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# East Timor and the “Disintegration” of Indonesia

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This is the latest in an ongoing series of articles on the crisis in East Timor. This article is by Sylvia Tiwon, Professor of Indonesia at the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley. It is also available on the Berkeley Indonesia Forum website at:

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East Timor and the "Disintegration" of Indonesia

by Sylvia Tiwon

One of the reasons given for the reluctance of the Indonesian army to "grant" the independence of East Timor has been the fear that doing so might set off a "chain reaction" leading to the disintegration of the Indonesian state. This reason also seems to be behind the general reluctance of the international community--the US in particular--to send in UN troops without the explicit "invitation" from President Habibie and, most importantly, from General Wiranto, minister of defence and Commander of the Indonesian Military (TNI). The reluctance of the military to give up East Timor, the argument goes, is their fear that it will set up an example for Aceh and Irian. If the international community "intervenes" against the wishes of Indonesia as a sovereign state, what will prevent such

intervention into Aceh and Irian, where local groups are already making appeals for a referendum? The chain of secessionist movements will destabilize the entire Southeast Asian region. Once the dominoes begin to fall, what is to keep other regions from following suit?

Another, more culturalist view, takes the example of East Timor (and Aceh and Irian) to bring into question the whole idea of nation-building in a multi-ethnic region such as Indonesia. East Timor, in short, is but another example that the end of the 20th century is witnessing the end of the nation-states that were born as ideas at the beginning of the century and found political reality at the end of the Second World War.

Both arguments tend to be generalistic in nature, and overlook the complex dynamics on the ground. This brief essay attempts to recast the question of "disintegration" by presenting a quick look at some of the particulars of nation-building under the New Order regime of Soeharto, a regime whose fundamental policies continue to this day.

What legitimacy does the Indonesian state have to keep intact the "imagined community," to use Benedict Anderson's apt term, other than its historical roots enshrined in the 1945 Constitution? The New Order's own strategies have undermined both the history of the nation and the 1945 Constitution by rewriting the history of the nation in such a way that most Indonesians no longer believe it. The Constitution has been violated systematically by the very powers that claim to uphold it as their sacred duty. In addition, the state has dominated cultural and symbolic articulation so extensively that it has allowed very little room for the growth of cultural expression and exchange among the general public. The entire educational system, while bringing literacy to some 95 percent of the population, was used mainly as a vehicle to inculcate the values and standards of the Jakarta power elite into a multi-ethnic population, thus marginalising local cultures and knowledge. Cultural expressions that were allowed to "develop" were those that could be repackaged as tourist commodities. Local cultures and religions were further disengaged from the process of modernisation by the laws governing local government, which enforced a uniform, and generally alien, system of administration upon the regions, reaching down to the village level and the bureaucratization of beliefs through the Ministry of Religion. On top of that, the "floating mass" policy introduced by the New Order prohibited political party representation at the village level, and effectively cut off some 75 percent of the population from the political process.

All this cultural, social and political engineering from the centre of power in Jakarta was undertaken not simply in the name

of national unity or fostering feelings of nationhood and unity, as the regime broadcast throughout the country. What went on behind the facade of "national unity" was a systematic and thorough exploitation of the natural and human resources of the regions in the name of "development."

Apart from East Timor, the infamous DOM (Military Operations Regions or Daerah Operasi Militer), regions where the military were in charge because of activity by elements of what the army labeled "illegal movements to disrupt the peace" (Gerakan Pengacau Liar, or Gerakan Pengacau Keamanan) were the resource-rich regions of Aceh and Irian.

Even a brief look at Aceh will indicate the extent of the economic exploitation that lies at the base of the present "separatist" movement for a Free Aceh. The most violent transgressions of human rights have taken place in North and East Aceh, sites of the richest oil and natural gas fields. Human rights organisations estimate that between 4-5000 Acehnese were murdered during the DOM, which was revoked only in 1998, and the killings continue. While the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh Movement) is now commonly perceived as a militant Muslim movement against a secularist and Javanese central power in Jakarta, the conflict is rooted in a dispute centered on the question of who has the right of control over natural resources. In the early 1970s, when Acehnese entrepreneurs initiated contacts with overseas investors to exploit the oil and natural gas fields, Jakarta-based interests, with strong military backing, circumvented these negotiations, effectively cutting off the Acehnese initiative. Once contracts were signed and operations began, work crews were brought in from Java and almost no Acehnese were recruited. The revenue generated by oil and gas went into public and private coffers in Jakarta, with Aceh receiving only a standard regional budget determined in Jakarta (the pre-crisis per capita income for Aceh was US\$500/annum).

