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# **The Conflict in East Timor**

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## **1.0 Introduction**

The events unfolding in East-Timor and Indonesia during the past few decades have not caught the awareness of the international community - not until this past September. After an almost unanimous vote for independence the small nation of East Timor was drawn into a bloody confrontation with their former host country of Indonesia which was not willing to give up its province without a fight. Once again in the history of international relations violence was committed and the price of this disreputable political play and intimidation was paid by the innocent people being slain. The reasons and backgrounds for this tragedy are multiple and interrelated, but much of the suffering might have been spared as many factors fusing this incident were to be identified long before they sparked the fire of war.

### **1.1 Objectives**

The objective of this research is to give an insight into and explain the factors contributing to the seemingly inevitable clash between nationalistic aspirations and Indonesia nationhood. Two articles on the matter are analysed. A historical-analytical approach is used to describe the historical backgrounds to the conflict. Colonialism and nationalism are viewed as contributing factors. A balance-of-power theory is applied to explain the comparative cross-national aspect and national interests of the countries involved. A level of analysis theory is used to research the internal domestic and individual political decisions made by relevant actors. Finally a conclusion of the topic is presented.

## **2.0 Background**

The roots of this conflict may be traced all the way back to mercantilism and the deriving of force of colonialism. The main international actors can be seen as Indonesia, USA and East-Timor. The international governmental organisations involved are the United Nations and IMF. A historical-analytical approach is helpful in describing the backgrounds for the conflict.

### **2.1 Historical-analytical approach**

East-Timor was originally a colony of Portugal. Colonisation was a basic feature of mercantilism around the 17<sup>th</sup> century which sought to enhance the power of a nation by maximising its wealth through acquiring foreign colonies. Colonialism can be seen to have carried with it the seed of instability, which plagues much of the world today. This holds true in East-Timor as much of the tensions and dispute derive from the period when East-Timor was decolonised.

Indonesia has a background of militant discipline and by 1975 it had already inherited the western half of Timor island from the Dutch. East Timor was a lonely colony of Portugal and was suddenly abandoned in 1975. Indonesia, then ruled by President Suharto, saw it in their national interest to invade this suddenly idealistically empty space of territory beside them. The Indonesian army marched in and seized East-Timor in December 1975 declaring it as an Indonesian Province. A 24 year period of harsh rule was to descend on the East Timorese people who began their seemingly futile fight for independence.

### 2.1.1 National interests

The historical background in 1975 was mostly characterised by the East-West conflict and the Cold War. National self-interests played an important part in defining the course of events. A state's interest is called the national interest and the methods and actions it employs to attempt to achieve its national interests are called national policy.<sup>1</sup> The national policy of USA in that time can be characterised as political realism according to which a state should provide for its own security and defence. In 1975 it was in the interest of USA to defend the spreading of communism in every part of the world. Indonesia was considered as a stalwart opponent of communism and thus assisting Indonesia was a way of promoting American national interests. According to the policy of the United States, during that time, they should overlook brutalities by friendly authoritarian regimes as long as it provided stability. "Indonesia was a good customer for Western weapons and it didn't make geopolitical sense to rock the boat: there was a Cold War to fight and Jakarta was on the right side", as is quoted in the National Review article. The people of East Timor paid a heavy price for this so called Kissingerian realism. In the invasion and subsequent occupation a third of the population of 600,000 died and the Indonesian military carried out atrocities throughout their regime of the area.

The events in 1975 can be seen to utilise this so called realpolitik in most of its aspects. Foreign policy was prioritised over domestic policy, nationalism was emphasised and the state can be seen as the unitary actor pursuing its national security as the most important international issue. Thus morality and legality factors were mostly overlooked and economic, ideological and military security factors emphasised as Indonesia was allowed to take over the East-Timorese region without a larger action from the international community. Indonesia was acting in its own national interest and had the blessing of the United States in the form of military aid as this coincided with the national policy of USA of that time.

### 2.2.2 Nationalism

Nationalism is defined as a psychological force that binds people who identify with each other together.<sup>2</sup> Nationalism can be seen as one of the most basic historical factors underlying the conflict between Indonesian nationalism and East Timorese nationalism.

Indonesian nationalism can be described as an authoritarian sense of belonging which is more suppressed upon the people by the Indonesian leaders than a willing sense of attachment. As mentioned in the National Review article Indonesia is characterised as a militarist authoritarian state which is historically used to wielding its power in order to keep the 17.000 islands and 300 languages under one flag. The military sees itself as the guarantor of Indonesian nationhood ensuring its place through brutality, patronage and power.

On the contrary to the divided nationalism of Indonesia East-Timor's nationalism is more uniform and stems from a sense of pride and belonging. The years of occupation and the atrocities conducted against the people of East-Timor have aroused a defensive wave of nationalism. The people have been under constant harsh rule under the past 24 years in a country ruled by hostile militia spreading terror among anyone opposing Indonesian rule. The possibility of gaining

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<sup>1</sup> Contemporary International Relations, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Daniel S. Papp, p.43

<sup>2</sup> Contemporary International Relations, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Daniel S. Papp, p.31

independence through a referendum vote was a spark of hope for the nations future and considering the historical past of this area it should not have come as a surprise that 79% of East Timorese voted for independence.

