

# Self-determination requires more than political independence: Recent developments in Timor-Leste

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International law has long recognized that “all peoples have the right to self-determination.”<sup>4</sup> Forty-six years ago the UN General Assembly declared that “the peoples of the world ardently desire the end of colonialism in all its manifestations” because it “militates against the UN ideal of universal peace.”<sup>5</sup> From the 1960s through the 1980s, most colonies achieved legal sovereignty; when the Trusteeship Council completed its task in 1994, only a few non-self-governing territories remained on the UN list. Timor-Leste was the largest.

In 1999, the UN conducted a referendum on self-determination in Timor-Leste, and the voters chose independence, with the new country becoming self-governing in 2002. This article will explore Timor-Leste’s experiences during its first four years of independence, and draw some lessons which may be helpful both for Timor-Leste and for other peoples seeking independence.

The UN lists several territories, notably Western Sahara, as still awaiting their right to self-determination. A number of other virtual colonies – including West Papua, Tibet, Kanaky (New Caledonia), Kashmir, Tahiti-nui (French Polynesia), Puerto Rico, Guam – remain occupied by foreign powers, but the UN General Assembly has not included them in the “non-self-governing” list.

Indonesia’s 1975 invasion of Timor-Leste was followed by two decades of international neglect and complicity. However, in the late 1990s, political changes in Indonesia and worldwide finally enabled the plebiscite in which Timor-Leste’s voters overwhelmingly rejected Indonesian rule. Three years later, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste became the most recent graduate from the list of non-self-governing territories, a sovereign, self-governing nation. This achievement inspires people worldwide who aspire to self-determination.

## Independence gets complicated

Since the referendum, reality in Timor-Leste has not reflected the “poster-child” portrayed by the United Nations. At this moment (in October 2006), the country is more like an orphan: three of

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<sup>3</sup> This paper is adapted from a presentation at the conference on *International Law and the Question of Western Sahara* at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands, October 28, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Article 1, Section 1 of both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, both approved in 1966 and in force since 1976.

<sup>5</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV) (1960) on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.

the most powerful institutions in the country – the World Bank, United Nations Mission and United States embassy – have vacancies in their top positions. The British Embassy recently closed permanently.

During the last seven years, Timor-Leste has hosted five UN missions. The United Nations Assistance Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) conducted the referendum in 1999, evacuating as Indonesian troops and their militia proxies laid waste to the country. The UN Transitional Administration (UNTAET) returned a month later to govern until a Timorese elected government took sovereignty in May 2002. The Mission in Support of East Timor (UNMISSET) then supported and trained Timorese for police, civil service and other government functions. Since 2005, The UN Office in Timor-Leste (UNOTIL) has coordinated replacing UN peacekeeping with technical and other assistance.

In April 2006, one month before UNOTIL was to wind up, Timor-Leste's capital unraveled – fighting between soldiers and police, gang warfare among jobless young men, regional schisms and political machinations forced Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri to resign. He was replaced by Foreign Minister José Ramos-Horta, who is also the new Defense Minister. Dozens of Timorese were killed, hundreds injured, thousands had their houses destroyed and tens of thousands are still displaced from their homes half a year later.

In late May, Timor-Leste's government invited nearly 3,000 international soldiers, mostly from Australia, to restore order and security. On August 25 the Security Council established the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT). It will include 1,600 police, plus expanded military and civilian staff components. Gunfire has reduced and the Timorese military and police forces are no longer directly involved, but the peacekeepers are only partly effective. Youth groups continue to fight each other, people are injured or killed almost every day, and most Dili residents are still in refugee camps, an impending public health disaster when the rainy season begins next month.

I recently asked some Timorese veterans of the independence struggle what others seeking self-government can learn from their experience. "Don't become independent" they half-joked, demonstrating how this crisis has shaken their confidence in their ability to govern themselves.

