

What Jakarta's Papers Say About East Timor

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This is the third in an ongoing series of articles on the crisis in East Timor.

This article is by Gerry van Klinken, editor of "Inside Indonesia" magazine in Australia.

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The article can also be found on the Inside Indonesia website at: <http://www.insideindonesia.org/digest/dig83.htm>.

III. What Jakarta's papers say about East Timor
08 September, 1999

Gerry Van Klinken, Inside Indonesia

President Habibie is not getting much credit in Jakarta's papers for the UN ballot in East Timor. "This was Habibie's most serious mistake," says constitutional law professor Harun Alrasid. "He's finished. Naturally the Consultative Assembly will reject his explanation." Another intellectual, Professor Maswardi Rauf, says, "This is a defeat for Indonesia." Presidential aspirant Megawati blames the post-ballot violence on Habibie as the supreme powerholder. Even Abdurrahman Wahid, the nearly blind leader of Nahdatul Ulama and hitherto a voice for moderation, warned last week that an independent East Timor could become a foreign military base, a place from which to spy on Indonesia. "It will change the power balance in Southeast Asia," he said, adding that Xanana must not become the "puppet" of Alexander Downer.

The trouble with the East Timor issue in Indonesian public discourse is that it comes into the midst of a presidential campaign. The

overwhelming result in favour of independence has come as a shock to a public kept in appalling ignorance about the humanitarian situation in East Timor for many years. Many of Habibie's opponents are blaming him for throwing a piece of Indonesia's territory to the foreign dogs. Even Democracy Forum, a respected group of intellectuals that did sterling work opposing Suharto, says Habibie has undone all Indonesian "sacrifices" for East Timor in the past with a hasty and pragmatic decision to let it go.

Some of this sentiment is frankly xenophobic. Media Indonesia, a daily owned by Surya Paloh, writes in an editorial: "This cabinet is merely the executive committee for an IMF program designed in the United States." Whereas the US in 1975 "told" Indonesia to go in to East Timor, now that same country seemed ready to use every dirty trick, including a "discriminatory" UN ballot, to get Indonesia out again. "Indonesia in the grip of America," screams the headline in Abadi, a Muslim tabloid led by Ahmad Sumargono.

East Timor does not resonate as a human rights issue in Jakarta the way it does in Australia. Except for a small but bold group of human rights activists, Jakartan opinion makers tend to view East Timor as a national security issue. However, there is now more variety in Indonesian public opinion than there was under Suharto, and the new xenophobia is by no means the only voice in the market place.

Habibie has won eloquent support from a number of Islamic intellectuals. The Islamic daily Republika editorialises that Habibie has "created history for a portion of mankind by giving them what they want through a democratic vote." Professor Dawam Raharjo says that the 1976 integration of East Timor into Indonesia was in fact an "annexation," under Cold War conditions and driven by the US and Australia. The Indonesian constitution, he points out, guarantees freedom as "the right of every people." The New Order was as colonialist as Portugal, but at least Habibie's Reformation government has now made amends.

Former Indonesian ambassador to Australia, Sabam Siagian, not by any means a Habibie partisan, also welcomes a political resolution through the UN ballot. He urges Indonesians to accept the ballot result, and to help East Timor develop into a stable nation. A peaceful East Timor, he says, is in Indonesia's interests.

General Wiranto on Monday failed to win parliamentary approval for the declaration of martial law in East Timor. Parliamentarian Zarkasih Nur says: "My party (PPP) strongly rejects martial law for East Timor. The military approach has traumatised the people, and does nothing to resolve the situation." This is a good sign that, even in the midst of a presidential campaign, xenophobia and military reactionism are not the last word on Indonesia's response to the popular vote in East Timor.

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