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E P R E S S

Out of the Ashes: Destruction and Reconstruction of East Timor

Abstract for chapter 10

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'East Timor: The misuse of military power and misplaced military pride' considers the many complex and inter-related issues – political, economic and military – involved in the pre- and post-referendum state of the nation, particularly the issue that gathered the most attention: military-supported campaign of violence and intimidation in East Timor. This examination of military issues focuses on both national and international factors in an attempt to determine the 'why' and the 'who' of the viciousness that overwhelmed East Timor.

The analysis looks primarily at the Indonesian armed forces and attempts to analyse why the tragedy of East Timor happened, what elements of the armed forces were involved and more importantly which were not, and what the objectives of the campaign of violence may have been.

Keywords

Armed Special Forces Command (Kopassus), autonomy, B. J. Habibie, Burma, Indonesia, Interfet, military, plausible denial, security, Soeharto, TNI, United Nations, UNTAET

East Timor: the misuse of military power and misplaced military pride

John B. Haseman

On 20 October 1999, the Indonesian parliament ratified the results of the United Nations ballot in East Timor, thereby creating Asia's newest independent entity. Not yet a country – several years of UN administration is likely to follow – East Timor has finally gained its freedom after almost 400 years of colonial rule by Portugal and 23 years of failed integration as a province of Indonesia.

The path has not been easy and the price paid by the East Timorese has been very high. The euphoria that began with Indonesian President B.J. Habibie's January 1999 announcement of 'autonomy or independence' quickly vanished. A process that could have been relatively painless, had good will been expended on both sides, instead became painful for all sides. Instead of implementing a peaceful program to educate and persuade the East Timorese population of the advantages of autonomy within Indonesia, Indonesia implemented a forceful 'security approach' of intimidation, violence and terror.

The final result: a discredited Indonesian government, disgraced Indonesian armed forces, a deployed Australian-led international peacemaking and peacekeeping force, and a lengthy and expensive program of reconstruction in East Timor, is about the worst possible outcome that could have been imagined.

There are many complex and interrelated issues involved – political, economic and military. The issue that has gathered the most attention has been the military-supported campaign of violence and intimidation

in East Timor. An examination of the military issue must look at both the international and the Indonesian audiences, however, in an attempt to determine the 'why' and the 'who' of the viciousness that overwhelmed East Timor.

When the International Force in East Timor (Interfet) began its work to restore security to the devastated people and infrastructure of East Timor, the primary and complex question to be answered was 'what went wrong?' Eight months later, after Interfet's successful operation and a transfer of security responsibility to the United Nations, the question remains unanswered and subject to both Indonesian and international investigation.

How did Indonesia, having jettisoned the autocratic Soeharto government in May 1998, and having held one of the world's most remarkable democratic elections in June 1999, so indelibly and inexplicably allow violence to bring international disgrace to itself, its leaders, and to its armed forces at a time when it is moving toward becoming the world's third-largest democracy?

As it turned out, a lot of things went wrong. But 'wrong' in the case of East Timor depends very much on the audience, and there are many audiences for which the events in East Timor in recent months by no means hold the same meaning. There is first the international audience, second the Indonesian audience, third the Indonesian armed forces audience, and sadly but lastly, there is the East Timor audience. This analysis looks primarily at the Indonesian armed forces and attempts to analyse why the tragedy of East Timor happened, what elements of the armed forces were involved and more importantly which were not, and what the objectives of the campaign of violence may have been.

It must be recalled that despite the resignation of President Soeharto in May 1998, Indonesia at the start of 1999 had changed but little. President Habibie was the longest serving Soeharto cabinet member and his hand-picked vice-president, so close to Soeharto he was often referred to as a surrogate son to the former strongman.

The military, though it had raised to senior levels a number of reform-minded generals, still had the mind-set of a force accustomed to having its own way and beset by a strong sense of automatic obedience to superior officers, no matter how wrong the decisions may be. Indonesia's political power elite had suffered from the lack of alternative leadership for three decades, its 'reform cabinet'

consisted almost entirely of hold-overs from the last Soeharto government. There was no effective counterbalance to nearly unlimited executive power.

