

'The East Timor Solidarity Movement in Australia'

By Damian Grenfell

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Timor-Leste, commonly known in Australia as East Timor, finally won its independence in 1999 following a gruelling and bloody 24-year occupation by the Indonesian military. At the epicentre of the resistance to the occupation were the East Timorese who supported national liberation, including the military and political wings of the independence movement, the largely youth-oriented clandestine front, and politically active East Timorese who were working or studying in Indonesia.

Providing support to the East Timorese was a large and amorphous international solidarity movement. In Australia this movement was comprised of members from the East Timorese diaspora and their respective political organisations along with a range of church and secular community organisations. Of critical significance were organisations that solely campaigned for East Timorese independence such as the 'Australian East Timor Association', 'University Students for a Free East Timor', 'Action in Solidarity with Indonesia and East Timor', 'East Timor Relief Association' and 'Friends of East Timor'. Together, these organisations provided impetus to a movement that was made up thousands of people, from Australian World War Two veterans, sympathetic journalists, politicians, academics, clergy and many members of the public concerned with the horrific human rights abuses occurring in Timor-Leste.

Solidarity movement campaigning in Australia tended to be directed against both Indonesia and successive Australian governments. Strategically, it was often felt that pressure for Timor-Leste's independence could be best applied by targeting Australian governments' 'complicity in genocide', namely the support given to Indonesia's actions in Timor-Leste, in turn disrupting an important source of international support for the Indonesian government.

Despite the broad range of organisations involved, protest activities in Australia generally eschewed more radical forms of direct action. With an educative emphasis that resembled the more liberal aspects of the anti-Vietnam War movement, stalls, galleries, leafleting, talks and numerous rallies tended to be used as key ways of placing pressure on Australian governments via informing domestic public opinion. This made information a key area of contestation, and even when testimony, images or pleas were smuggled out of Timor, such as video footage of the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre, the movement had to combat attempts by the Australian government to discredit the validity of the information.

As persistent as the international solidarity movement was over the decades, it was amid extraordinary social turmoil in Indonesia, especially with the fall of President Suharto during 1998, that a key opportunity for Timor-Leste's independence was created. With the war seen as costing Indonesia greatly, in January 1999 the new Indonesian President called for a United Nations-organised ballot that would provide the territory with two options: autonomy within Indonesia or full independence.

The vote finally took place on 30 August 1999 with more than 78 per cent of registered voters supported independence. In the coming days Timor-Leste would be racked by violence at hands of pro-Indonesian militias and the Indonesian military. In Australia, after years of small demonstrations, vigils and street corner rallies, protests grew suddenly and dramatically. The networks of activists that had been working for decades provided the expertise, experience and communication channels required to galvanise a sudden increase in public support. Unions black banned Indonesian products and ships in Australian ports, and helped block Garuda flights from leaving Australian airports. Indonesian diplomatic and Australian government buildings were targeted by protesters, with many tens of thousands of people attending mass rallies around Australia in the first weeks of September.

It is frequently held that the protests on the streets of Australia had a direct impact upon both the Australian government's abandonment of its policy of non-intervention and the formation of an Australian-led military force which entered Timor-Leste on 20 September 1999. However, at the very least such sentiments need to be considered in line with other interests that a military intervention may have been shaped by, such as ensuring regional stability and securing an influential presence in what was by then an inevitable move to nationhood by the East Timorese. Irrespective of this, the years of campaigning in Australia played a central role in providing vital points of pressure on the Indonesian regime and the governments that supported the occupation. Without this there would not have been the critical social infrastructure necessary to provide the necessary support to those at the centre of the campaign in Timor-Leste itself.