is very different to the world 24 years ago. In 1975 the Cold War dominated western strategic thinking. South Vietnam had just fallen to the communists. In those days it was OK to annex a potentially communist East Timor. Not today. The western world will hate Plan B. Jakarta is extremely vulnerable to leverage on financial and military aid.

Within Indonesia it won't be that easy to sell Plan B. Unlike 1975, there is no Suharto to keep the establishment united. Lots of Indonesians will oppose Plan B. A freer Indonesian press is already exposing the real situation on the ground in East Timor for all to see.

Within East Timor, too, things are different. In 1975 the army could not have done what it did without the support of at least a portion of the East Timorese elite. Today there is no such support for Indonesia within East Timor. The pro-Indonesian militias are political nincompoops without local support. Moreover, with 24 years experience of struggle, the East Timorese are in a vastly better position to fight back. Plan B will once more make East Timor ungovernable for many years. In short, the list of reasons why Plan B is unworkable goes on and on.

So why would anyone want to launch such a foolish plan? There are unfortunately some reasons why some will think it might work. The military are alarmed about their loss of influence in Indonesia. They are determined to reassert themselves. For example they are pushing very hard to have the currently sitting parliament pass a rather draconian bill on state security that will give them powers they do not now have.

Politically, those pushing for a military ascendancy may well be looking favourably on Megawati, who has never questioned the military's political role. Although she accepts the result of the East Timor ballot, she also says she deeply regrets it.

Much newspaper commentary in Indonesia yesterday pointed out that the loss for Indonesia in the East Timor ballot is a blow to President Habibie, who now stands accused of slicing off a piece of Indonesia's

territory without consulting parliament.

Indonesia's political and economic collapse is nurturing a new xenophobia (hatred of foreigners) among a section of the elite.  I have heard Indonesian students here in Australia express intense anger about Australian 'interference' in East Timor.  Like much of the more conservative public in Indonesia, these students think of East Timor primarily as a security issue.  For them the issue is not about human rights.  The domino theory of course stirs strong fears within the Indonesian elite.

Such a xenophobic backlash could grow in Indonesia as the international community wields big financial sticks at Indonesia's moribund economy.

East Timor does not resonate chords of sympathy in Indonesia the way Islamic Aceh does.  The level of public ignorance about East Timor remains appalling.

Habibie and many of his associates remain committed to a UN solution, but he is now more lame duck than ever.  Habibie's weakness may make the irresponsible Plan B worth a try.  We have seen crisis conditions in Indonesia breed dangerous short-term stratagems in the intelligence services before.  Much evidence points to intelligence operatives fomenting the riots that devastated Jakarta in May 1998, apparently as part of a desperate strategy to defend President Suharto.  In any case, we have the makings of a constitutional crisis in Jakarta here.  Plan B smacks of military insubordination at a high level in Jakarta.

The UN rushed through the East Timor ballot because it saw a "window of opportunity" before President Habibie stepped down.  Those within the Indonesian armed forces pushing Plan B may be well aware of another "window of opportunity."  It could be three months before Indonesia's super-parliament, the MPR, comes down with its decision to ratify the East Timor ballot result.  In the meantime, the government seems determined to keep out foreign peacekeeping troops.

Three months may be all it takes to completely transform the situation into one where the international community decides there is no peace to be kept.  By that time the world may think twice about "deepening Indonesia's isolation" by applying sanctions, and East Timor may go into the "too hard" basket once more.

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Nautilus Institute

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