Going Home?

“Now you may go to East Timor,” said the Indonesian official earnestly, “and see for yourself what the government has done there.” President Suharto had recently signed the decree which, in January 1989, opened the disputed territory to foreign tourists after 13 years of enforced isolation.

We were sitting near the base of Mount Kelimutu, a volcano famous for its three coloured lakes, located on the beautiful island of Flores, north of Timor in the Indonesian archipelago. The young man’s comment was directed to what he had read of economic development in the former Portuguese colony. Little did he appreciate the reality of Jakarta’s rule in East Timor.

Shortly thereafter, traversing the hot dusty streets of East Timor’s capital Dili, I was immediately struck by the pervading atmosphere of fear and apprehension. Friends in West Timor had tacitly warned of the excessive ‘security situation’ in the neighbouring territory. It became readily apparent that, while the opening of East Timor was a ray of light for the Timorese, the dark history of Jakarta’s rule still cast a shadow over the lives of the indigenous population and, curiously, over many ordinary Indonesians themselves.

On 7 December 1975, when the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) launched its full-scale invasion of East Timor, the dark history of Jakarta’s invasion and occupation still cast a long shadow over the lives of the indigenous population and, curiously, over many ordinary Indonesians themselves.

On 7 December 1975, when the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) launched its full-scale invasion of Australia’s small neighbour, it set in train a process of violent oppression of the Timorese of which the Santa Cruz massacre late last year was just one example. Apologists for Jakarta’s military dictatorship claim the 12 November massacre was merely an ‘aberration’ by a section of the military. More than 200,000 deceased Timorese, were they able to, would hotly dispute this ludicrous claim. However, the ABRI understands very well the maxim that dead people tell no tales.

Unfortunately for Jakarta’s generals, however, many thousands of Timorese are witnesses to ABRI’s crimes of the past 16 years. Moreover, foreign journalists and visitors recorded the bloody Santa Cruz massacre and brought it to the vivid attention of the world. In this sense, at least, the massacre was indeed an ‘aberration’ for the military, which has traditionally conducted its vendettas against the Timorese away from the international gaze.

The massacre in Dili briefly focused the world’s attention on the human tragedy of East Timor. Indonesia’s military government came under unprecedented international and domestic pressure; ABRI floundered in a welter of contradictory and incriminating statements. Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, respected in some quarters, lamented loudly that some people overseas had the false impression that “the Indonesian government goes around shooting people”.

Alatas’ complaints rang hollow; soon after Armed Forces Chief Try Sutrisno publicly beat his breast in a speech to a seminar at the National Defence Institute, East Timorese pro-independence demonstrators he described as “despicable”; they had to be killed and “we (ABRI) shall shoot them”.

Sutrisno’s speech, coming from one of the most powerful figures in the Indonesian state, demonstrated that the massacre was not an aberration but an act of policy. President Suharto has not sacked Sutrisno for his comments nor, indeed, publicly repudiated them. Instead, Suharto has singled out two convenient scapegoats, Major-General Panjaitan and Brigadier-General Warouw—who have been punished for at least 50 civilian deaths, by a sideways transfer.

Meanwhile, a number of Timorese languish in jails in Java, Bali and East Timor (some facing the death penalty) for the ‘crime’ of resisting the illegal occupation of their homeland. At the time of writing, not one Indonesian soldier has been charged with a crime—although it is not beyond President Suharto to come up with a few low-ranking ABRI scapegoats to further placate foreign governments and aid donors.

Under pressure, Suharto has expressed ‘regret’ and called for reconciliation and progress in East Timor. He then appointed Brigadier-General Theo Syafei to replace Warouw as East Timor military commander—whereupon Syafei promptly announced a much tougher policy towards the Timorese than his predecessor.

