

A Tale of Timor and New World Disorder?

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This is the latest in an ongoing series of articles on the crisis in East Timor. This article is by Susan Tillou, Research Associate and Coordinator of Asia Studies Programming at the Council on Foreign Relations. Ms. Tillou served this summer as a District Electoral Office with the United Nations Mission in East Timor. This article is also available on the Intellectual Capital website at:
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A Tale of Timor and New World Disorder?
by Susan Lynne Tillou *

It was early afternoon when our United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) electoral team arrived at the small village of Kaimege in the Western district of Liquia. As we drove up to the village, men, women and children ran out to the street just to greet our vehicle with the only English phrase universally known throughout East Timor: "Hello Mister." The excitement level was high and there was no doubt that the Timorese saw the United Nations as the vehicle for their expression of self-determination. After 24 years of harsh Indonesian rule in the territory, the East Timorese finally felt justice would prevail.

Curious and somewhat hesitant, the villagers had been waiting some time for our arrival. My teammates--another district electoral officer from Germany and two Timorese local staff--and I opened the doors of our Landrover and used the car stereo to broadcast a recorded message from

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan. The message we had come to deliver was simple: UNAMET would be the neutral facilitator of the August 30 popular consultation, the East Timorese voters' choice would be secret, and no matter the outcome of the referendum, UNAMET would remain in East Timor.

At the conclusion of our voter education session, we solicited questions. A middle-aged farmer named Afonso stood up. "What will UNAMET do to guard our safety after the vote?"

Until now we had understood the main security concern to be the run up to the election. The intimidation in our district had been especially severe--militias had control over the town and, we had understood, were in collusion with local government officials, police and the military. In the months prior, a majority of the people sympathetic to the independence cause had been tortured, killed or run into the nearby hills. The town had recently become notorious after militia and army in coordination with police massacred at least forty civilians who sought refuge from recent fighting in the town's church. Liquia proper, with an estimated population of 22,000, had become a veritable ghost town. Little did we know this was a small glimpse of something worse to come.

As our team continued to other villages that day, this particular question was posed again and again. Even our locally-recruited UNAMET staff asked what kind of protection UNAMET would provide them as they left the voting sites on the day of polling. Quickly, it became evident to us in the field that the Timorese would have no problem risking their lives--even coming down from the hills to villages which they escaped in fear--just to cast their votes, but all knew the punishment for this freedom of choice would come later.

The following morning, Afonso came to see me at our registration center. He had been hiding in nearby bushes waiting for our electoral team to arrive. He told me that during the evening, two militiamen had come with guns to his house under orders from the village chief to kill him. His wife delayed them at the door and he escaped out the back of the house. He had been sought out because he attended the UNAMET voter education meeting and dared to ask a question.

In a short amount of time on the ground, the collusion between the militia, and the local authorities--including the police and army--became blaringly obvious. Yet, bound by the security arrangements established in the May 5 accord signed by the Secretary General and the Portuguese and Indonesian Foreign Affairs Ministers, UNAMET was forced to place shaky trust in Indonesian security forces to protect its operations and staff.

In the pursuing days, we learned of similar situations of intimidation and threat directly related to our presence and interaction with the people in Liquia. Reports to the police were futile, most times even working against our best intentions because of the close collaboration

between the militia and police. The reality was sobering: UNAMET had no secondary recourse to ensure the safety of the voters, the local or the international staff. At the same time, the resolve of the East Timorese to meet with us and even work for us was astounding. They put their full faith in the 72-nation presence that was the United Nations mission to allow their voice to be heard and, ultimately, to protect their interests.

To be sure, it was no small miracle that the United Nations was able to orchestrate such an elaborate election functionally, logistically and in such a short time period. The electoral process was immensely successful, but the imperative to rely only on the Indonesian authorities for security was flawed from the beginning.

In addition, there was an illogical and dangerous gap between UNAMET Phase One (the popular consultation) and Phase Three (the implementation of the outcome of the vote). Since Phase Three could not begin until after the Indonesian Parliament (MPR) met and considered ratifying the results of the vote, there was a temporal no man's land between the announcement of the results on September 4 and the MPR session scheduled for sometime in November--a period where chaos could rule with little, if any, repercussions. UNAMET was bound by the May 5 Agreement to retain a presence during Phase Two, but no role had been established for the civil affairs officers who were to remain on the ground during these two months. It remains difficult to understand why the vote was not scheduled closer to the time of the new MPR session to avoid this gap.

On the day before the popular consultation, I held one last meeting with my local staff to run-through each of their duties. Again the issue of their personal security came up. Frustrated by a lack of contingency planning, I told them each to pack their bags and to be prepared to go wherever they needed for safety directly after the polling. I even drove one local staff member too frightened to stay in Liquia to a bishop's compound in Dili as the rest of my team continued to the airport to leave the country. Even considering our difficult security circumstances and living conditions, the most difficult part of the mission for many UNAMET staff was having to leave behind those who risked so much in order to vote--and those who risked even more to work for UNAMET .

As evidenced by the killings of local staff directly after the polling, and the ensuing destruction and carnage since the September 4 announcement of the results, Habibie has not been able to control the military-backed militias running rampant in East Timor. There had been some debate about whether or not Habibie retained enough power to control the situation, but the one man who surely did, General Wiranto, certainly was not held accountable soon enough.

As East Timorese ran for the hills or were forcefully deported to militia-run camps in West Timor, the United Nations made an announcement that they were evacuating all remaining staff in Dili. This statement was revised later to say that a small presence would remain, but the

announcement -- and the eventual evacuation of the compound -- sent a clear message to the East Timorese voters that they had been abandoned by the international community that had promised them so much.

Unfortunately as the United States and the West considered slapping Indonesia's hand by invoking trade and economic sanctions, the militia and the army were given time and space to complete their mission of revenge. The belief that economic sanctions might have somehow influenced the Indonesian military's will and actions was a logical stretch. The Indonesian military's actions at the highest levels are more likely based on internal Indonesian politics than international relations. Why would military officials with so much invested in the old Suharto regime not want to promote anarchy in order to avert peaceful transition to a more reform minded government, especially one which might support the secession of an Indonesian province?

Of course, the lower ranks of the military and the militia have an additional incentive to seek revenge through a scorched-earth policy. Although possibly for different reasons, there is no doubt that the various levels of Indonesian security authorities collaborated in this campaign of terror. Still, knowing of this complicity, the international community has felt obligated to bend over backward on the terms of the international peacekeeping force so as to avoid further destabilizing the Indonesian political situation.

The lessons to be drawn from the experience in East Timor are difficult: freedom of choice and placing trust in the United Nations may have a high cost, and there is no legitimate and competent region-wide security regime in Asia through which such crises can be addressed. Through its failure to provide security for the UN mission, Indonesia has tarnished its image worldwide, potentially ruining chances for a quick and stable transition to democracy and recovery from the recent financial crisis. In addition, the ability of the military to spotlight Habibie's lack of power undercuts his chances of being elected president this Fall and even suggests the potential for a military coupe.

Embarrassingly pushed aside in Kosovo, the mission in East Timor was a chance for the UN to regain credibility. Instead, the failure to ensure effective security measures to buttress the UN's work on the ground allowed for yet another stain on the its record. There is a larger question of why a coalition of nations would unilaterally intervene for humanitarian purposes in Kosovo and not East Timor. Since the Indonesian annexation, over 200,000 Timorese have lost their lives--possibly thousands more in the past week alone. This is the myth of the Blair and Clinton doctrines--a direct illustration of the gap between ideology and the chaos that is the new world order.

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