There was a major policy decision made at some level of government to apply a 'security approach' rather than a 'political approach' in East Timor in an attempt to gain a favourable pro-autonomy vote. Instead of using its vast information and propaganda network to persuade the East Timorese populace of the considerable advantages of autonomy within Indonesia, the military was directed to apply the tough use of force that characterised most of its prior actions in East Timor. Policy decisions of this magnitude are not taken in isolation in Indonesia. This decision was probably reached by consensus at the cabinet level, pushed by hard-liners but eventually approved by at least part of the cabinet. It is not clear whether President Habibie approved of the policy decision, or even knew of it. There has been no explanation of why the decision was made to implement a campaign of intimidation and fear in East Timor, rather than to make an effort to persuade the populace of the benefits of the autonomy proposal.

It is quite possible that this decision was based on a major intelligence failure. The hard-line security approach must have been based on an estimate that the pro-Indonesia segment of the population, reinforced by a campaign to terrorise enough of the neutral and pro-independence segments of the populace into approval of the autonomy proposal, would gain a favourable majority in the 30 August ballot. Instead the vicious militia campaign caused a huge number of East Timorese to go to the polls and reject the proposal by a four-to-one margin. All indications are that the Indonesian military and the government were stunned by the magnitude of the anti-Indonesia vote.

Both the civilian and military government has consistently misread public opinion in East Timor. I recall on many occasions when, after my frequent visits to East Timor as U.S. Defense Attaché, I reported to Indonesian military officers my impressions that the sentiments in East Timor were not so much anti-Indonesia as anti-army. Virtually every East Timorese had experienced a negative relationship with the army because of mistreatment or slights to themselves or their family and friends. My observations were always summarily rejected by intelligence officers who insisted that my impressions were in error and that I had not spoken to the right people. Indonesia's military

intelligence network has always failed to appreciate the degree to which the East Timorese have hated the Indonesian army. On 30 August, the population voted to get the army out of East Timor, pure and simple. And Indonesia's intelligence agencies either failed to make a correct estimate of the probable outcome, or used its certain knowledge of coming rejection to reinforce those who supported a 'security approach'.

The same type of intelligence failure occurred in Burma in the run-up to the 1990 parliamentary elections in that country during my assignment as the U.S. Defense and Military Attaché. The all-powerful Burmese military intelligence agency, the Directorate of Defense Services Intelligence (DDSI), consented to a national parliamentary election in 1990 in part because the military was confident that the government's National Unity Party (NUP) would win the election. The foreign diplomatic community was briefed that the NUP would get at least a plurality and probably as much as 60 per cent of the vote, based on their own intelligence estimates and country-wide polling.

Instead, the Burmese people went to the polls in June 1990 and gave a huge mandate of more than 85 per cent to the National League for Democracy and its associated regional parties. The Burmese military government responded first by ignoring the election and then by declaring it a 'referendum' and not an election. The parliament elected in 1990 has never been allowed to meet.

The DDSI was sure it would win in Burma, and so apparently did the Indonesian hard-liners think they could win in East Timor. In both cases they totally failed to read the true will of their target populations.

In my view, based on information available and analysis of information and events, the months of violence that destabilised and brutalised East Timor was a deliberately planned covert operation carried out in accordance with orders issued by someone in authority over at least some elements of the armed forces. The likely strategic objective was to attain a pro-integration vote in East Timor or, failing that to either negate that vote or so destabilise the territory that it would take years of time and a huge financial investment by the international community to make a viable country of East Timor.

That operation was forced by a powerful group of hard-liners made up of active and retired military officers as well as well-placed civilians. The operation was well-financed. Elements of the intelligence apparatus and covert operations assets from the Army Special Forces

Command (Kopassus) and the police were utilised to implement most of the operation. They used as their primary tool a basic militia organisation in East Timor that was originally raised and supported by the army in the 1980s to assist in security and intelligence for the military.

Organised by Kopassus and intelligence teams, that militia base was expanded greatly by recruitment of both East Timorese and non-East Timorese and then directed and supported as a surrogate force to intimidate the populace into supporting integration.

