East Timor: The Modest Revolution

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"The most backward backwater in the world" was how the Australian press recently described East ("Portuguese") Timor. Looked at economically and historically, this undoubtedly is true. Yet in a short 16 months, East Timor has set an unprecedented example.

It is an historical paradox that East Timor, unknown to the world, closed off in a stagnating fascist-colonialism for 450 years, without overt political activity until April 27, 1974, should be able to defy the geo-political realities of its surroundings and reach a level of political maturity that has taken similar movements in Africa or Asia decades to achieve. This unique experience is as part of the totality of the world-wide colonial revolution, which alone explains the political phenomenon we are now witnessing 400 miles north of Darwin.

Javanese and Chinese traders made the first known contact with Timor from about 1000 AD onwards to barter goods for sandalwood, a semi-parasitic highly perfumed white wood tree in great demand in the region and particularly China. Timor was literally covered with the precious wood. It was thus one of the "spice islands", attracting the Portuguese, who established a trading station in Molucca in 1511. This Portuguese influence spread by 1566 to islands near Timor.

The Dutch drove the Portuguese out of what is now Indonesia, and in 1653 from Kupang, now capital of Indonesian (West) Timor. But they clung on east Timor, which was administered by the Church and Portuguese traders until 1702. Significantly, Portuguese control was strengthened by the emergence of the "Topasses" or Black Portuguese, the offspring of Portuguese, other European Goanese and Chinese trader-adventurers, local and other women from neighboring islands, who together formed a skilled, literate free-booting pirate class reminiscent of the Caribbean.

"Quarrelling among themselves, manipulating the traditional chiefs in bloody little trade wars aimed at controlling the rich sandalwood industry, rebelling impartially against both Church and State, they nevertheless, in the final issue invariably chose Portugal, the distant origin of their synthetic culture, in preference to Holland." (1)

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It was only in 1769 that Portugal moved the capital to Dili from the enclave of Oe-Cussi, fearing Dutch attack. Nevertheless, throughout the eighteenth century, the Portuguese rule was nominal, with feuds between the Church and State and the Goa authorities who were nominally in charge. Britain took control briefly in 1816 during the Napoleonic Wars. All missionaries were expelled by the Portuguese from 1834 to 1877, reflecting the continuing struggle between Church and State in Portugal itself. In 1893 a tenuous border agreement was drawn up with Holland.

It was only in the latter half of the nineteenth century that the Portuguese began to slowly push their authority inland, in the hope of digging copper, gold, precious stones and oil. The first and virtually only export crop - high grade Arabica (coffee) - was planted in the hills above Dili in the 1850's. Good results from wheat and cattle were not continued, through government neglect.

Portuguese colonisation proceeded slowly and inefficiently by Dutch standards. In the Dutch East Indies (and west Timor) the role of the traditional village chiefs, the radjas, had been continually eroded as part of Dutch colonial policy. Villages were regrouped and the radjas power power limited. The Portuguese, however, in the slow push inland, with poor roads washed away every wet season, deliberately enhanced the powers of these chiefs (regulos or luirais). They were given many privileges and allowed to maintain their private armies in some cases. The Portuguese maintained the loyalty of the luirais by divide-and-rule, maintaining traditional tribal animosities, leading to almost fanatical loyalty to the Portuguese by some. The Portuguese flag was even incorporated in animist rites in some areas, as a sacred object.

But in other areas it led to violent revolts, the most famous being that led by Dom Bonaventura, in the same region, in 1912, which shook Portuguese rule. B.J. Callinan, commander of Australian commandos in East Timor in World War 11, in his book on his experiences, wrote of how an anti-Portuguese revolt in the Maubisse area, was put down by the expedient of the Portuguese arming a rival tribal group, which massacred hundreds of the rebels. (2)

At the end of the Nineteenth Century, Timor became a separate Portuguese province. The sandalwood had by then been completely stripped from Timor. The colony stagnated, serving as a place of exile for political opponents in Portugal. These deportados were however often entrusted with the administration of the colony.

It was World War 11 that turned East Timor upside down. Portugal was neutral, but the Japanese landed and for 13 months 400 Australian commandos pinned down 21,000 Japanese troops, inflicting 1500 deaths for the loss of 40. The Portuguese divided between those who worked with the Australians (mainly the deportados) and those who collaborated with the Japanese.

