

THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF UNRESERVED AND SYSTEMATIC ACTIVIST SUPPORT

June 2015

The unreserved and systematic support of the East Timorese government by a group of Australian political activists^[1] has one chief quality: it is unfailing. One never reads in their frequent statements any criticism, however discreet, of the policies or behavior of the Timorese government or of its political leaders, while at the same time their criticism of the current and past governments of Australia is profuse and abrasive. Criticism of Indonesia is also surprisingly, but instructively, quite absent from their ranting.

Isn't this quite mystifying?

In a part of the world where corruption is prevalent, if not ubiquitous, and mismanagement standard in all branches of government, is the government of East Timor miraculously immune to venality and gross mishandling of its affairs? Or is it that the Western activists who unconditionally support it feel a special spiritual relationship with its leaders, so close and deferential as to affect their honest judgement? Isn't it surprising that not a word of dissent is ever heard from these confirmed democrats, and that only messages of praise were released when the political leader recently masterminded an obvious political coup and directly anointed his successor from within the ranks of the Opposition in an almost monarchical fashion? And how to explain the absolute and surreal consensus behind the maritime boundaries dispute, about which one never hears a whisper of doubt?

The systematic and unflagging support of the political leaders of a notoriously corrupt and incompetent government by Western activists portraying themselves as righteous intellectuals endangers the very people whose interest they claim to protect. East Timor is a tiny nation with very limited resources and no industrial tradition, and very few assets to efficiently compete economically with its giant neighbors. Instead of fanning the flames of nationalistic indignation and rancor, they should rather endeavor to help find inventive ways for the small country to survive in the modern world as an independent nation, not suggest and recommend to their heroes irrational and unfounded policies of territorial expansion and governmental control over all aspects of the economy. If need be they should firmly and courageously oppose such dumbfounding policies publicly.

Could it be that they are trying to implement across the water in East Timor an ideology that failed in Australia, and are using the East Timorese-Australian dispute as a weapon in a broader domestic political proxy battle?

Or is it that after having carefully crafted during forty years the elegant and romantic legend of a mountain guerilla warrior who, against all odds, fought as a modern David a ferocious invading Goliath in the name of National Sovereignty and Freedom and eventually won his cause thanks to the undivided support of his righteous Western supporters, acknowledging the myth would be too painful, and removing the heroes from a Pantheon enshrining the likes of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Salvador Allende and Mao Tsetung would perhaps prove too embarrassing?

In the mid 1970's, a number of these activists were young men and women who likely hailed the proclamation of the "Democratic Republic" just north of Australia as the coming of the New Cuba to the Southern Hemisphere, just one more confirmation at the time of the demise of what the Soviets called "American Imperialism". Did they notice that the leaders of the independence movement were in fact Portuguese Creoles and that the bulk of the people was largely unrepresented in that movement?

What makes modern Indonesians politically distinct from Malaysians, Filipinos or East Timorese is not so much ethnic differences but rather which European power ruled their various lands until the middle of the XXth century. One shared feature, however tenuous, between the three dozen different ethnic communities of East Timor, or those of West Timor, Flores, or the Moluccas, is the influence of either Portuguese or Dutch rulers on their administration and technical vocabularies, and also some marginal genetic roots traced back to European adventurers or administrators and convicts deported from Europe, Africa and other parts of Asia. Until 1859 Portugal officially ruled over West Timor and Flores and it was not until 1916 that an official boundary was established. Today some of these lands are Indonesian while others are East Timorese, according to boundaries defined by the colonial rulers, but despite their many differences the peoples of these various islands have much in common ethnically and culturally but only few colonial dissimilarities. Still, what makes East Timor different from West Timor or Leti in the eyes of its current minority rulers is its colonial Portuguese history, and it is for the direct or distant offspring of the expatriate Portuguese that they claimed independence, not in the name of the thirty-six or so nationalities of the half-island, whose large majority doesn't even speak the otherwise beautiful language of Luís Vaz de Camões.

Let us try to review, as dispassionately as possible, the events that took place in East Timor since the mid-1970's.

