

What To Do On, and In, East Timor

Recommended Citation

Agus Sari, "What To Do On, and In, East Timor", NAPSNet Special Reports, September 09, 1999, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/what-to-do-on-and-in-east-timor/>

September 9, 1999

This is the latest in an ongoing series of articles on the crisis in East Timor. This is the draft of a forthcoming article in Indonesia Alert! by Agus Sari, Executive Director of Pelangi, an Indonesian non-governmental organization that focuses on environment and development.

What To Do On, and In, East Timor?
Forthcoming in Indonesia Alert!

A Region of Terror

On August 30, 1999, the overwhelming majority of East Timorese decided to break away from Indonesia to become an independent sovereign country through a United Nations (UN) -facilitated voting mechanism. Shortly after the decision--especially since Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General, announced the result of the voting--pro-Indonesia militias have run amok, "cleansweeping" villages alleged to house pro-independence people. Hundreds more of unarmed and innocent villagers died since the beginning of the oppression, adding to the already large number of deaths since Indonesia annexed the former Portugal colony 20 years ago.

While the day of the voting itself was not necessarily a day of crisis, the whole voting process was far from peaceful. The balance of power reportedly sided on the pro-Indonesia minority. The police, the military, and the authorities seemed to be impotent, if not giving ways for the pro-Indonesia thugs to terrorize the region by burning houses, carry weapons, and killing random people. The killing of an American UN officer outraged the United States to the point that both Kofi Annan and Madeleine Albright made a strong condemnation to the violence. Armed clashes also happened in the residence of Bishop Belo, a joint Nobel Laureate for Peace for his dedication to East Timor problems.

Violence has increased, and many people who are lucky enough to remain alive are fleeing the region amid a shower of intimidation and bullets. Jakarta declares a state of emergency by enacting Martial Law in East Timor. In so doing, it is sending even more troops to East Timor. There are mixed reactions for and against this move, given the mixed reputation of the Indonesian Army. Meanwhile, the Security Council sent a delegation to Jakarta to meet Habibie and Wiranto, whereas Canberra stated its readiness to deploy about 2,000 peacekeeping troops to East Timor. The United States remains waiting-and-seeing, though it endorses an Australian move once Jakarta gives its green light.

What May Be Happening? There are numerous theories on which one can speculate. One is simply that the military needs to destroy evidence of atrocities that may bring them to the World Court tribunal for committing war crimes and alleged genocide. It is a strategy that has long been known in other parts of the world from Iraq vs Kuwait to Serbia vs Kosovo, even the United States vs Vietnam.

The second theory is related with Indonesian domestic politics. The invasion of East Timor in 1975 and an orchestrated annexation the year after by Suharto-led Indonesia still leaves a sour legacy. It cost Indonesia a lot, and it still does. Like an abusive relationship, it has gone sour, but much has been invested, reputations are at stake, faces need to be saved, so that a breakup is not envisaged.

But today, Suharto is no longer President; thus theoretically, no face is slapped and no toe stepped on. Therefore, amid increasing international pressures, President Habibie decided to give in by agreeing to a referendum in East Timor. In the absence of Suharto and other generals that were directly involved and therefore have strong sentiments, Habibie can easily put East Timor on a journey to independence. Wrong. Sentiments against East Timor's independence have gone full circle for one generation, and even without the presence of Suharto, laypeople in Indonesia have quite a strong opinion about it.

Taking all that into consideration, it can be theorized that the current escalating tension in East Timor may have been an unfortunate consequence of apparently an extension of domestic politics in Jakarta between President Habibie and his old and new political enemies. The current debate within the Indonesian Parliament questioning his authority to let the future fate of East Timor be decided in the hands of, or at least facilitated by, an "outside force" such as the UN was an illustration of such. The opposition-led Parliament members regret his unilateral decision to allow the referendum, thus denying a Parliamentary Law to accept East Timor as part of Indonesia. Repealing such an Act needs yet another Parliamentary Law, thus denying Habibie's executive decision. Many observers agree that such questioning by the Parliament members should be isolated only as a domestic affair between the President and the Parliament, and should not be used to alter the UN decision on East Timor as it will only give Indonesia a bad reputation within the UN. But, of course, for Habibie's political rivals, this major legal flaw can

backfire on his political standing. If at all, this is only another example of Habibie's amateurish political move to make such a major legal mistake, albeit a really bloody one. But it is also a mistake of his opponents in using this as political weaponry.