The Japanese, demagogically, but with some effect, rallied a sector of the Timorese to oppose both the Australians and Portuguese through anti-white, anti-colonial propaganda. As in Indonesia, many Timorese were awakened to anti-white and anti-colonial sentiments by this Japanese demagogy, although a majority remained pro-Australian. But as elsewhere in Asia, the Timorese soon felt the hard hand of Japanese fascism. Massacres of pro-Australian Timorese occurred, while the ruthless seizure of food resulted in a famine which took up to 40,000 lives. Timor's few towns were savagely bombed by the Australian air force, reducing them to rubble.

The pro-Japanese elements were wiped out when the Portuguese returned to full control in 1945. But the memory of Japanese anti-colonialist demagogy remained. There is evidence to link the pro-Japanese elements of the war period with the few pro-Indonesian forces in the island today. Some of their main leaders lived for some time in Indonesia, after independence, in liaison with similar forces who had worked with the Japanese against the Dutch. Indeed, the “kill all whites” propaganda by APODETI in recent weeks over Radio Kupang, returns to such origins, while also reflecting the provocation the Indonesians were trying to mount, to excuse invasion.

In 1959, Indonesian officers who had staged a revolt in the South Molluccas sought refuge in Portuguese Timor after their revolt was crushed. They then organised a revolt in the Viqueque region, with the aid of some elements who had supported the Japanese in World War 11. The revolt was discovered before it was launched and the Portuguese
crushed it bloodily. The pro-Indonesian APODETI party falsely claim the revolt was for merger with Indonesia. Given that its leaders were Indonesian refugees, it was more likely they aimed at using East Timor as a base against Indonesia to support the South Molucca secessionists.

Nevertheless, the 1959 abortive revolt, coming shortly before the outbreak of liberation wars in all its African colonies, resulted in a new policy towards Timor by the Salazar regime, as part of its new colonial policy in the Sixties. It was only then that the Portuguese built any sort of infrastructure in their forgotten colony. Dili's few sealed roads, electricity, the modern port complex, concrete storm water canals, radio station and beacon, cold storage and warehouse facilities, a new hospital annexe and a few rudimentary "factories" (coffee production, soft drinks, biscuits, cigarettes, etc.) were established. Much also ill-conceived, to say the least. The airport at Baucau can take jumbo jets, but actually handles only Fokker Friendships twice a week from Darwin. They were superficial development projects, immersed in corruption that did nothing for the Timorese.

More importantly, the Portuguese from 1969 did move towards a comprehensive primary education system, which has been enormously important in political developments over the past year. In October 1974, the Portuguese claimed 52,000 primary school pupils. Although this was probably an inflated figure, the education has had an important impact. It was Portuguese in all aspects, aimed above all at inculcating a "love of Portugal" in the students. Under fascism, Timorese language and culture was forbidden in the schools.

At the same time, the first high school and later a technical school, were opened in Dili. Two religious seminaries offer secondary education. Three hundred students attend the Dili lyceum, half non-Timorese. In Lisbon, 39 Timorese are attending university courses. 38 more began this year. (3) Today there is the grand total of 13 Timorese graduates from Lisbon universities in East Timor, small in number but politically very important.

THE ELITE IN TIMOR

The elite - those with some education, jobs in administration or trade, coffee plantation owners, traders, etc. - are crucial in a country like East Timor. The Timorese elite is small, numbering at all levels perhaps 3,000. It has a number of components: the traditional luirais appointed and backed by fascism; the colonial administration, mainly Portuguese at its top levels and part-Timorese, Goanese and Chinese at its lower levels; the small bourgeoisie, mainly Chinese traders and a handful of Portuguese and Timorese plantation owners; and skilled workers in commerce, service industries and the administration.

In a society like this, skilled workers such as postal technicians, who in a country like Australia would be at best in the middle level of the working class, form part of the elite, by the sheer fact that they enjoy a living standards many times better than the unskilled workers or the villagers. Yet, at the same time, they remain in a subordinate position within the administration and commerce. As a result in many cases they are open to radical, nationalist views.