At the end of November, 1975, Fretilin, a political party which officially endorsed "the universal doctrines of socialism", unilaterally declared independence from Portugal for the "Democratic Republic of East Timor". Only seven months after the fall of Saigon to Communist North Vietnam and of Cambodia to the Communist Khmer Rouge, at the very same time that the Communist Pathet Lao was overthrowing the Kingdom of Laos, and a mere 48 hours after an attempted Communist coup in Portugal, there is not the shadow of a doubt that the West would not, nor could it, tolerate the creation of a "Democratic Republic" in the midst of Indonesia and only 300 miles north of Australian shores. Consequently, Indonesia invaded East Timor with the blessings of the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. As a precedent, Indonesia had forcefully taken over Dutch New Guinea upon its being relinquished by the Netherlands to United Nations Temporary Executive Authority in 1962, already with the support of the West. For those not familiar with the Cold War era, in 1975 the words "Democratic Republic" characterized harsh Communist regimes such as those ruling the Democratic Republics of East Germany, Laos, Vietnam, or North Korea to name a few.

While a Portuguese speaking and educated right-wing elite favored annexation to Indonesia as its 27th province, the Portuguese speaking and educated left-wing leadership of Fretilin favored independence, and 24 years of conflict ensued, with the ghastly events that have been replicated in many, if not all, military conflicts and civil wars in other parts of the world. There were horrid massacres of civilians. In total,

between 900 and 1,000 civilians were killed in collective bloodbaths between 1975 and 1999, one half at the hands of Timorese anti-independence militias, and the other half first in Kraras in 1983 where the Indonesian army executed 200 civilians in reprisal for the assassination of 16 Indonesian soldiers a month earlier, and then in Dili in 1991 where 200 to 250 civilians were killed by the Indonesian military after a confrontation between pro-independence demonstrators and the military led to the stabbing of the Indonesian Deputy Commander of an Airborne Battalion.

For reference, the population of East Timor was 663,000 in 1975. In 1999 it was 848,000.

The Indonesian army was certainly using all means at its disposal to enforce Indonesia's authoritarian rule, but its behavior was quite probably not generally as horrifying as depicted by Western observers, otherwise one would expect a fierce resentment of all Indonesians in today's East Timor, of which there is none, especially when compared to the resentment of most things Portuguese in the general population. Almost all the population speaks Indonesian, if only to communicate between regions in which mutually unintelligible idioms are spoken, but only a tiny minority speaks Portuguese, a language that is nonetheless required for securing government portfolios and high positions in the administration. Timorese travel extensively to Indonesia to procure higher education, medical treatment, entertainment and all staples of life, and many marry Indonesian citizens. Likewise, Indonesians abound in East Timor, investors, qualified workers, fishermen, entrepreneurs, contractors, and both Timorese and Indonesians are welcome in each other's country. Many Timorese and Indonesians are also citizens of the other country.

To come back to historic events, a referendum was organized in 1999 for the population to make a choice between "Do you accept the proposed special autonomy for East Timor within the unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia?", an option favored by several Portuguese speaking right-wing paramilitary groups, and "Do you reject the proposed special autonomy for East Timor, leading to East Timor's separation from Indonesia?", an option favored by a Portuguese speaking left-wing paramilitary group led by a charismatic commander. There was much intimidation and violence on the part of the former groups and the latter won, with 78.5% of the vote. Characteristically, the victors remained in power instead of relinquishing their authority to a civilian government and converted their group into a national armed force. It is worthwhile noting that the Indonesian President, Habibie, had been campaigning not in favor, but against, maintaining East Timor within Indonesia. It is also worth remembering that it had been widely repeated since the mid-1970's that an Eldorado-like bounty was lying offshore the half-island and everybody would be rich in an independent East Timor, whereas an Indonesian provincial East Timor would lose all petroleum revenue to Jakarta.

The very next day murderous violence erupted, at the hands of East Timorese anti-independence paramilitary groups, and many public buildings, including churches, were burnt to the ground.

