The unease that followed massacre

Occupied East Timor

Australia was in no position to constructively oppose the invasion of East Timor.

When I took up my appointment as ambassador in Jakarta, East Timor had formally been an Indonesian province for 12 years. Before July 1976, it had been a Portuguese colony for over 350 years. Seeking sandalwood and spices, Portuguese adventurers first visited Timor in 1460, and Portugal took possession of the eastern part of the island in the 17th century. Under Portuguese rule, East Timor languished as a neglected colonial backwater.

Less than a quarter of the size of Tasmania, East Timor is 640km north-west of Darwin. Most East Timorese are of mixed Malay and Melanesian descent. A wide variety of languages and dialects are spoken, with Tetum the most common language. East Timor has a savannah climate. In the dry season the coastal plains resemble a desert and in the often short wet season the country appears tropical. The Timorese soil — like that of eastern Indonesia but unlike that on Java — is not rich, and only a minor part is volcanic. A rugged spine of mountains stretching from the west to the east, rising to nearly 3000m at its highest point, has long tempered Timorese economic, political and cultural life. The harshness of nature, and the backwardness of Portuguese colonial rule, impoverished the East Timorese peasant for centuries. East Timor's only significant export during the colonial period was coffee, which was introduced by the Portuguese in the 19th century.

Naturalist and evolutionary theorist Lord Alfred Wallace visited Dili in 1861 and later wrote:

The Portuguese government in Timor is a most miserable one. Nobody seems to care the least about the improvement of the country, and... after 300 years of occupation, there has been no rule of road made beyond the town... The Portuguese are not rich and are not the savages as much as they can.

Little had changed by the time Portugal walked out on East Timor in August 1975.

In Portugal in April 1974, the leftist Armed Forces Movement overthrew the regime of Marcello Caetano, the successor to General Antonio Salazar. The new regime ended nearly half a century of authoritarian rule and committed Portugal to a program of decolonization. In July 1975, Portugal signaled its intention to establish a provisional government in East Timor and constitute an elected popular assembly that would determine the eventual status of the territory. However, before these steps could be implemented, and in a region deprived of any credible administration, civil war broke out between East Timor's principal political groups: Aprodet (Popular Democratic Association of Timor), UDT (Timorese Democratic Union) and Fretilin (Revolutionary Front for the Liberation of East Timor). Portugal threw up its hands and abandoned the territory.

Fearing the establishment of a communist state on its eastern flank, and also concerned about the encouragement this tiny state might give to subversive groups in Malukus province, Indonesia invaded East Timor while the civil war raged, and seized control. Ten thousands of Timorese and five Australian journalists were killed by Indonesian forces in the course of their military operations. Indonesia set up a so-called provisional government of East Timor, which convened a People's Assembly that voted in the right to self-determination. Subarto's invasion of East Timor was initially bloodily sudden. Subarto had been president for almost 10 years before he went into East Timor. He had no plans to leave the impoverished territory to Portuguese, since East Timor was of no economic or political value to Indonesia. Indonesians assert that Subarto had been reluctant to use military force against East Timor but became alarmed by the behaviour of the leftist Fretilin, and especially by its appeals to China and Vietnam for help.

Both sides of Australian politics gave high importance to maintaining working relations with Subarto's Indonesia, and effectively concluded that Australia's interests were best served by Indonesia and East Timor were best served by East Timor's being part of Indonesia. The United States took the same position. At the time of the invasion, Australian government officials took no steps to take any constructive initiatives. The Whitlam government had been disin- terested, there was a caretaker government in Canberra, under caretaker prime minister Malcolm Fraser, and no initiatives could be taken until after the elections, to be held on December 13, 1975. Australian military intervention was for domestic reasons, as this was just after the end of the Vietnam war, such action would not have been favoured by the electorate. On the day of the invasion of East Timor, the caretaker foreign minister, Andrew Peacock, said that the Australian government regretted the course that events had taken.

On July 17, 1976, Subarto formalized the integration of East Timor with Indonesia. The United Nations did not recognize the integration, and the UN Security Council called upon all states to respect the right to self-determination of the East Timorese people. Subarto then argued that the United Nations had agreed with the invasion of East Timor.

Meanwhile, the rapid expansion of education for the East Timorese, at a time when there were few opportunities for employment, saw the emergence of a pool of disadvantaged youth. When Indonesia invaded the province, barely 5 per cent of the population was literate, in either Portuguese or Tetum. Indonesia introduced Bahasa Indonesia as the national language in East Timor, and provided many new schools. As a result, literacy levels increased dramatically.

Indonesian rule brought many benefits to East Timor... but the a-handsome and dominated by the military, failed to win the hearts and minds of the East Timorese people. Indonesia had expected that its military forces would eliminate Fretilin elements within a fairly short time frame. This was not the case. Fretilin enjoyed solid support, and attempts to deny it access to have necessities resulted in devastating consequences. Fretilin managed to supply its forces. They suffered destruction of crops and property, and in the early years suffered large-scale loss of life because of famine, and the response of the Indonesian military. And those East Timorese who did not cooperate with the Indonesians were brutalized.

Indonesia invaded East Timor after the Asian Games in 1974. In the following years, Indonesia invaded many more countries, including Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The invasion of East Timor was carried out by military forces, and the territory was occupied and annexed to Indonesia. The United Nations did not recognize the invasion, and the Security Council called upon all states to respect the right to self-determination of the East Timorese people.

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