An as yet unknown number of covert military and police personnel supported the operation. TNI soldiers, ethnic East Timorese from the two territorial battalions and the territorial structure permanently assigned to East Timor, who either deserted from their units or were under orders from the covert operation agents, were also involved. This force perpetrated most of the violence and physical damage in East Timor prior to the announcement of the voting results in early September as well as afterwards.

The vicious months-long campaign of the militia forces was a strategic failure. The operation – dubbed *Operasi Sapu Jagad*, or ‘Operation Clean Sweep’ – may have succeeded in killing many pro-independence East Timorese and destroying much of East Timor’s infrastructure and towns, but it failed to achieve its objective of gaining approval for autonomy within Indonesia.

It was also a tactical failure. A cardinal component of any covert operation is the need for ‘plausible denial’. Those in the Indonesian military directing the operation failed to achieve ‘plausible deniability’ to its claims of non-involvement. Western intelligence agencies, non-government organisations, and the United Nations itself were all aware of the involvement of military and intelligence covert operatives in organising, recruiting, training, and directing militia force activities. World-wide television showed police and soldiers standing by while militia forces wreaked violence on a defenceless populace. Too many people – non-Timorese and closely resembling military personnel – were seen using sophisticated radios and telephones to direct events. A vivid television news clip broadcast around the world showed a crew-cut non-Timorese man leaning against a utility pole taking a cigarette break, then pulling on a huge wig of long unruly Timorese-style hair and romping down the street, weapon in hand. Foreign soldiers assigned to the UN monitoring mission watched as a group of ‘militia members’ drew up in military formation and marched

with precision onto a C-130 aircraft at the Baucau airfield, to fly away, most likely back to their army special forces unit on Java.

In short, the perpetrators of the covert operation attempted to conduct their efforts using the rules and standards of 20 years ago and completely failed to take into account the impact of instantaneous communication and an open society.

The East Timor fiasco was a military leadership failure. There is a cardinal principle of military command which holds that any military commander, including the armed forces commander-in-chief, is responsible for what his men do or fail to do. By this standard, General Wiranto must bear responsibility for what men in the pay of his army did in East Timor. Elements and personnel of the TNI, acting under the orders of *somebody* in authority, conducted reprehensible acts in East Timor, failed to perform their mission to provide security and order in the province, and failed to fulfil the commitment of their nation given to the United Nations to guarantee security in East Timor prior to, during, and after the balloting.

The involvement of some elements of the armed forces, even though a tiny percentage of total military strength, brought international disgrace to a beleaguered military, already reeling from domestic revelations of past human rights atrocities in its security campaigns in Aceh, Irian Jaya, Jakarta and East Timor.

The Sapu Jagad Operation was not implemented by itself without higher command approval. Either General Wiranto obeyed cabinet orders to run the operation, or he ordered it himself without approval of his civilian superiors, or the operation was ordered without his approval by others, outside the military chain of command, with the power to do so – a very small group indeed. No matter which of these circumstances obtained, it reflects leadership failure at the very highest levels of the Indonesian armed forces.

However, and this is an important caveat, it is wrong to blame all of the Indonesian armed forces for what happened in East Timor. The majority of TNI personnel, while distressed at the ‘loss’ of East Timor, are dismayed and angered by the atrocities committed by TNI elements and their militia surrogates in East Timor. That atrocious behaviour has brought humiliation for Indonesia, to the TNI as a whole, and international criticism and disgrace for the TNI as a professional military organisation. Years of efforts to build professionalism within the TNI have been badly damaged in the eyes

of the outside world. And it has brought the added embarrassment of international inquiry and a domestic investigation that implicated 33 members of the armed forces, civil government, and non-official civilians. Indonesia's internal judicial inquiry began in March 2000 and will no doubt result in controversy no matter what the final results might be.

That is the view of the international audience. But recall that there are many audiences to the events in East Timor. Perhaps not everything that happened there is considered a failure by at least some of those audiences.

Many analysts hypothesise that at least one strategic objective of the security approach was to set an example of the fate that will befall other separatist-minded regions of Indonesia if efforts to secede persist.