It is interesting to reflect on the fact that East Timor did not claim large reparations from Indonesia after independence. Some Western organizations were, and still are, recommending reparations, but it seems the East Timorese think differently. They know that most of the infrastructure had been built between 1975 and 1999 and that whatever

infrastructure was destroyed by the anti-independence militias in 1999 had not been there before 1975. Most of the infrastructure, if not all, government buildings, ports, airports, roads, bridges, electrical plants, hospitals, had been built by Indonesia and most was in good order and constitutes the core of the infrastructure to this day. The Indonesian government had invested considerable resources in East Timor, which had led to a more rapid economic growth than in any other province, averaging 6% per year over the period 1983-1997. The Timorese are acutely aware of this.

Now, to come to collective memory, it is quite intriguing to realize that Timorese people are quite indifferent to events that were largely publicized internationally as intolerable, such as the killing by Indonesian special forces of five Western journalists seven weeks before the planned Indonesian invasion, in a town not 4 miles from the Indonesian border. For one thing, the Timorese do not feel as much connected to these journalists from Australia, New Zealand and Britain as the public in those countries are, for another, at the time the country was still Portuguese and Indonesians were more welcome than the Portuguese as far as the general population was concerned, especially so close to the border, but more importantly the Timorese understand that as illegitimate as the infiltration of Indonesian special forces in foreign sovereign territory might have been regarded by the Portuguese, and as horrifying as the killing of individuals in cold blood might be, the special forces probably had not much choice but to permanently silence, after consultation with their military hierarchy, the foreign journalists who, if released, would have exposed Indonesia's military plans internationally, while it would have been impossible to secretly keep them prisoners for several months. Very sad consequence of the inadvertent discovery of the Indonesian plot by Western journalists. The New South Wales Coroner in effect later confirmed this interpretation of events.

The officer in command of that special force later married an East Timorese woman of partial Portuguese ancestry and their children have both Timorese and Indonesian roots and speak the two languages. They are well known to authorities and are free to travel to and from East Timor, which supports the notion that Timorese and Westerners may see the same events in a quite different light. Incidentally, at the time of the referendum the officer, who had retired as his country's most decorated officer, was Indonesia's Minister of Information and is well known for dismantling governmental control over the media and introducing both free speech and free press in Indonesia.

Many Indonesian officers and soldiers married East Timorese women. The Timorese feel no resentment about these marriages, which is perhaps a reasonable indication that the occupation of East Timor by Indonesian forces was probably quite different from what Western activists and Timorese hagiographers have depicted.

World history is a tale of greed, cruelty, and above all foolishness, but prosperous activists, from the safe redoubt of their vast continent, guided by mistaken ideology and indignant self-righteousness, should resist the unfortunate temptation of making their own country the scapegoat for the failures of a foreign government, by irrationally blaming their own past and current governments not only for political decisions made several decades ago in the middle of the Cold War, when the West was feeling besieged and was experiencing what was then perceived as dramatic setbacks at the hands of Communism, but also for treaties and agreements entered into in more recent years, and for current events, the reach of which is probably still ignored. The hopefully unintended consequence of yielding to such a temptation is to critically impair the

economic and human development of a destitute neighbor by unreservedly supporting the flamboyant spiritual leaders^[2] of its rather corrupt government, instead of trying to assist the common people, which, if anything, need to be protected from their own incompetent and self-serving government.

The road to Hell is indeed paved with good intentions. Self-centered, ill-informed, and idealistic goodwill based on the cult of personality is a poor substitute for wisdom and honest pragmatism.

Notes:

1: among them Kirsty Sword, Steve Bracks, Damien Kingsbury, Tom Clarke, Kim McGrath, Tom Allard, Father Frank Brennan, Sister Susan Connelly, Janelle Saffin, Paul Cleary and many others.

2: ironically, Wikipedia reports in its History of Indonesia pages that *“charismatic Sukarno spoke as a romantic revolutionary, and under his increasingly authoritarian rule Indonesia moved on a course of stormy nationalism. Sukarno was popularly referred to as bung (“older brother”), and he painted himself as a man of the people carrying the aspirations of Indonesia and one who dared take on the West. He instigated a number of large, ideologically driven infrastructure projects and monuments celebrating Indonesia’s identity, which were criticized as substitutes for real development in a deteriorating economy.”* Incidentally, among other common traits, the East Timorese refer to their spiritual leader as Maun Bot (“Older Brother”).