

Australia's appalling Timor legacy and why it matters

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May 20 will mark 20 years of independence for Australia's near neighbour, the nation of Timor-Leste.

On that day in 2002, the [United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor](#) handed over power to the new Government, reinstating independence to the people of Timor-Leste almost 27 years after it was wrenched from them in a brutal invasion and occupation that took the lives of up to a [third of the population](#).

The extent of these atrocities, the prolonged resistance of the Timorese people in confronting such adversity and their final achievement of independence in the face of what many observers regarded as impossible odds should be regarded as amongst the most significant events in our region in living memory.

While there is some public understanding of the role Australia played in the final transition to independence, the crucial role Australia played during the lead up to the invasion in 1975 and during the occupation itself is not well known or understood.

My recent book, [A Narrative of Denial: Australian and the Indonesian violation of East Timor](#), a study of Australian Timor policy during the years 1975 to 1983, seeks to remedy this.

Australian Timor policy in the period covered in the book is important in its own right for a number of reasons. It was during these years that the violence against the Timorese people was at its height and that the majority of people who lost their lives during the occupation died.

It was during these years that the Indonesian military campaign of "encirclement and annihilation" destroyed rural food resources, forcing hundreds of thousands of Timorese from their homes and creating the artificial famine that took the majority of the lives lost during the occupation.

This was accompanied by other widespread [human rights violations](#), including torture, sexual violence, murder and detention.

Public understanding of this issue is largely based upon the contention Australia was not in a position to greatly influence these events. My research, based upon the examination of tens of thousands of Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) documents and other sources, demonstrates otherwise.

It reveals that were it not for Australian actions the invasion would have been unlikely to have taken place at all. Furthermore, it demonstrates that Australia's role as the Suharto regime's apologist and propagandist in the international arena after the invasion was a crucial factor in allowing these abuses to continue.

Prime Minister [Gough Whitlam](#) played a key role in encouraging an Indonesian invasion, first by sending his personal secretary to Jakarta in 1974 to encourage the hard-line OPSUS faction (a security and combat intelligence unit) within the [Suharto regime](#) to work for an Indonesian takeover.

This was followed by two meetings between Whitlam and Suharto in Jogjakarta and Townsville in which he strongly asserted that an independent East Timor would be unwelcome by Australia and an Indonesian incorporation welcomed. The Suharto regime was at that time divided on the Timor issue, with Foreign Minister Adam Malik deeply concerned the impact an intervention would have on Indonesia's position in the international community, including in the Non-Aligned Movement in which it sought a leading role.

Malik initially sought a position accepting of the possibility of an independent East Timor, but the key support provided by Australia to the hard-line OPSUS faction greatly strengthened the hand of the interventionists. Senior OPSUS figures later said they regarded the Whitlam position as a "green light" for intervention.



The bulk of my research concerns the Fraser Government, which was in power during the invasion itself and in the period of the occupation during which the worst atrocities occurred.

Like Whitlam, [Malcolm Fraser](#) considered good relations with the Suharto regime crucial to a foreign policy agenda oriented around supporting pro-Western governments in the region and containing communism, particularly in the wake of the unification of Vietnam and the coming to power of Marxist regimes in Laos and Cambodia.

During the years of the most violent subjection of the Timorese people, the Fraser Government protected the Suharto regime from scrutiny in both the domestic and international arenas, propagating a false narrative of the events leading to the invasion and denying evidence of atrocities.

When mounting evidence made this unfeasible it shifted to blaming the mass starvation on Timorese underdevelopment and the actions of the Timorese people themselves rather than the purposefully implemented campaign of “encirclement and annihilation” that was in fact responsible for it.

At the United Nations, it lobbied on a country-to-country basis to deny evidence of abuses, temper concerns, head off inquiries and attempt to remove the matter from the UN agenda. With Australia seen by many as a democratic country that respected human rights with expertise on the Timor issue due to its proximity, this Australian lobbying supported the Indonesian narrative and convinced many that claims regarding the dire situation were untrue.

This allowed the Suharto regime to continue its abuses relatively unhindered, a situation that undoubtedly cost many lives.

The issue of [Timor Sea resources](#) played a role under both Whitlam and Fraser. In arguing for an acceptance of an Indonesian takeover before the invasion senior DFA figures noted that Indonesia would be likely to settle for more favourable terms than an independent East Timor, while under Fraser recognition of Indonesian sovereignty was linked to negotiations on the Timor Sea Gap.

That said, my research indicates that it was strategic and Cold War considerations that were the primary drivers of policy, with the Timor Sea issue providing further impetus to an already established policy direction. This of course does not make Australian conduct on the Timor Sea issue any less outrageous. The theft of Timorese revenues should be regarded as a major crime perpetuated by Australia against an impoverished neighbour recovering from an extensive conflict in which Australia was complicit.

Understanding the key role Australia played in supporting the violation of the Timorese people and the multidimensional factors that led to our country’s outrageous and destructive conduct is vital if we are ever to come to terms with what our government did.

This requires an understanding of the theft of Timor Sea resources, but also of other factors that motivated our complicity in the massive violation of human rights that occurred in one of our nearest neighbours. Australians who value human rights should campaign for an apology to the people of Timor-Leste by the Australian Parliament.

This should be accompanied by recompense, not only for the stolen revenues of the Timor Sea, but for the Australian role in facilitating the catastrophe inflicted upon the Timorese people over the decades of occupation.

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