The international community is not without blame. With considerable intelligence input from those already on the ground in East Timor, the involvement of military and police in the militia depredations, and the degree of violence that might be suspected, was known and should have been disseminated with greater speed. Several countries admitted that they had received such reports, but had relied on repeated assurances of the Indonesian military leadership that they could control the situation. This was a failure in foreign intelligence estimates.

And what of the implications for Indonesia? What might be seen from the Indonesian audience that may well differ from conclusions drawn by the international audience?

To understand the implications of the army's role in East Timor, it is important to look beyond the international view of this tragedy and its 'failures', and instead look at it from the inside, as most Indonesians will do. A large segment of Indonesian society simply does not understand either the short term events of the past several months, or the conditions that have existed in East Timor for the past 20 years.

The reason is because the situation in East Timor has been, over the years, a more important issue overseas than it has been in Jakarta. Most Indonesians look at East Timor as a security issue, not a human rights issue. There has never been the same degree of concern in Indonesia about human rights violations in East Timor as in Aceh or Jakarta. To analyse the East Timor problem as a security threat to Indonesia as a whole, the possible strategic objectives of the military become more clear, particularly to the Indonesian public and the military audiences.

First and foremost, if there was ever any doubt that the armed forces is the most powerful and influential element in a post-Soeharto, more 'open' Indonesian society, those doubts have been erased.

Within the army and some important political forces in Indonesia, there is a primordial fear that allowing East Timor to secede from Indonesia will lead inexorably to a breakdown in national unity and possible disintegration of the country. This is the primary reason why the military so strongly opposed the sudden decision by President Habibie to equate rejection by the East Timorese of his autonomy package with separation and independence for the province. The fear of national disintegration is so strong in the armed forces that some elements in the military have been willing to risk strong international criticism, withholding of loans from international financial institutions, and the loss of its international military-to-military programs.

There are other reasons for the military's opposition to President Habibie's 'autonomy or independence' policy as well, more parochial to military interests both institutional and individual. The army in particular has strong emotional and psychological ties to East Timor. A huge percentage of the officer corps has served in East Timor, senior officers went there time after time. The army fought and sacrificed thousands of its men's lives to integrate East Timor into Indonesia. The military also feels strong loyalty to the tens of thousands of East Timorese who supported the military and the civil government over the past two decades.

Finally, there were substantial financial interests at stake, reportedly primarily those of the Soeharto family and its cronies, to which the military may well have access.

Another blunt fact of the matter is that East Timor's 800 000 people make up less than one-half of one per cent of the Indonesian population. Neither the military nor the Indonesian government was willing to allow that tiny percentage of the country to, in their view, destroy the viability of the other 99.5 per cent of Indonesia.

Therefore, ever since President Habibie's surprise announcement that he would grant independence to East Timor if its people rejected his autonomy proposal, the military began planning its own strategy to negate the adverse effects – as the armed forces saw them – of the decision. That the military leadership was not consulted on the decision, and its after-the-fact advice disregarded by the president, added the important psychological element of 'face' to the impetus

for planning and implementing the hard-line security approach to ensuring the retention of Indonesia's 27th province.

The strategic objectives of the military's covert campaign in East Timor appear to have been, first, to negate the decision to free East Timor and second, failing in that, to give an unmistakable lesson to other potentially secessionist regions elsewhere in Indonesia that the consequences of attempting to secede from the country are far too high. In achieving either or both of these objectives, the military also drives home the clear fact that it is still a powerful force to be reckoned with in the post-Soeharto political equation.

There were several important components to the covert operation to retain East Timor as an autonomous province of Indonesia. First, it was necessary to destabilise the security situation in East Timor so that society there could be portrayed as a violent one in which clans, regions and political factions are constantly fighting with each other. Official Indonesian briefings have contended that only the presence of a strong security force could keep violence under control. This led to an expansion of the use of thugs, dignified with the term militia, as surrogates for the army. The army has used these tactics frequently in its covert security operations, not only in East Timor but throughout the country.

