The Crisis in East Timor: An Analysis

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This is the latest in an ongoing series of articles on the crisis in East Timor. This article is by Dr Damien Kingsbury, Executive Officer of the Monash Asia Institute in Australia. Previously, Dr. Kingsbury was East Timor Coordinator of the Australia East Timor International Volunteer Project, the Australian NGO observer group in East Timor for the "popular consultation."

The crisis in East Timor: an analysis

By Damien Kingsbury

The tragic events in East Timor since the territory's vote on self-determination on 30 August 1999 have raised a number of critical questions about the process agreed to by Indonesia, Portugal and the United Nations on 5 May. Some issues include the role and function of the UN, the behaviour of Indonesia's military and political institutions and the processes of development. Responding to points raised by the Nautilus Institute, the following paper attempts to assess some of these issues.

The UN failed to prepare for the events that followed the 30 August ballot, in that it was totally unable to control the violence that erupted allegedly in response to the 78.5 per cent pro-independence result. However, the responsibility for the violence, in which more than a 1000 people were killed in the week following the ballot, rests squarely with the Indonesian authorities. In the first instance, it was the Indonesian president, Habibie, who initiated the ballot, referred to in typically Indonesian terms as a "popular consultation," and who

established the timelines for the ballot. All parties apart from the Indonesian government regarded the timeline for the ballot as being far too short. It did not, they said, allow adequate time to either establish a stable political environment nor to redress the economic and political concerns of the 100-plus thousand non-East Timorese who had shifted to the territory since Indonesia's invasion in 1975. More importantly, the short timeline did not allow the Indonesian armed forces (Tentara Nasional Indonesia - TNI) time to come to terms with what amounted to a humiliating defeat of its policy of repression and intimidation.

Given that the UN at no stage ever accepted Indonesia's invasion or occupation of East Timor, it can hardly be held responsible for the TNI's policy there. Further, it was a primary condition of the ballot, imposed by the TNI, that the UN not have an armed force in East Timor. The Indonesian government insisted that security would be guaranteed by its own paramilitary police. While the UN was rightly skeptical about this "guarantee," it had little choice but to accept it or to forfeit the chance to secure for the people of East Timor the right to self-determination. Again, responsibility for the unarmed status of the UN rests squarely with Indonesia.

To the extent that the UN's "dwindling credibility (has) been further eroded" by the post-ballot events in East Timor, there is an assumption that its standing was already in decline. Given its successful role in both the 1993 and 1998 ballots in Cambodia, this assumption is not valid and reflects a peculiarly American view of the UN that underpinned the US refusal to fulfill its financial obligations to the UN starting from the early 1980s. The view was predicated on the UN "being held hostage" by a large number of small member states, with particular reference to the policies of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

If the UN Security Council does not endorse a peace-enforcement or peace-keeping mission to East Timor, this will more probably reflect the intransigence of China than any particular failure of the UN's Assistance Mission to East Timor (UNAMET). China's position on this matter can be understood in light of its own illegal invasion and occupation of Tibet, and the vulnerability it would face on this issue if it endorsed armed intervention in East Timor.

In so far as there is, at the time of writing, likely to be a peace-enforcement or peace-keeping mission to East Timor, it will probably comprise members of the defence forces of Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Portugal and some ASEAN member states. The rationale for such intervention is based on the status of Indonesian legitimacy in east Timor. Such legitimacy is fundamentally compromised on the following grounds.

a. Indonesia's invasion and occupation of East Timor is not regarded by the UN as lawful.
b. The legitimacy of a state rests, in significant part, on its ability to secure law and order within its claimed territorial boundaries. Indonesia has demonstrably failed in this task.
c. The Indonesian government allowed the people of East Timor to vote in an act of self-determination that overwhelmingly rejected integration with Indonesia. This result was accepted by Indonesia's president, Habibie. The question was thus one of not if East Timor would become independent, but the timing and process of achieving such independence.
d. Under its defence treaty with Indonesia, Australia may intervene in its affairs if Indonesia has demonstrated that it is unable to secure its own environment.

The impact of events in East Timor will certainly test the validity of the ASEAN Regional Forum. In this sense, it will also act as a test of ASEAN as an organisation. Given the somewhat fragile and superficial nature of ASEAN and the increasing discord between its member states, this conflict is neither surprising nor is it cause for concern to other than supporters of this shallowly constructed grouping. The implications for the relations of the member states of ASEAN are limited, especially given that tensions already exist between member states, including Burma and Thailand, Thailand and Cambodia, the Philippines and Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore and Singapore and Malaysia. This is only to mention the most overt tensions and does not include long-standing rivalries and tensions between ASEAN member states that have precluded ASEAN acting as an effective organisation.

The massacres in East Timor are very clearly orchestrated by the TNI. The reasons for this include the following:

a. Securing unity of the state, as it is more broadly conceived by the TNI.
b. Using East Timor as an example to other territories contemplating separation.
c. Ensuring that East Timor does not become Indonesia's "Vietnam" (pride of the TNI).
d. Ensuring the economic well-being of Indonesian investors in East Timor, including the TNI, leading political and military figures and tens of thousands of economic migrants.

The means by which TNI has orchestrated this violence has been by supplying logistics, arms, money and training to the "militias." This has been well documented and has been supported by first-hand observation in East Timor. The "militias," incidentally, comprise very few East Timorese and are largely made up of West Timorese and other outer-islanders, usually led by Kopassus or ex-Kopassus officers and NCOs, as documented by UNAMET, amongst

others.

There are no "intra-military" politics at stake in this venture, as the TNI has been effectively united since early 1999. The factional divisions leading up to and following Suharto's fall in 1998 were almost entirely resolved in favor of the "Fraksi Merah-Putih," which is led by TNI commander-in-chief (panglima), General Wiranto. In terms of Indonesia's post-Suharto political environment, this and related events clearly point to a shift in real political power to the TNI generally and Wiranto in particular from around October 1998.

Unless the United States steps in as a major military or financial provider, there is little prospect of it taking a "leadership role" in East Timor. Indeed, many observers agree that no US military presence would be a positive step, removing both the perception and the reality of the US as the self-appointed world policeman. More usefully, if a number of other, smaller states could act together in East Timor, it would show that international concern is widespread and not dominated by the world's remaining "superpower." Having said that, at the time of writing, the US had indicated that it could provide logistical support for a multi-lateral peace enforcement or peace-keeping mission in East Timor. This low-key approach to US involvement in international affairs would be a welcome shift from what has often been interpreted as the heavy-handedness of US international engagement.

A further issue, which is particularly of concern to the regional states of South-East Asia, including Australia, is the future of its relationship with both Indonesia and an independent Timor. Clearly both are and will remain of strategic importance and, in the case of Indonesia, again of economic importance. However, Australia's foreign policy deliberations towards Indonesia have been determined by either bluff ignorance and disengagement or by appeasement and sycophancy. Australia's relations with Indonesia are now at the crossroads. There is the possibility that Australia will continue to pursue constructive relations with Indonesia. However, there is increasingly the feeling in Australia that such a relationship will be more predicated on compromise by both sides on foreign policy issues and less on Australia attempting to artificially accommodate the peculiarly constructed world-view that continues to dominate Indonesian thinking about the nature and role of the state.

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