The tension in civilian politics, however, pales compared with the military ones. The role and presence of Kopassus, the Elite Force within the Army (deemed as "the Green Berets" of Indonesia), has been pivotal in East Timor. Kopassus also has long been known for its maverick behavior, while it is the most well-funded troops within the Army. Its otherwise brilliant former Chief, Prabowo Subianto, was in rivalry with Wiranto, the Chief Commander of the Armed Forces. The tension remains, even after Prabowo was sacked by Wiranto shortly after Suharto – Prabowo's father in law – gave up his Presidential chair to Habibie amid growing unrest. Some Kopassus officers, however, remain loyal to Prabowo even after he became a civilian.

Wiranto, known as a leading general from the "Red-and-White faction" of the military for his alleged non-partisan positions, still holds power as Chief Commander of the Armed Forces, and unlike some factions within the military, backs Habibie's presidency.

Declaring the Martial Law in East Timor and dispatching more troops – about 1,400 more from Jakarta – may seem to add insult to injury, especially since the army reportedly are backing the pro-Indonesia thugs. But one can argue that these troops are loyal to Wiranto, whereas the ones already in East Timor are not.

What does this mean? East Timor will be a battlefield between factions of the Indonesian military. Who will lose in the battle? The civilians.

On Sending UN Peacekeeping Troops

Will sending UN Peacekeeping troops assure a solution? What are the likely problems? Certainly, denying the unarmed and innocent villagers protection is a sin of omission. So, something must be done. Imagine this: the motive is to protect the innocent civilians in East Timor from being slaughtered, the backdrop is a delicate international power politics and diplomacy, as well as military preparedness. Xanana Gusmao, who was just released from prison, suggested a UN peacekeeper to enter East Timor. Xanana may be right, given the uncertainty of the sides the Indonesian military is backing currently. But choosing the right passport-holders in the peacekeeping team may be complicated for various reasons. The following fleshes out some of the complexities.

The first complexity has to do with the reluctance of the government of Indonesia to allow foreign troops to enter Indonesia. Indeed, this reluctance is a giving-in response to the sentiments shared by some politicians in Indonesia – some of them actually are in Habibie's bloc – against any foreign involvement. Already the acceptance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in managing Indonesia's economy has

been criticized in Indonesia. Far beyond economic involvement, military involvement will instigate the nationalistic sentiments of some of the Republicans in the country. Habibie as well as Wiranto will not risk it.

Second, even if, or when, Indonesia accepted the UN's offer for a Peacekeeping Force in East Timor, the way is not too smooth. Unlike the Serbia-Kosovo case, the international community is currently facing an important and significant country. Indonesia is the fourth most-populous country with a substantial economy and military, and its military officers only listen to other strong countries. Indonesia respects only a few of other countries' military forces.

Third, There are biases in the international community regarding the status of East Timor. One side of the spectrum is Portugal, which denies completely Indonesia's claim over East Timor. On the other is Australia, which acknowledge Indonesia's rule over East Timor due to its interest in exploiting the Timor Gap oil. There is military joint training and education between Jakarta and Canberra. Its outrage against the militia in Australia emerged only recently when its Ambassador's car was shot in East Timor. All of these facts render Portugal and Australia unlikely to be perceived to act fairly.

Third, the peacekeepers may have to face the Indonesian military, albeit the maverick ones. This needs more than a straightforward decision in the battlefield; i.e., to shoot or not to shoot.

So, what to do? A carefully crafted UN Peacekeeping is definitely needed. It needs more than the size of the troops or the readiness, however. Time is limited, however, and the time to act is now.

View this online at: <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/what-to-do-on-and-in-east-timor/>

Nautilus Institute
2342 Shattuck Ave. #300, Berkeley, CA 94704 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org