

# Security Implications for an Independent East Timor

---

## Recommended Citation

John B. Haseman, "Security Implications for an Independent East Timor", NAPSNet Special Reports, September 09, 1999, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/security-implications-for-an-independent-east-timor/>

---

September 9, 1999

This is the latest in an ongoing series of articles on the crisis in East Timor. This article was contributed by John B. Haseman, former US defense attache to Indonesia. It will be published in a forthcoming issue of Jane's Defense Weekly.

-----  
Security Implications for an Independent East Timor  
John B. Haseman

On 30 August the people of East Timor voted by a ratio of almost four to one to reject an autonomy package offered by the Indonesian government, and thus in effect voted to secede from the world's fourth most populous country. Election day was peaceful, a respite from months of violence largely perpetrated by pro-Indonesian militia forces. The very next day violence began again and has continued at a much more vicious pace. It is clear that the one day of peace was deliberately ordered by whomever in the Indonesian army controls the militia forces, and shows that they have the ability to turn the violence on and off at will.

After more than 20 years under Indonesian rule, East Timor rejected Indonesian pleas for national unity and chose instead to become Southeast Asia's newest independent nation. The margin was not close -- 79 percent voted against the Indonesia government's autonomy proposal, only 21 percent favoured the measure. An astounding 99 percent of registered voters, more than 400,000 people, braved the threat of violence to cast their votes.

Now the East Timorese have chosen independence, but if recent events are a harbinger of things to come, it is not likely to be an easy transition. The security implications are significant, for an independent country of East Timor, for Indonesia, and for the region.

Long lost in the press coverage and international rhetoric about East Timor is the legacy of internecine violence that has characterized East Timor's history. For hundreds of years the Portuguese colonialists skillfully manipulated strains among clans, among the dominant family dynasties of East Timor, and later among the political parties that formed along ideological and family dominated political fault lines.

East Timorese culture and history are a complex blend of dominant families split along political factions often in conflict with each other. Indonesian government spokesmen have frequently alluded to the potential for violence in East Timor if the military ever pulled back from its strong presence in the province. The militia violence that characterized the final months leading up to East Timor's ballot on 30 August was the most recent manifestation of the inherent violence of East Timor's past. Though a callous and cynical reinforcement and exploitation of the historical cleavages in East Timorese society, manipulated by certain hard liners within the military hierarchy for a variety of reasons, the brutality of the past several weeks may not be as easy to contain as some critics believe. The conflicts between pro-integration and pro-independence forces is just a continuation of historical conflicts that have characterised politics in East Timor, whether as a Portuguese colony, a province of Indonesia, or now as a soon-to-be-independent nation.

One of the greatest challenges to face East Timor as a separate country will be to reconcile the violence between its own peoples and then form its own security apparatus. Many of the police are native East Timorese, although more senior officers are Indonesian. The military situation is more difficult. Tactical Indonesian army battalions now deployed in East Timor will probably be withdrawn quickly. However there are also two "territorial" Indonesian army battalions that have been permanently stationed in East Timor and whose manpower was largely recruited in East Timor. The extensive military district structure is also heavily East Timorese. It has yet to be determined whether or not East Timorese police and army personnel, as well as other East Timorese in the civil service, will be given the choice to remain "Indonesian" and withdraw from East Timor, or to resign from Indonesian service and transfer to new East Timorese government institutions.

To this core group of the new security services will be added Fretilin guerrilla force members and supporters who may choose military or police service over government positions or a return to a "normal" civilian life. Both pro-integration and pro-independence East Timorese leaders are on record that reconciliation and amalgamation of all elements of the security forces will be a high priority for the new East Timorese government, but the integration of individuals who have been enemies for

twenty years is an obviously difficult challenge. One civilian East Timorese official of the Indonesian government noted that "this is really a very small town here" and that many East Timorese on both sides of the civil conflict have known each other for decades. Whether such early friendships can survive the ravages of many years of conflict and be resolved peacefully remains to be seen.

And what of the pro-Indonesia militia forces, whose brutality over the past year has so angered East Timorese society and the world community? Though certainly aided and abetted by elements of the Indonesian armed forces, the political sentiments of the respective sides of the conflict nonetheless are very real. As surrogates for the Indonesian army's covert operations and intelligence organizations, it is possible that Indonesian withdrawal will dry up the financial and logistical support that sustained the militia groups. In fact a considerable number of militia members are suspected to be non-East Timorese thugs recruited from other islands and characterized by a background in criminal organizations and youth gangs frequently employed as political surrogates by the army. These men may well simply "fade away".