The other social classes are easily defined. First there is the 90 percent of the population living through subsistence agriculture, struggling to both feed themselves and pay the poll tax levied by the Portuguese, with the alternative of forced labor. In the towns, particularly Dili, a small unskilled working class, engaged in construction, transport and trade. Extremely poorly-paid, in most cases migrants from the villages, and competing for work with the newly-arrived villagers, the Timorese working class is in many ways the most oppressed. Drawn by the hope of making money and captivated by market fetischism, having experienced town life, they are unwilling to return to their villages of origin except on holiday occasions, though maintaining close links.

The migrants from the villages who form the lumpen proletariat of Dili are a new breed. Invariably young, with a primary or even high school education, they come looking for well paid jobs, which are simply not available. Of the dozen or so high school graduates in agriculture last year, for example, ten are without jobs, scrounging a living by acting as guides, interpreters, waiters or other jobs where their English can provide some subsistence.

It is from the elite, from the skilled and unskilled workers and from the unemployed,
educated youth, that the nationalist and revolutionary movement in East Timor has drawn its cadres and inspiration. By being able to link up with the aspirations of the villagers, this radical sector of the urban population has swiftly transformed East Timor into what it is today.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FREtilin

Prior to April 25, 1974, a handful of young, educated members of the elite gathered surreptitiously in the gardens of the governor's residence, on Sundays, to discuss politics. Invariably young, they were educated in the early Sixties. Jose Ramos-Horta, son of an anti-fascist Portuguese deportado and a Timorese mother, had been sent to Mozambique in a form of "re-educative exile" after a youthful nationalist escapade in the early seventies. In Mozambique he worked as a journalist and cameraman, covering the war. Although he never met the Frelimo guerrillas, his observations only strengthened the basic Timorese nationalism which had resulted in his exile in the first place.

In early 1974 he visited Darwin, where he spoke of his nationalist views to an Australian journalist, who unaware of the consequences, published them in the Northern Territory News. Horta, whom the fascist administration had hoped had been "re-educated", was to be deported to Australia. Horta's luggage was already in Darwin when the coup occurred on April 25. He was due to take the plane to Darwin on April 27. Among the other members of the clandestine discussion group was Nicolau Lobato, a Timorese minor administration official, who was also an ardent nationalist, and had absorbed some of the anti-colonialist ideas from the worldwide movement.

Overnight, after April 25, the former fascist administrators, all of whom were members of the official Portuguese fascist party, became "democrats." The ruling elite met and planned to form the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT) and register it as a political association under the democratisation announced from Lisbon.

Horta and Lobato, concerned at the island's Establishment's decision to form such a party, considered first of all joining it, to work within, but soon decided to form their own party, the Timorese Social-Democratic Association (ASDT), to project independence as the goal. (The UDT accepted Spinola's proposal of a federation with Portugal).

Horta, Lobato and others in the initial clandestine group were young (Horta was 24, Lobato 28) and felt the need for an older figure, well known in the island, to head the party. They therefore asked 38 year-old Xavier do Amaral, a full Timorese graduate from the Jesuit seminary in Macau, who had not entered the priesthood and held a minor government post in the port authority, to become ASDT president. Xavier was very popular among the people for his humanitarian work and for his willingness to represent them to the authorities in personal matters. The ASDT recruited among the young elite in Dili, and in the villages where its leaders were part of the traditional leadership. Yet, although it had its major goal as independence, its name and format was in a European mould. Its progress, because it was still very much a party of the radical elite, was slow.

The clandestine group emerged into public activity in the first few days after April 25. A small section of Dili's Timorese unskilled workers had begun a spontaneous strike which Horta and others soon spread among all the town's workers. This quickly won a doubling of the miserable wage level. Horta and others formed the Committee for Defence of Labour, an embryonic trade union structure, which soon was absorbed into the ASDT.

While strong in Dili and a few villages, ASDT was in the first few months after April 25 way behind the UDT in its support. ASDT penetration into the mountain villages was difficult because of the legacy of Portuguese colonialism, the strong grip of the luirais (almost totally UDT) and the continuing fear, deliberately inculcated by the elite, that nothing had really changed and repression would follow any move away from the UDT.

