

Forty-five years on, secrets of the Balibo atrocity haunt Australia

Opinion by Susan Connelly in the Sydney Morning Herald, 16 October 2020

Forty-five years ago, on October 16, 1975, five Australian-based journalists near the town of Balibo were reporting on the impending Indonesian invasion of Portuguese Timor. They were Gary Cunningham, Brian Peters, Malcolm Rennie, Greg Shackleton and Tony Stewart.

The Indonesian military, specifically Yunus Yosfiah and Cristoforo da Silva, killed these young men to prevent them from broadcasting information about the invasion.



The Balibo Five

Eight investigations have been held since. The last was a coroner's inquest in Sydney in 2007, and the findings were handed over to the Australian Federal Police. Seven years later, in October 2014, the AFP dropped the investigation, citing jurisdictional challenges and insufficient evidence.

No one has been held accountable for the slaughter of the journalists. To this day, relevant documents are denied to the Australian public, well beyond the usual thirty-year rule. This denial conceals the true extent of Australian knowledge of the invasion, and avoids offending Indonesia for fear of economic or political repercussions. It is made on the grounds of protecting "national security".

The irony of the claim cannot be missed. Australian citizens and regional neighbours clearly see government untrustworthiness in the Balibo Five atrocity and complicity with the occupation of East Timor. They see the bully-boy tactics against the weak and grovelling obeisance to the strong that then emboldened an Australian government to spy on the new but impoverished nation of Timor-Leste in 2004 for the benefit of resource companies with interests in the Timor Sea.

That swindle is compounded by the current prosecutions of those who told the truth about it – former Australian intelligence officer Witness K and his lawyer Bernard Collaery. This is the spectacle of an Australian government willingly surrendering an essential component of national security – trust.

As with the Balibo Five episode and cover-up, the national security supposedly protected by secrecy concerning the matter is already undermined. The whole world knows we spied, lied, and are now concealing the corruption of past decision-makers.

The prosecutions are not for the Australian people's security, but for government revenge, and to serve as a warning to others not to allow conscience to be placed before the state. As with Balibo, Australian citizens are not safe from their own governments in thrall to greater powers or big business.

Thankfully, there have been no retaliatory acts by Timorese groups or individuals, as happens too often in other parts of the world. That level of security occurs despite Australian governments. It flows from the extraordinarily forgiving nature of the Timorese people, and their friendship with the countless Australians who cringe at the greed and deceit of recent decades.

Five journalists were killed 45 years ago for telling the truth, but few politicians of the time spoke up for them. Will our present politicians allow two Australian truth-tellers go to jail on their watch? Will the Australian public?

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