Most militia members, however, are native East Timorese. There is an unfortunate possibility that many of them will remain organized, though without the sponsorship of the Indonesian army, and continue to prey on East Timorese society. The worst case, of course, is that a bitter and recalcitrant hard-line element within the Indonesian army will continue to use the militias to destabilise East Timor in much the same way as covert Indonesian army special operations troops were used in 1975. Each of these scenarios poses security challenges to the new East Timorese government and its international supporters.

On the strategic international level, East Timor will likely apply quickly for membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as well as the South Pacific Forum. Donor nations and non-governmental organizations will remain a major presence in East Timor for years while they provide the budget and training support for the fledgling nation. These outsiders can be expected to bring with them a security umbrella of some sort. Should militia violence continue there is a strong likelihood that the United Nations will quickly deploy an armed military peacekeeping force to East Timor. If not, such countries as Australia and the United States will likely contribute forces to a multi-national security force outside of UN auspices.

Australian military forces of at least one and perhaps two brigades have been on alert and in training for such a deployment for months. Despite public denials the U.S. has reportedly prepared both Marines and army troops for deployment to East Timor in cooperation and consultation with the Australians. However the Americans are preoccupied with other commitments around the world and East Timor is a long way from home. The U.S. expects Australia to take the lead in any East Timor security operation. These deployments, or even the threat of troop movements to East Timor, might deter a recalcitrant or rogue Indonesian military

faction from attempting to continue sponsorship of pro-Indonesian militia groups or their own covert operations forces in East Timor. But there is always the chance that an international peacekeeping force might clash with covert Indonesian military operations.

The Indonesian military's culpability in the surge of militia violence of recent months is an astounding development for a military organization with a plethora of problems. Its reputation is in tatters after a series of public revelations of systematic army involvement in human rights abuses across Indonesia. Though publicly espousing the cause of political and economic reforms, the military is seemingly having difficulty in adjusting to a reduced political role in a more democratic Indonesian society.

Now the army has been accused of, at the least tacitly accepting and at worse overtly supporting a failed effort to destabilise the United Nations operation in East Timor. This association with an unsavory and brutal militia movement whose depredations resulted in world wide opprobrium, despite official denials believed by almost no one, has disgraced the Indonesian armed forces even further. It is difficult to explain why this happened, but some speculation into the possible reasons illustrates the deep identity problems that now faces Indonesia's security forces.

First, despite public commitment to political reform there is within the military a small but powerful hard line element dedicated for many reasons to retention of the status quo. Second, there is a strong psychological tie to East Timor and loyalty to those thousands of East Timorese that supported Indonesia's military and government operations during more than 20 years of combat there. Third, there is a very real and justifiable concern throughout the military and elsewhere that allowing East Timor to secede from Indonesia will make it far more difficult to preserve national unity. There are strong separatist sentiments in Aceh and Irian Jaya and widespread discontent with the centrist policies of the Soeharto era. Political and economic devolvement to the provincial and district level may well assuage part of the discontent, but it is still worrisome. And finally there is financial wealth and personal power at stake in East Timor. The Soeharto family and cronies have major ownership stakes in East Timor business, land, and small industrial base. It is not known to what extent this wealth has been shared with, or promised to, elements of the armed forces, but certainly the prospects must be a part of the equation.

The combination of these, and perhaps other factors, must be very strong for the military to have allowed itself to become so identified with the brutal and reprehensible behavior of the pro-government militia forces in East Timor. The military's ability to curb those militia groups and to assist in safeguarding the security of the East Timor and its large contingent of international assistance agencies during the transition to East Timor's independence will impact immediately on Indonesia's credibility with its international friends, donor nations, and

international organizations in the months to come.

Still to be determined is a road map to the separation of East Timor from Indonesia, the ability and willingness of the Indonesia security forces to maintain public order there, and the size and make-up of any international peacekeeping force likely to be deployed. Even with the best of intentions on the part of all concerned, however, it is clear that security challenges will persist during the transition and into the separation of East Timor from Indonesia. It will require strong commitments on the part of the East Timorese of all political persuasions, on the part of the Indonesian government and security services, and on the part of the international community to assure any degree of success in what promises to be a difficult process for Indonesia and the region.

---

View this online at: <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/security-implications-for-an-independent-east-timor/>

Nautilus Institute

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

[nautilus@nautilus.org](mailto:nautilus@nautilus.org)