But the continuing radicalisation in Portugal had its effects in a number of ways. Portuguese papers arriving in the colony spread new ideas. Books by African liberation leaders such as Amilcar Cabral radicalised many more. Soldiers coming from Portugal or other colonies carried these books and ideas with them. In July and August, five Timorese university students arrived back from Lisbon.
full of such ideas and with close knowledge of the African liberation struggle. They quickly convinced ASDT leaders that what was needed was not a European style movement, but a liberation front. On September 12, the ASDT general assembly transformed itself into FRETILIN (Revolutionary Front for Independent East Timor).

It was a momentous decision. At the time, ASDT membership was 1,000. (1,000 ASDT cards had been issued, without payment collected). On September 20, FRETILIN held its first rally in Dili. A huge crowd of 20,000 attended, launching the movement into a period of rapid expansion which amazed its leaders and strained the limited cadre resources available.

By November, FRETILIN could boast 80,000 signed up FRETILIN members. Wherever the leaders went, they found an enormous response. In Maubisse, the seat of one of the most autocratic and powerful luirais, the villagers soon flocked to them. A delegation of 200 came to FRETILIN offices in Dili (Xavier’s Timorese-style house), in early November, tore up their UDT cards and took FRETILIN ones. Within a month, Maubisse was a FRETILIN stronghold.

Once the power of the UDT Establishment to physically punish villagers was shown to no longer exist, age-old discontent burst out against the Portuguese-appointed rulers. In villages throughout the island, schoolteachers and other minor officials with some education, led the revolt and took whole villages into FRETILIN. Only in the most isolated villages did not get swept into the FRETILIN wave.

FRETILIN’s program of developing an anti-illiteracy campaign in the local language, Tetum, a people’s health service and cooperatives showed the real concern of the movement with the people’s interests and was largely accountable for FRETILIN’s victory in the villages. (4) This at the same time reflected itself in FRETILIN support among Timorese conscripts who absorbed what was happening generally in the country.

The continuing threat of Indonesian invasion, spoken directly through Radio Kupang, drove FRETILIN cadres in feverish
activity, to prepare the base for resistance to the Indonesians. Such an invasion was on the cards continually from October onwards. The fears were particularly intense in December and again in February. In January, the imminence of such an invasion was such that FRETILIN and UDT formed a coalition for independence and against invasion. UDT was then controlled by its "conservative nationalists" such as secretary-general Domingues Oliveira. The continuing leftward development in Portugal and the growth of FRETILIN in Timor had forced UDT to take up the call of independence while they also feared an Indonesian invasion.

But in the months that followed FRETILIN made all the gains, while UDT's power continued to shrink. In late February after the immediate invasion threat had passed, UDT began to turn increasingly against its alliance with FRETILIN. UDT President Lopez da Cruz and Vice-President Costa Mouzinho, during a visit to Australia last April, accepted advice from the JIO (Joint Intelligence Organisation) and Brig. Callinan, a top DLP official and director of BP (Australia) to break the coalition with FRETILIN and move towards an "anti-communist" alliance with APODETI. (5) They carried UDT with this advice, defeating the Oliveira faction, who still saw Indonesia as the main danger. In May, the coalition was broken. In June, da Cruz and Mouzinho visited Djakarta and received Indonesian support.

In late June FRETILIN refused to attend the Macau conference with Portugal and UDT and APODETI, because APODETI refused to recognise the principle of independence as the basis of the talks. This decision provided the Portuguese Governor, Lemos Pires, a close friend of Spinola, with the excuse to begin harassment of FRETILIN leaders and cadres, and to openly back UDT. The anti-communist upsurge in Portugal in July-August, and the acute crisis there, allowed this to develop also in Timor. UDT rallied its support among the elite and skilled working class, backed by the Church, to aggressively challenge the gains won by FRETILIN. In early August, da Cruz went to Djakarta and Hong Kong, where he finalised the details for support for the UDT coup attempt on August 11.

FRETILIN leaders in their majority escaped death on August 11 only because they were in the mountain villages, leading FRETILIN Revolutionary Brigades formed last June. The Revolutionary Brigades are perhaps the most important development in the past year. The Brigades consist of the whole leadership of FRETILIN, who have given up their comfortable jobs in Dili and Baucau and led virtually the whole Timorese student population into the villages. There, they hoe their own fields and grow their own crops, live in village huts, and use the rest of their time to carry out the anti-illiteracy campaign, based on the Friere method, which means combining political education with the teaching of reading.

