

For East Timor, a Tough Transition to Independence

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This is the second in a series of analyses on the current crisis in East Timor.

This article is by Alan Dupont, director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at Australian

National University's Strategic and Defense Studies Center in Canberra.

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For East Timor, a Tough Transition to Independence

By Alan Dupont International Herald Tribune

CANBERRA - Escalating violence in East Timor should not obscure the fact that the self-determination ballot sponsored by the United Nations has been an overwhelming success, paving the way for a final resolution of one of Asia's most intractable and long-running conflicts.

The impressive voter turnout and the clear-cut vote against autonomy have provided the independence leader Xanana Gusmao and his National Council of Timorese Resistance with the moral authority and political legitimacy they had previously lacked. There can no longer be any doubt that the council represents the hopes and aspirations of the vast majority of East Timorese.

The United Nations should be permitted a moment of self-congratulation. The much-maligned organization has endured a difficult few years.

Embarrassingly marginalized in Kosovo, the world body has demonstrated in East Timor that it still has an important role to play in mediating and resolving international conflicts.

But it would be a mistake to believe that East Timor's transition to independence is a fait accompli. The ballot was merely the first stop along a track still littered with obstacles that could yet derail the peace train.

Pro-Jakarta militias retain the capacity to seriously threaten East Timor's political stability. Their fears and insecurities must be addressed if there is to be genuine reconciliation and an enduring peace.

The Timorese council knows that power must be shared with pro-Jakarta East Timorese leaders. That is why it agreed to establish a 25-member transitional commission headed by the United Nations and comprising representatives from both sides of the political divide.

The United Nations' highest current priority must be to ensure that the momentum toward democracy is not lost during the coming months, when the risk of violence will be greatest. This will not be easy. Powerful voices in Jakarta will argue that Indonesia should wash its hands of East Timor and recall its troops and police. A small but influential group of hard-liners may even seek to destabilize or partition East Timor. Neither must be allowed to happen.

The sooner Jakarta hands over responsibility for security to a UN peacekeeping force, the better. Given Jakarta's inability to control militia violence, it would be inadvisable to wait until after the Indonesian Parliament ratifies the result of the ballot in October or November. The militias may take advantage of the interregnum to wreak further havoc in East Timor. It is also important for the Indonesian withdrawal to be synchronized with the deployment of a UN force.

A UN peacekeeping force will probably have to remain in East Timor for several years so that the transitional authority can concentrate on economic reconstruction and nation building. Australia and Malaysia are likely to provide the core of an expected 7,000-strong force.

Peacekeepers can keep the peace but they cannot build a nation. To do this the East Timorese will need substantial commitments of foreign aid and investment. East Timor's current budgetary requirements suggest that about \$100 million to \$150 million a year for at least the next five years will be needed.

Australia and Portugal will contribute the lion's share of foreign aid but they must not be left to carry the burden alone. Europe, the United States and the Association of South East Asian Nations also need to assist and to remain engaged, financially and politically, long after East Timor is no longer "news." Without substantial and ongoing international support the fruit of freedom may soon wither on the vine.

Indonesia remains the key to East Timor's future. A hostile, resentful Indonesia would jeopardize an already difficult transition process and encourage the more obdurate militia leaders.

The problem here is not Indonesia's political leadership, which by and large is resigned to East Timor's separation. Neither President B.J. Habibie nor his likely successor, Megawati Sukarnoputri, will renege on their public commitments to honor the result of the ballot. The attitude of the Indonesian military, however, is less certain. General Wiranto, the armed forces commander, has made it abundantly clear that he fears the example that East Timor may set for the troublesome provinces of Aceh and Irian Jaya.

Indonesia's friends can best help by encouraging Jakarta to address the underlying political and economic concerns of the Acehnese and indigenous communities of Irian Jaya. Granting them greater autonomy and a more equitable share of their abundant natural resources would be a useful start.

But to support independence for these provinces would run the risk of further destabilizing Indonesia. This, in turn, could jolt other parts of Southeast Asia. It would be an outcome that would serve neither the interests of the West nor those of Asia.

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