

East Timor's second independence struggle is with Australia

Could Canada play a role in resolving dispute over oil revenues?

Opinion by

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In the 1990s, the Liberal government maintained close ties with the Indonesian regime that occupied East Timor. The new Liberal government's environment minister, Catherine McKenna, has in the past worked as a negotiator for the UN mission in East Timor, and some hope that experience could push Canada to play a better role in what is being called a "second independence struggle."

Last week, ten thousand protesters flocked to [the streets in Dili](#), the bustling capital city of Timor-Leste, once known in English as East Timor.

"Complete the struggle for independence," protesters demanded. Supporters staged smaller demonstrations throughout the region and via social media as part of an international week of solidarity with Timor-Leste.



The small half-island country won its freedom in 2002 after a quarter-century of blood and fire. Under an Indonesian military occupation that lasted from 1975 to 1999, between 100,000 and [200,000](#) Timorese died — over one-sixth of the population, and as high as one-third by some

Canadian government complicity

For most of that period, Western governments urged the Timorese to surrender. Indonesia's military regime was a strategic and trade partner beloved in capitals from Washington to Ottawa to Canberra to Tokyo. [The Canadian government](#) again and again welcomed Indonesian leaders, sought more trade with Indonesia, became one of the top foreign investors in Indonesia and even sold the regime military equipment.

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On the other hand, more and more Canadians listened to Timorese voices and stood in solidarity with the Timorese struggle for human rights and for self-determination.

Church groups signed letters and appeals. Trade unions spoke out. University students were the backbone of protests across the country. The East Timor Alert Network, founded on Vancouver Island, became a national organization standing with the Timorese.

In 2002, the Timorese finally gained their independence. The work of the East Timor Alert Network was recognized in 2015 with the Order of Timor-Leste, the country's highest honour.

Despite some growing pains, independent Timor-Leste embarked on a positive journey. It has held three rounds of parliamentary and presidential elections, judged to be free and fair, and seen non-violent transfers of power at all levels of government. Its economy has grown and standards of living are rising.

Timor-Leste has signed more UN covenants on human rights than the United States. Internationally, its work includes support for the people of Western Sahara and Palestine, the creation of a new group of "fragile states" cheekily named the g7+ (with a lowercase g), and active work with UN Women.

Australia's intransigence

So why did the largest wave of protests since independence speak of a second campaign for independence?

Timorese independence is incomplete, activists and political leaders say, so long as there is a lack of clear borders with their neighbours.

One neighbouring country still refuses to negotiate a border with the Timorese government. But this time, it's not Indonesia. It's Australia.

The tale of Australia's refusal to negotiate a maritime border includes the bugging of Timorese cabinet ministers, pressure tactics on Timorese leaders, and a remarkable Australian decision to walk out of the jurisdiction of international tribunals. All this to

cooperation and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea — a flashpoint between the U.S. and Chinese governments, which claims much of the sea as its territorial waters. Speaking in Washington about China's efforts to construct artificial islands, Turnbull **declared** that “unilateral actions are in nobody's interest. They are a threat to the peace and good order of the region on which the economic growth and national security of all our neighbours depend.” Turnbull's words apply equally to his own government, which is carrying out unilateral actions in the dispute over the borders in the Timor Sea.

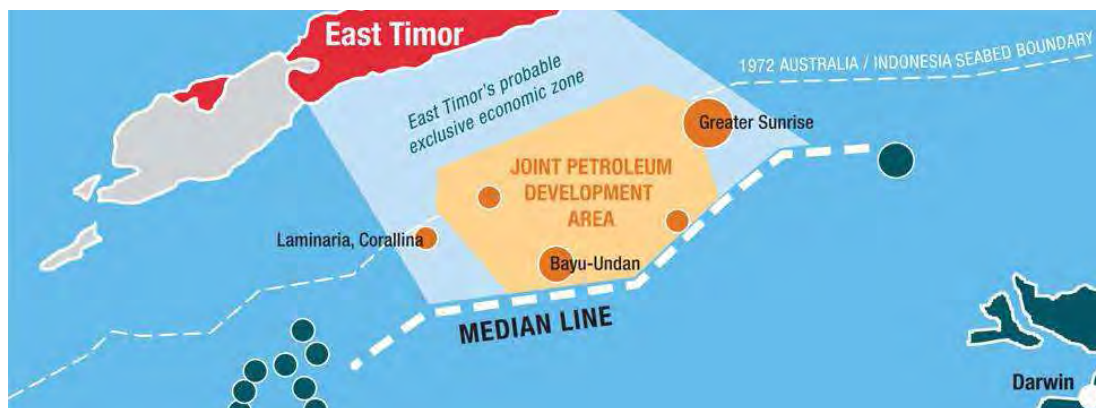
**practising fair play
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When Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop visited Canada last year, she spoke of “common values” of democracy and fair play shared by her country and Canada. Yet Australia, famed for its advocacy of “a fair go” for the underdog, is not practising fair play towards its smaller neighbour.

It comes down to oil

As with so many global conflicts, the reason seems to lie in oil. The Timor Sea has plenty of it. A “median line” halfway between the two countries is the usual solution to sea border disagreements. It is how Canada defines sea borders with Greenland, for instance.

That would leave more oil on the Timorese side — a reasonable sacrifice for wealthy Australia to make in order to benefit one of Asia's poorest countries, many would say. Instead, the Australian government has forced Timor-Leste to accept shared jurisdiction, with oil refined in Australia. The Timor Sea Treaty and the Treaty on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea create a “shared jurisdiction” zone with complex revenue-sharing agreements between the two countries. The upshot of these treaties is that Australian oil companies make more money than they would through a simple median line agreement.



Map of Timor Sea disputed area Courtesy Timor Sea Justice Campaign

The **\$4 billion in oil revenues to Australia** dwarf that country's aid to Timor-Leste. In the words of Australian researcher Clinton Fernandes, “East Timor is Australia's biggest

talks. They want a solution that mirrors Canada's solution to maritime border disputes with Greenland — the median line. Australia accepted that principle when working out its maritime border with New Zealand, but it's refused to do so with Timor-Leste. Perhaps that's because Australia is used to getting its way by bullying smaller neighbours that it considers to be "Third World" countries.

The recent wave of protests in Timor-Leste was organized by a new group, the Campaign Against the Occupation of the Timor Sea (known by its Tetun-language acronym, MKOTT). The sea between Timor-Leste and Australia, the group argues, should be divided along a line halfway between.

Canadian supporters of the Timorese independence campaign were inspired in the 1990s by the words of Bella Galhos, a young Timorese refugee living in Ottawa. Now an NGO activist and advisor to the president in Timor-Leste, Bella recently called for a revival of Canadian activist solidarity with the Timorese people.

"For the longest time we fought for the independence of East Timor," she wrote on Facebook. "We are not completely Independent if our sea (which contains our oil) is still in the hands of Australia. A luta continua, the struggle continues. I am again calling on my Canadian friends to stand up with us in this fight."

Her words, and the street protests coordinated by MKOTT, are echoed by the Timorese government. In 2015, the Timorese prime minister, Dr. Rui Maria de Araujo, met with a group of foreign visitors and asked us to once again stand with the Timorese in a struggle for full independence.

Australia's government is stonewalling the Timorese, refusing calls for a clear border and even rejecting calls to sit down and negotiate on the issue. This is an injustice that Canadians can help to address. The Turnbull government in Australia feels free to ignore Timorese voices. It is more likely to listen to voices from "like-minded" countries, including Canada.

The Canadian government, and Canadian citizens, can make a difference by calling on Australia to end its stonewalling, sit down and negotiate a sea border.