The Revolutionary Brigades also marked a vital step in FRETILIN's ideological evolution. The ideas, drawn from Amilcar Cabral, of the radical "petty-bourgeoisie" or elite, breaking from its privileges and origins and identifying completely with the poor villagers, found concrete expression in the decision to leave jobs and go to live in the villages. Moreover, this decision was also reflected in a more basic policy-decision to avoid the formation of a privileged elite after independence. FRETILIN has decided that its leaders, from the future Republic's President down will not live in big houses, draw big salaries or drive big cars. A majority of all their time will be spent each year, living and working in the villages.

FRETILIN is highly aware of the dangers of bureaucratisation after independence, and the formation of a new, privileged elite. It is also aware that if independence is to have any meaning, it must mean a rapid improvement in the living standard of the majority - the villagers. An independent East Timor would therefore concentrate capital investment into the villages, bringing new fertile land under cultivation, improving present cultivation methods, educating the people in nutrition and concentrating on mobilising the people to these goals. Industrialisation is seen as a future goal, only attainable after a rural revolution has succeeded in adequately feeding the people and then providing a surplus for investment in industry. Of course, in such a rural revolution, the transport infrastructure, to open up internal trade is crucial. But road and bridge construction will of necessity be labour-intensive.

IS EAST TIMOR VIABLE?

A major argument advanced by Whitlam and the Indonesians against an independent East
Timor is that it would not be viable economically. (6) Certainly, a superficial analysis shows East Timor to be one of the most backward colonies. It is, however, virtually completely self-sufficient as far as the vast majority of its people are concerned, though admittedly at a low living standard. Its consumer imports were for the consumption of the Portuguese army, the local elite and the Chinese traders. Australian canned beer for example was a major consumer import: a minor commentary on Australian cultural imperialism in Dili! Petroleum, construction machinery and spare parts accounted for essential imports, although petroleum could quickly be produced domestically in sufficient quantities to avoid imports. (7)

With the old elite having fled in large part into exile, the import bill on non-essentials can be substantially cut, while judicious encouragement of coffee-growing and other exports crops can ensure sufficient to pay for imports. The possibilities of large-scale oil discoveries of course would obviate these worries completely.

It is easy to see how avoidance of a privileged elite is not only a moral question, but one essential to any economic progress in a country of such poverty as East Timor. It is a question of political awareness: the morality of a leader not drinking a can of Tooths KB which costs the equivalent of a labourer’s daily wage ... and of rejecting the cultural imperialism spread by tourists from Australia.

Avoiding formation of such a new elite is not an easy question, particularly in the years to come, if East Timor survives as an independent nation. In a society such as Timor where scarcity prevails, powerful forces push in this direction. And the pressure from outside - in particular Australia and Indonesia - can result in a weakening of resolve, as the temptations of power and privilege claim more and more recruits. The very formation of a bureaucratic State apparatus itself also gives rise to such tendencies. In East Timor, the formation of cooperatives in production and in import-export trade can help avoid too great a bureaucracy, leaving much decision-making with the village and producer level. Moreover, consciousness of the danger of bureaucratisation that currently exists in FRETILIN can mean a strong cadre force keeping out of administration and maintaining direct contact with the villages, acting as a transmission belt of their criticism and for an egalitarianism which rejects elite privileges.

But it is the Timorese masses themselves - the villagers, the working class, the student and unemployed town youth - who can best help avoid bureaucratisation by insisting their leaders keep to their promises, and watching carefully their actions. It is the expressed desire of the FRETILIN leaders that such a process of mass control operate that holds such hopes for the future.

Another danger facing East Timor, if it survives as an independent nation, is the possible growth of privileged elements at the village and urban level who seize part of the increasing surplus in rural production for themselves, becoming rich peasants, or small traders. The mass departure of Chinese traders, plantation owners and other elite, means that most of commerce and capitalist production is vacated property (bien vacant as it was termed in Algeria when the French settlers staged a similar exodus on the eve of independence.) Who shall own these resources? The people as a whole, organised in cooperatives, or a new privileged Timorese trader and business class?

