

East Timor: The struggle for full independence — 10 years on

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What is commemorated as Timor Leste's (East Timor) "liberation" is the United Nations-facilitated referendum on August 30, 1999.

East Timor was already an independent country, as a result of the pro-independence political party Fretilin declaring East Timor, which had been a Portuguese colony, independent on November 28, 1975.

But barely days after the independence proclamation, on December 7 the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia used all its military firepower to invade Timor Leste.

The invasion was brutal and the occupation lasted 24 years before the UN referendum in 1999.

During the occupation, the Indonesian military tortured and slaughtered our people. Such terrible acts became an everyday spectacle in Timor Leste.

During these most difficult times, a popular-based movement to win back independence became well-organised and strong.

This people's resistance movement was based on several pillars: the forces carrying out an armed struggle, an underground clandestine movement and a diplomatic wing.

These three pillars were united under one umbrella of people's resistance. This umbrella took several forms, from the Revolutionary Council of National Resistance (CRRN), National Council of Maubere Resistance (CNRN), until finally at the time of the referendum in 1999, the National Council for Timorese Resistance (CNRT).

The continuing resistance forced the hand of the international community to intervene in Timor Leste.

During the 1970s and '80s, the Timorese people fought almost alone against the Indonesian regime. Most governments were silent about the torture and killings in Timor Leste.

The United States, Britain and our own closest neighbour, Australia, placed more importance on their relationship with the Suharto dictatorship than Timorese lives. Documents and eyewitnesses prove these countries supported and aided the invasion and occupation of our country.

However, ordinary people in many countries were active in solidarity movements with Timor Leste, including Australia.

In the 1990s, groups formed in Indonesia, such as Indonesian People's Solidarity with the Maubere People (SPRIM), linked to the People's Democratic Party (PRD), Solidamor and Fortilos. There was also media exposure through groups such as British human rights group Tapol, US-based East Timor Action Network and Amnesty International.

The support of these groups helped the self-determination movement to gain strength at the international level.

However, when we voted to separate from Indonesia in the 1999 referendum, the Indonesian military and allied militias went on a rampage and destroyed almost 90% of our infrastructure. The reconstruction of Timor Leste began when the UN formed its peacekeeping mission, UNTAET.

Several countries, which had directly or indirectly supported Indonesian occupation, suddenly became "friends" in the reconstruction process.

Was this change in attitude genuine? If only the answer was yes.

It seems many neighbouring countries are motivated by their own economic interests. Nothing is given away for free in this capitalist system.

Reconstruction

The political struggle against Indonesia was victorious. However, the issues of justice and bringing to account the Indonesian criminal generals are still unresolved.

But the new Timorese elites, such as Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao, would prefer to forget the past and enjoy close relations with the Indonesian government, including with those responsible for great crimes.

President Jose Ramos Horta, in his "Liberation Day" address this year, said there would be no international tribunal to bring those responsible for crimes in Timor Leste to justice — a balm to soothe any worried Indonesian general.

Ten years after the referendum, the issue of justice is still unresolved.

After the UN referendum, the UN formed UNTAET as the transitional government in Timor Leste. The whole system was controlled from New York. UNTAET head, Sergio Vieira de Mello, had absolute authority in Timor Leste. Decision making and reconstruction rested in UNTAET's hands.

Participation by ordinary Timorese people in the development process became well nigh impossible.

We need to understand this in order to understand why the development process has experienced problems. The problems we see today are related to the "quick fix" foundation put in place by UNTAET.

The first elections in 2000 for a constituent assembly were won by Fretilin. The assembly drafted a constitution and became the country's national parliament.

Mari Alkatiri, as Fretilin chairperson, became prime minister. In direct presidential elections in April

2002, the people voted for our first president, Xanana Gusmao.

On May 20, 2002, the UN handed over sovereignty to the Timorese government amid much fanfare.

Political violence

In this first period after independence, there were some incidents, such as the violence on December 4, 2002, when Alkatiri's house and several public buildings were burned down. Strangely, until now we don't know who was behind these incidents, although they occurred when the UN police were still in charge of security.

It is difficult to end political conflict among the elites in Timor Leste. Conflict was worsened by the UN mission indirectly favouring certain political forces.

The UN mission led by Sugehiro Hasegawa was complicit in the politically motivated violence in 2006, which led to the fall of the Fretilin government.

The violence arose from a conflict within the armed forces over allegations of discrimination against soldiers from the western region of Timor Leste. Major Alfredo Reinado led a walkout of hundreds of soldiers.

A demonstration of soldiers with grievances was fired upon by the police. This led to a long period of conflict in Timor Leste, which was particularly intense in May-June 2006, and the return of Australian troops to "restore order".

The Timorese elite must bear responsibility for this political conflict, however the UN mission also needs to be mentioned here for its lack of action.

Ten years after the referendum, the people continue to be the victims of political conflict. People were displaced after their houses were burned down. Conditions in the displaced camps were very difficult in terms of food, clean water, sanitation and so on.

Was this the kind of independence we fought for? In 2006, the state failed to provide security and comfort for its population.