Many observers of Indonesia’s policies towards East Timor view the Santa Cruz massacre as a turning point in the sixteen-year conflict. There are strong grounds for this view. International attention on East Timor has eroded the wall of lies and disinformation painstakingly erected by the Indonesians over many years. Jakarta can no longer confidently claim that resistance to Indonesian rule is negligible or non-existent. Even Brigadier-General Syafei, at his installation ceremony in Dili, conceded that the large independence demonstration that preceded the massacre was a reflection of the people’s aspirations—aspersions he apparently intends to suppress. If Syafei and his military superiors believe that greater force is the answer to the East Timor problem, they have learnt little from the 16-year rule. During the occupation, ABRI has used its entire military arsenal and committed tens of thousands of troops to the relentless war against independence guerrillas, the clandestine network and the indigenous population. In 1992, the independence guerrillas continue their lonely struggle, the clandestine network is extensive and the civilian population remains as steadfastly opposed to Jakarta’s rule as ever. Even former Prime Minister Bob Hawke, after ignoring the plight of the East Timorese for years, correctly admitted in parliament recently that “the military solution is no solution”.

This is the dilemma for Jakarta, and represents the fundamental weakness of its position in East Timor. Military force has failed miserably to crush the Timorese, but should Jakarta loosen
its grip, the Timorese will take full advantage of it to further their pro-independence activities. ABRI’s generals have succeeded in maintaining military control, but have been comprehensively defeated in the political battle for the hearts and minds of the people. Visitors to East Timor who speak to the people are left in no doubt as to their overwhelming desire for freedom and self-determination.

Many Indonesians who have been posted to East Timor or who have migrated there for economic reasons sense the underlying problem. A not uncommon response from Indonesians is that they are living in East Timor because of ‘duty’ and there is a longing to leave the place at the earliest opportunity. Timorese understand this attitude—hence the “Kapan Pulang?” campaign developed by the clandestine resistance as a form of opposition. This campaign involved Timorese constantly asking Indonesians when they were going home. It had an unsettling effect, reinforcing the sense that the Indonesians were foreigners in what is supposed to be their “27th Province”.

The 12 November pro-independence demonstration was one of a series of protests organised by the new generation of educated Timorese youth since the territory was opened in 1989. Jakarta had previously placed great faith in the strategy that controlled education and the effluxion of time would create a new generation of Timorese who would be “good Indonesians”. The bodies of the Timorese youth at the Santa Cruz cemetery symbolise the ineffectiveness of this strategy.

Xanana Gusmao, the leader of the East Timorese Resistance, in a lengthy interview in September 1990 at his secret mountain headquarters, succinctly put forward his view of the colonial power’s dilemma:

The youngsters, both those born before the invasion and those since, are children of the people, they are not children of one people and children of another, they are not children of the transmigrants, they are children of these people who, under 400 years of Portuguese domination, always knew how to keep alive the patriotic consciousness... The schools established by the Indonesians deny them their own language, their own culture, their traditions, their way of seeing things. The Indonesians tried to impose on them a way of thinking which they know is not theirs, yet they receive a transference in terms of continuity, a transference of their Maubere identity and culture, customs and traditions. A Maubere goes to a school in the Bahasa language, where they teach another history, another way of seeing, another concept of life. Evidently, a people which knows itself cannot be reduced, cannot be subjected. They are a people which is conscious, which wants not to be alienated, and this is the case of the Timorese youth, and this is the fundamental problem of the war.

Indonesians may control most of the guns in East Timor but the vast majority of the indigenous population remains sullen and resentful towards them. Jakarta’s changing of the repression levers from ‘hard’ to ‘soft’ or back to ‘hard’ again will not substantively alter this reality. East Timor is Jakarta’s ‘Palestinian problem’ and the problem will continue for as long as the Indonesian government lacks the courage and will to recognise the failure of its forcible integration into the Republic of Indonesia.

International pressure is critical to this recognition which, it seems, will only occur after the key architects of the failed policy, Generals Suharto and Murdani, have departed from the political scene.

One of the greatest ironies of the Santa Cruz massacre is that ABRI has come under unprecedented scrutiny and criticism from within Indonesia itself. The Armed Forces that went into East Timor to crush the people’s aspirations for freedom and democracy now finds that those very same Timorese have caused ABRI to be subjected to the winds of democracy and reform, fluky though those winds may be.

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