FRETILIN, aware of the dangers of economic and political disruption if it forced these traders and businessmen to leave, before August 11 guaranteed their continued existence. Now, however, they have fled. Clearly, to set up a new Timorese elite as traders would endanger the whole strategy of opposition to an elite that FRETILIN has developed. FRETILIN had seen the gradual formation of trading cooperatives as a means of competing with the Chinese traders. Now there is little doubt such self-managed cooperatives will be formed, to fill the vacuum left by the departing elite. The anti-elite policy of FRETILIN is perhaps best shown in the abolition of all ranks in the Timorese army, now under FRETILIN control.

INDONESIAN DANGER

Much of the above is of course based on the premise that Indonesia will not invade East Timor - a premise that at the time of writing seems quite unjustified. It is of course a first priority for Australian workers, students and others to mobilise in opposition to an
Indonesian invasion. But hopefully the perspectives adopted by FRETILIN, outlined above, and the hope for the East Timorese they contain, will help in that mobilisation.

Certainly, an Indonesian invasion would meet stiff resistance from every East Timorese, it would be a mini-Vietnam on our borders. The costs of such a liberation war to the East Timorese would be incalculable; tens of thousands would die. But the Indonesian generals would also have to measure the costs: any lengthy war in East Timor would add to the underlying instability of the generals' rule, inside Indonesia itself. It would add a volatile element to the repressed political life there.

CONCLUSION

The sudden rise of the national liberation movement - FRETILIN - in East Timor must be seen as a product of the collapse of Portuguese fascism and colonialism (itself largely a result of the African liberation struggles) which in turn opened a Pandora's box of revolt against 400 years of repression.

The FRETILIN cadres, by critically examining the lessons of the worldwide colonial revolution and applying them in their own specific conditions, found the way to the masses in such a way as to mobilise them in huge numbers. While its cadres were drawn from the radical young elite, the working class and the students, it also has developed peasant cadres who play an increasing role in the organisation.

What is quite unique in FRETILIN is the degree to which consciousness of the danger of a new privileged elite is determining a new social and State structure which can, if followed consistently, if not avoid the formation of a new elite, at least severely restrict the growth both in size and power.

This consciousness can also extend into a thorough-going revolution at the village level, where the luirais and other "notables" in the village enjoy substantial privileges over the rest of the population. This involves not so much bringing the average luirais down to the level of the poorest villager, but rather of ensuring that while the rich luirais have much of their wealth taken from them, the concentration is on mobilising the poorest villagers and making sure the village surplus goes to raise their living standards. FRETILIN won 90 percent of the luirais elections conducted earlier this year by the Portuguese throughout the colony. After the victorious struggle against the UDT counter-revolution, these new luirais can in most cases be recruited to such a campaign at the village level and not expropriate for themselves the village surplus.

FRETILIN ideology has been variously described, as "populist", "trotskyist", "maoist" or what have you. All are equally inaccurate. FRETILIN is and remains essentially a nationalist movement, emerging first from the radicalised elite, which has developed a specific praxis, based on lessons from the colonial revolution worldwide and from their own concrete needs. It is certainly pragmatic and eclectic in many regards, not in a negative sense but attuned to the total world conditions in which the East Timorese revolution operates, drawing from all experiences, above all its own.

It is a revolution without great ambitions, without a desire to strike postures on the world stage. It is a revolution whose achievements, past and future, do and will modestly speak for themselves. If it is worthy of emulation, then it is perhaps above all in its modesty, in its anti-elitism and in its complete devotion to the oppressed people who are making it.

- Sydney, September 8, 1975

(1) Peter Hastings, The Timor Problem - 1, unpublished paper given to Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Research School of Pacific Studies, ANU, Canberra, December 16, 1974, page 5.
(4) Tetum was an unwritten language until FRETILIN produced its first anti-illiteracy handbook.
(5) For fuller details on these allegations see Tribune, September 1, Aug and
(6) Unclassified Foreign Affairs paper September 11. AAP reported (September 5, 1974) Whitlam as saying "an independent Timor would be an unviable State and a potential threat to the area."
(7) Overseas Trade, August 1974. "Portuguese Timor's growth points to heightened Trade". Published by Australian Department of Overseas Trade.