Nationalism can also be seen as a driving force of colonialism expansion which contributed to the appearance of today's conflicts.

## **2.2 Summary**

Considering these historical factors and realities the ensuing conflict should not have come as a surprise to the international community. Bearing in mind Indonesia's past as a militaristic and authoritarian state used to wielding power and with a background of corruption, brutality and patronage it should have been easy to predict the inevitable conflict. Also the history of national self-interests and the power of nationalism can be seen to further complicate the issue. The historical models of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union were not cases that Indonesia wanted to follow as other rebellious regions might be encouraged to follow the break away. From a historical-analytical point of view conflict was unavoidable.

## **3.0 Balance of Power Theory**

The balance of power theory strives to explain the balance of interstate relations between states capabilities. Power is measured relative to a nations economic strength, ideological strength and military capabilities. The balance of power theory can give insight into the actions taken by actors and the situation of East Timor prior to and during the conflict.

In 1975 when Indonesia seized East Timor the international system can be described to be transforming from a rigid bipolar world into a multipolar world. USA and the Soviet Union were still the main rivalries standing on opposite sides of the scale. However, new centres of power were developing and the two super powers were struggling to expand their power of influence over new territories and at the same time trying to limit the other party gaining an upper hand in the competition. Thus the situation was still essentially a bipolar division. This can be seen as a major reason for the silent approval by international actors of Indonesia's invasion of East-Timor. As mentioned earlier while describing the national interests of the states involved (section 2.1.1) the era of cold war was still in progress and it was in the best of USA's national interest not to condone the evasion. As quoted in the National Review article: "Indonesia was a good customer for Western weapons and it didn't make geopolitical sense to rock the boat: there was a Cold War to fight and Jakarta was on the right side." The article in the Gazette also points towards the same fact of "a leftist independent East Timor being a threat."

In order to ensure the balance in the East Asian region the United States also provided military aid to Indonesia in the form of training, intelligence sharing and weapons. This helped to keep up the geopolitical stability. The following diagram (Diagram 1.0) provides an illustration of the balance of power theory in a bipolar world applied to this case.

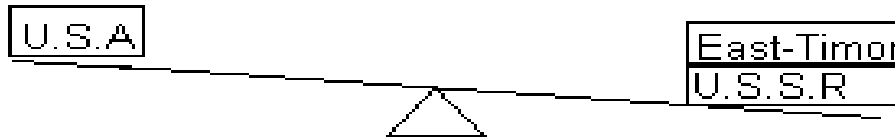


Diagram 1.0: Disequilibrium

If the East-Timor would fall under a leftist or communist influence the balance of power would be in imbalance suggesting that Soviet capabilities are greater than the capabilities of the United States. This is depicted in diagram 1.0 and this is the situation U.S.A wanted to avoid. It acted according to its national interest through national policy which in that era was characterised as political realism and approved the invasion of East-Timor. In that time it seemed a rationale and justified act.

In the present situation (1999 in which the conflict unfolded) the balance of power theory is more difficult to apply. This is because the past decade has seen a dramatic change in the number of decision making units in the international system. The ending of the East-West conflict has reawakened many nationalistic demands in ethnic minorities seeking to assert their own national power and identity. This development from a bipolar world, with just two main actors, to a multipolar world with numerous decision making units has made it ever harder to predict and react to the conducts of different states foreign policies. This is one of the factors which complicated the East Timor issue prior to the crucial referendum vote. The actors involved were multiple such as the U.N, the USA, the IMF, the Indonesian military, the underground militias and East Timorese independence supporters. And as referred to in both of the articles it was not clear who was controlling each actor and what influence that actor would have on the situation as a whole. For example the National Review article questions the unstable domestic policies of Indonesia and speculates on who really is running the nation.

In a multipolar system of the present world it is hard to predict and to draw conclusions on just the balance of power theory as such a state of balance is hard to define. Thus the old bipolar concept in 1975 was an easier concept to relate to the invasion.

#### 4.0 Level of Analysis

In order to illustrate the motives and interests of the international actors in the East-Timor conflict the level on analysis tool provides valuable insight. It suggests that individual international actors may act accordingly to broad-based or purely individualistic motives. 5 levels of foreign policy analysis exist<sup>3</sup>. These levels are: individual, position of individual, bureaucratic structure of actors, nation-states and other actors, regional systems and the global system. This analysis tool can be applied to East Timor by studying the actors and individuals

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<sup>3</sup> Contemporary International Relations, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Daniel S. Papp, p.20

taking part in the conflict. The two main actors can be identified as the United States with Bill Clinton and Indonesia with newly elected president B.J Habibie.