Where is the social justice we hoped for after independence?

There is no accountability by any of the political leaders for the violence that occurred. This sets a bad precedent for a country that claims to base itself on democracy and the rule of law.

After the Fretilin government fell in 2006, elections were held and Fretilin lost its parliamentary majority. A new coalition of parliamentary parties, minus Fretilin, was formed under the prime ministership of Gusmao.

The refugee crisis began to be tackled, in stages. The security situation began to improve. The crisis in the police, an institution that came close to collapse in 2006, dissipated.

Post-2006, maintaining "security" became a strong weapon for the government to mute conflict and dissent. "Security" was the stick, but stability was also bought by distributing money — the carrot.

Long-term peace and wellbeing remain a distant hope.

Natural and human resources

Timor Leste has vast natural resources, primarily concentrated in the Timor Sea.

In the Joint Petroleum Development Area (JPDA), there are a number of oil fields already in production. The Bayu Undan oil field is being exploited with the Australian government, with 90% of the proceeds for Timor Leste and 10% for Australia.

However, the pipeline from the field goes to Darwin — ensuring, in this way, that Australian companies still make more profit.

Other oil fields have already been exhausted, such as Elang Kakatua and Kakatua Norte.

Timor Leste's main source of revenue is Bayu Undan's oil, reaching an overall total of US\$5 billion this year. The oil field is expected to last until 2024.

As a result, Timor Leste no longer needs to depend on international donors.

The Timorese government has also signed an agreement with Australia on the exploitation of the largest oil field in the Timor Sea, Greater Sunrise. The negotiations are currently over the direction of the pipeline.

In this field, the main operator is the Australian company, Woodside. Proceeds are to be divided 50/50 between Timor Leste and Australia.

The Timorese government has also contracted out several oil and gas fields in its exclusive area to Italian company ENI and Reliance from India, both in the exploratory stage.

The government has also started a feasibility study about the possibility of the pipeline from Greater Sunrise coming to Timor Leste.

However, Timorese people continue to miss out on education and work opportunities. Skills transfer to Timorese people, much touted by UNTAET, did not really take place.

The Gusmao government continues to rely on a large number of foreigners. The finance department has up to 60 international staff on high wages, working as advisors.

From the very beginning, the Timorese government should have prioritised investment in the education sector from the oil proceeds. The Fretilin-led government did make this a priority in its development program, but the education department was unable to implement it.

In spite of its weaknesses, the education department under Fretilin did make some important breakthroughs by working across departments. It was at the forefront of implementing programs such as the cooperation on education and health with Cuba.

There are now 700 Timorese students studying medicine in Cuba. Cuba's provision of medical training for Timorese students is an example of pure solidarity — cooperation without hoping for anything in return.

The Timorese government is beginning to provide scholarships for Timorese students to study overseas, in limited numbers.

A most important use of Timor's oil revenue is to develop its people. Only by having healthy,

educated people can we have the capacity to manage the country.

These were important objectives in Timor Leste's struggle for self-determination.

Economic justice for our 1 million people is still out of reach. The United Nations Development Program lists Timor Leste as still the poorest country in Asia.

Why is it that the people are still very poor in a small country that is well-endowed in oil and gas with large reserves stored away in a Petroleum Fund?

Since the UNTAET period, experts from various countries came to give development advice. The development process has entailed slavishly following economic formulas that don't prioritise the people.

Physical infrastructure such as roads into villages for farmers to transport their produce have not been prioritised.

Agricultural infrastructure suffered from poor planning and remains directionless. The government is distributing tractors to farmers to increase yields, but without preparing farmers to make the transition to this kind of technology.

International advisors, alongside local technocrats, are looking at the possibilities of large-scale infrastructure construction projects, involving the construction of megaprojects, such as airport, ports and electrical generators. But do these constitute basic needs for our people right now?

Why not involve the majority of the people in determining their development needs, rather than elite-level policies where the process is dominated by a handful of people unfamiliar with the real situation of Timorese people?

Timor Leste needs to come up with its own development plan. Neoliberal formulas need to be rejected. Formulas from overseas should be used as a reference, not slavishly followed.

The government and parliament need to begin to discuss with the people plans for development. If not, we will just be subjected to neocolonialism — economic and political oppression. If the neocolonial agenda holds sway in Timor Leste, our struggle for independence and self-determination will have been for nothing.

Ten years after the UN supervised referendum, Timor Leste has not achieved full independence. Neocolonial agendas have been implemented through United Nations missions and donor institutions, which continue to try to push back our struggle for full independence.

The people have not become self-sufficient, but instead are being marginalised by the development process itself. All economic, social and political policies are dominated by the pro-neoliberal elites, supported by pro-neoliberal governments in other countries.

Are the people expected to sit by in poverty? Should the people be patient in their poverty? The Suharto regime fell in 1998 because the Indonesian people lost their patience.

These are some of the lessons we need to reflect on. Leave behind the economic formulas from neoliberal "advisors". Start to think about our own priorities for Timor Leste itself.

A Luta Continua! The struggle continues.

P.S.

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