Rough calculations show that if Aceh were to receive even 50 percent of the revenue from its oil and gas fields, it would be able to offer free education and free health services to its entire population of nearly 4 million. As it is, a vast area of Aceh's 55,390 square kilometers remains inaccessible because of poor infrastructure. Of the eight provinces on the island of Sumatra, Aceh has the highest number of poor villages, at 40.32 percent out of a total of 5643 villages. Most public education and health services are located in the industrial areas and the regional capital. The province is segmented into two economic zones: the industrial zones comprising the AAF (Aceh ASEAN Fertilizer), PIM (Pupuk Iskandar Muda, also fertilizer) I and II, KKA (Kraft Aceh paper plant), MobilOil, and Arun, and the agrobusiness zone. This latter comprises 19 forest and plantation concessions (HPH, HTI) covering 4,130,000 hectares, or

more than 70 percent of Aceh's total land area. All these enterprises go through the hands of the Jakarta-based business elite. Indigenous peoples are evicted from traditional land-holdings, often with violence, while indigenous fisherfolk are forced to fight a losing battle against modern fishing concerns exploiting marine resources.

Aceh was seen simply as one enormous resource for exploitation by the Jakarta power and economic elite. In the face of economic, political and cultural marginalization, the Acehnese were left with but one viable avenue of resistance; this was Islam. The articulation of Islamic values merged with the effort to recover a historical identity older than Indonesia, rooted in the Acehnese Sultanate that had engaged in diplomatic relations with Great Britain as far back as the 18th century, and culminating in the great Aceh War against Dutch colonialism in the 19th century. Aceh thus establishes for itself the status of statehood preceding the 1945 declaration of Indonesian independence and the nationalist revolution itself.

On the other end of the archipelago lies Irian, a mineral-rich region blanketed by a rainforest still largely untouched, whose (thus far) unpolluted waters offer a wealth of marine life, has suffered a fate perhaps even worse than Aceh. Its indigenous peoples live in extreme poverty on some of the richest mineral deposits in the world. For the sake of development and security, the Jakarta government has moved whole villages from Java to areas bordering Papua New Guinea. There they serve as buffers against jungle-based guerrillas and provide agricultural labour for modern plantations. While the dislocated Javanese peasants suffer from the lack of health services and protection against malaria--from which hundreds die every year--the indigenous peoples, evicted from traditional garden and forest holdings, languish unemployed and untrained in urban and sub-urban resettlements. They are trained to depend on rice as their staple, particularly as the sago groves, their traditional source of carbohydrates (and protein from the sago-grub) are rapidly turned over to commercial crops. And the distribution of rice is in the hands of the government. Few of the indigenous peoples are recruited into government and entrepreneurial jobs. Most government jobs are controlled by Javanese, while mid-level enterprise is largely in the hands of migrants from South Sulawesi (BBM--Bugis, Buton, Makassar--as the locals call them). Resistance is met with extreme violence, both physical and cultural, for the military and the bureaucracy look upon the indigenous peoples as a primitive, savage race.

The list of atrocities practiced by the military upon the peoples of Aceh and Irian is far too long to present here but can be summed up as: eviction, rape, torture and mass execution. Nor are such methods of control exercised by the Jakarta power elite

in the name of a sanctified unity limited to these "outlying regions." They are practiced everywhere: in Java, Riau, Bali, Ambon, Kalimantan (Borneo)--in short, practically all over the Indonesian archipelago--local communities have suffered extreme forms of human rights abuse carried out systematically by the New Order regime of conglomerates and generals with the backing of international capital interests, including the weapons industry.

The fear of the Indonesian military is not only that they stand to lose their training grounds and lucrative businesses in East Timor, but that they will lose their self-created right to "unify," and thus exploit, an entire nation. If the independence of East Timor--the land of Loro Sae--sets off a chain-reaction of "separatist movements" in Indonesia itself, it is but a chain of the New Order's own violent creation.

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