By portraying East Timor as in a state of civil war between pro- and anti-independence forces, the next step in the strategic campaign may have been to attempt to discredit the results of the UN-sponsored ballot as biased and to demand a second round of voting. Though a claim without merit to the international community, it would have played well in Indonesia, where a substantial element of the population is prepared to believe that international political and economic conspiracies are at work against their country.

This portion of the strategic plan failed because the pro-independence Fretilin guerrilla force and its huge clandestine support army kept its promise to forswear combat operations and remained in its agreed-upon encampments. The pro-independence Fretilin forces showed remarkable restraint in the face of great provocation. By not responding to militia violence, it proved impossible to show 'civil war' in the province. That left the militia forces with only an unarmed civilian population to fight. The pro-integration militia forces quickly lost the moral high ground when violence spiralled out of control. Instead the world saw violent thuggery at its worst and Indonesia's credibility and that of its military forces sank to an all-time low.

International pressures for a peacekeeping force became too great for the Indonesian political and military leadership to withstand.

And tragically for the East Timorese people, they became the unfortunate pawns in the political battle for the national unity of Indonesia and the retention of power and influence on the part of the Indonesian military. Virtually every element of power and decision-making within Indonesia was willing to sacrifice any part of that tiny one-half of one per cent of the country's population if doing so is portrayed as saving the other 99.5 per cent of the nation.

But what of the implications for the future? Indonesia is simultaneously attempting to implement major political, economic and military reforms. Just one of these tasks is a major undertaking but Indonesia has been forced by circumstances to deal with all three at the same time. Indonesia is in the throes of a transition toward greater democracy and openness after more than three decades of darkness during the autocratic Soeharto era. Its economy was the hardest hit by the region's recession.

A stable, united Indonesia is of great importance. Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous nation, the largest and most moderate Islamic country in the world, and a country of great economic potential. It occupies a strategic location between Asia and Australia, between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. This is no tiny impoverished and unimportant mini-state. It is potentially a political and economic giant with an important role to play in the world. Nobody expected that Indonesia's transition from dictatorship to democracy would be easy or that the simultaneous economic, political and social challenges it must face could be quickly solved.

Indonesia, like all countries, needs a respected and respectable security force for its national defence, internal unity, and international contingencies. As the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) expands its operations to maintain and improve security and meet the huge humanitarian requirements there, it is ironic but important to recall that Indonesia has been one of the most reliable supporters of United Nations international peacekeeping operations elsewhere. As indelible images of the damage wrought by some elements of the TNI continue to emerge daily from East Timor, it is difficult now to apply the adjectives 'respected and respectable' to the Indonesian security forces. But the key words here are 'some elements'.

The atrocities committed in East Timor were carried out by only a tiny number of people taken from only some elements of the military. A vengeful cabal of hard-liners directed the violence for a variety of potential objectives well analysed in the international media. That policy was carried out with unspeakable ruthlessness by some elements of Indonesia's military and police intelligence apparatus and some of its special forces personnel, who organised and supported militia forces as surrogates. But the great majority of the Indonesian armed forces was *not* involved in the East Timor tragedy of recent months.

It is more important than ever before to keep in mind the imperative need for constructive military-to-military relationships between the Indonesian armed forces and the military establishments of the Western democracies. Dozens of senior Indonesian military officers with reformist credentials have the intellect and international sophistication to make a real difference in Indonesia's halting efforts to implement meaningful reforms. The world community must encourage and support these reformists. Dialogue and co-operation with a moderate government and military leadership would help to isolate and eliminate the hard-line faction from positions of power once and for all.

Indonesia's armed forces remain the most powerful and influential element of Indonesian society. It is crucial that the TNI be encouraged to continue a reformist agenda and to prevent control by hard-liners and their extensive monetary resources.

Now is the time to encourage a moderate military leadership. Now is the time to enhance dialogue between reform-minded senior Indonesian military officers and the military leaders of the Western world's leading nations. To isolate the entire TNI because of atrocities committed by a minority cabal would only encourage those hard-liners to persist in efforts to regain control of the country. The international community should help them to reform the Indonesian defence establishment so that what happened in East Timor will never, ever happen again, anywhere.