### **Individual Level**

Important factors to study are the values of individual decision makers. Habibie acting of behalf of Indonesia is described as a technocrat and diminutive figure who envisioned Indonesia as a high-tech Internet friendly place (National review article). Considering these individual factors it is not surprising that he announced without warning or much consideration the referendum vote in East Timor. This was to prove the new reformist policy of Indonesia and to fix attention away for human rights abuses. Bill Clinton on the other hand represented the humanitarian values of the Western developed countries and thus is anticipated to condone the human rights abuses and violence. However, instead of pre-emptively taking action against the seemingly inevitable clash of nationalism USA and the international community chose not to act until the situation became serious.

### **Position**

Habibie's position is awkward as the first civilian leader of Indonesia since independence. He is scorned by military leaders and by taking radical action towards East Timor was to show himself as a decisive leader. As he does not enjoy the confidence of the military the question of who is really controlling the army is significant. Habibie's weak political position can be seen as a contributing factor to the situation turning violent and getting out of hand.

### **Bureaucratic structure of actors**

The bureaucratic structure of Indonesia is unstable. It has a long history of militarism, authoritarianism and corruption. No one seems to have clear control over military decision making and the sphere of political responsibility and control is obscure. In the United States the military industry as an important actor effecting political decision making as Indonesia has long been an important export country of weapons and military aid. Thus this US bureaucracy evidently opposed cutting off all programs with Indonesia. Military aid and IMF loans were not cut until the slaughter was at its zenith. If Clinton would have acted a few weeks earlier thousands might have been spared.

### **Nation states and other actors**

Habibie's decision of giving East Timor sovereignty can be seen as an act of trying to improve Indonesia's tarnished human rights reputation and a to join Indonesia into the family of modern nations. However the military's violent action to suppress the referendum result is totally contradictory to these aspirations and ruins the chances for a quick and stable transition to democracy. In reacting to the conflict USA has to take into consideration its political and economical national interests. Using American troops abroad is always a delicate decision but the voice of American leaders always carries an influential weight.

A third international actor or non-governmental organisation entered the sphere of the dispute after UN's commitment to defend East Timor. As mentioned in the Montreal Gazette article leaders of Indonesia's largest religious group threatened to join ten of thousands of Muslims in a holy war against UN backed forces. "The call for jihad against foreign intervention in East Timor is not only directed at Australia, but also especially against the United States", as quoted in

the Gazette article. This transnational ideological movement further reflects the divergence of values in international conflicts.

### **Regional system**

The East Asian region was recently severely hit by a financial crisis as well as economical recession. These factors may have promoted some of the underlying conflicts in the Indonesian and East Timorese nations which lead to violence.

### **Global system**

The transformation of the world from a bipolar to multipolar world has increased the number of decision making factors in the global system making it even harder to predict and prevent these conflicts in advance. The United Nations role as the global "guardian" of peace and human rights is complicated and the actions taken in East Timor preceding the referendum vote were not efficient enough to guarantee safety and stability. The call for jihad against the Western societies amidst this tragedy can be seen as proof of the spreading of transnational ideological movements.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

The factors mentioned in this research help understand the multiple and interrelated factors that shaped the events in East Timor.

Colonisation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century can be seen to have contributed to the political and bureaucratic instability of Indonesia. The decolonisation of East Timor was the start of the 24 years of animosities in the region. The balance of power theory during the cold war hints that human rights and the right to autonomy were overlooked while prioritising national self-interests of nation-states. Nationalism is also an important issue and factor which lead to rivalry among proindependence East Timorese supporters and pro-Indonesia minded people. As identified with the level of analysis tool many levels of interpretation may bring forth numerous different factors contributing to the conflict. The nation states and position of individuals among them and their conflicting desires effected the alternatives and outcomes presented to them. USA, Indonesia and UN can be seen to each have had interrelated and diverging interests in the situation which lead to a general idleness and indecisiveness of the international community towards the violence being conducted in East Timor.

The hesitation and lack of action by the international community in anticipation of the seemingly inevitable confrontation about to unfold in East Timor can be better understood considering the facts mentioned, but not accepted. There was intelligence evidence of militia operations aiming on the murdering of pro-independence East Timorese leaders and families prior to the referendum vote and UN was conscious of the fact that it could not guarantee the safety of the population. Examining the past of the militarist hard line Indonesia and the harsh rule that it had already exhibited in East Timor for the past 24 years it should not have been hard to predict the bloodshed that was about to occur. The United State's and the international community's lack of response can not be excused by adhering to diverging national interests or bureaucratic structure. They were too late to prevent ethnic cleansing and rampaging militias and the price of silence in East Timor was paid by the estimated 400,000 casualties. Through its failure to provide security



for the UN mission Indonesia has tarnished its image worldwide as well as ruined possibilities for a stable transition to democracy.

The lesson to be drawn from the East Timor experience is complex. Freedom of choice, defending human rights and placing trust in the United Nations to act on behalf of the international community may have a high cost and there seems to be no legitimate or competent regionwide security regime in Asia through which a crisis like this could be addressed. Thousands of East Timorese have lost their lives and there is no assurance that there will not be another East Timor waiting around the corner.

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