### **Complete Self-determination**

Some legal scholars, notably Special Rapporteur Hector Espiell describe the right of peoples to self-determination as including "not only the completion of the process of achieving independence or other appropriate legal status by the peoples under colonial and alien domination, but also the recognition of their right to maintain, assure and perfect their full legal, political, economic, social and cultural sovereignty." Mr. Espiell explains that "The right of peoples to self-determination has lasting force, does not lapse upon first having been exercised to secure political self-determination and extends to all fields, including of course economic, social and cultural affairs."<sup>6</sup>

In this globalized millennium, it takes more than a referendum to achieve independence. Timor-Leste has been governed by the United Nations; its National Development Plan was largely written and enforced by the World Bank and ADB; the IMF designs fiscal and monetary policy; so-called "development partners" decide what projects to do. The police and military structures

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<sup>6</sup> Espiell, Hector Gros "The Right to Self Determination: Implementation of United Nations Resolutions." Study prepared by the UN Special Rapporteur of the Sub Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities (E/CN.4/Sub.2/405/Rev.1), 1980. Excerpts at [www.tamilnation.org/selfdetermination/80grosepiell.htm](http://www.tamilnation.org/selfdetermination/80grosepiell.htm)

which have caused so much trouble recently were mostly created and trained by international "advisors." Ninety percent of the economy depends on foreign oil companies. The new nation, sandwiched between two self-absorbed neighbors, has had to surrender petroleum reserves to Australia and abandon justice to Indonesia, where military officers from the current President on down advanced their careers by participating in the illegal, brutal occupation of Timor-Leste.

Timor-Leste has metamorphosed from a liberation movement to a state, and its leaders have had to abandon many of their ideals to political realities. Their sister movements in West Papua, Tibet and Burma have discovered that former comrades-in-diplomacy are less free as government officials than they were as freedom fighters. Although I am uneasy with many of the diplomatic decisions Timor-Leste's government has taken, I understand that with their independence comes compromise.

### **Timor-Leste's historical moment**

Timor-Leste's referendum seven years ago grew out of a unique set of historical and specific circumstances which may not be repeatable for other parallel movements in this millennium. A few of them are worth recalling:

- Timor-Leste is only 1/122 as large as Indonesia. Although Indonesian propaganda claimed that Timorese independence was the first step toward dismantling their Republic, the breakaway province was too small and too poor to matter to any Indonesians other than soldiers who had built careers or lost comrades there. Resource-rich West Papua, on the other hand, is not yet independent partly because Sukarno and his successors have made its annexation a *cause célèbre* for the last 50 years. Western Sahara remains on the UN's list partly because it has 3/5 the land area of its Moroccan occupier, whose government portrays Western Sahara as an integral part of their territory.
- The Nobel Prize Committee, looking for situations where it could have a positive impact, awarded the Peace Prize to Bishop Belo and José Ramos-Horta. The committee had not yet broadened its scope to include environmental activism and economic justice.
- Economically and politically, the Suharto regime collapsed in 1998; Indonesia has had four presidents since then. B. J. Habibie, Suharto's ill-informed successor, believed that Indonesia would win a referendum in Timor-Leste, ending decades of international embarrassment. The Timorese independence movement, ready after long struggle in military, clandestine and diplomatic arenas, seized this opportunity, but the ouster of Suharto's 32-year dictatorship opened the way.
- In 1999, after a series of UN failures – Somalia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia and Western Sahara – the international community needed a success. With the legal and moral case for self-determination undeniable after the deaths of almost 200,000 Timorese people, Australia, the United States and other supporters of integration were ready to let go. Even then, they would not pressure Indonesia to turn over pre-referendum security to UN personnel. Ironically, the referendum agreement<sup>7</sup> was the first time the UN legitimized Indonesian troops in Timor-Leste, assigning them responsibility for security during the vote. This "cruel hoax"<sup>8</sup> enabled the Indonesian military and the militia they commanded to execute pre-referendum terror and post-referendum scorched-earth campaigns, killing 1,500 people,

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<sup>7</sup> *Agreement Between the Republic of Indonesia and the Portuguese Republic on the Question of East Timor* ([www.etan.org/et99/may/1-8/6un.htm](http://www.etan.org/et99/may/1-8/6un.htm)) and *East Timor Popular Consultation Agreement Regarding Security* ([www.etan.org/et99/may/1-8/6unagre.htm](http://www.etan.org/et99/may/1-8/6unagre.htm)).

<sup>8</sup> The agreement was signed by Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the Foreign Ministers of Portugal and Indonesia on 5 May 1999. The International Federation for East Timor, among others, urged that the UN take responsibility for public safety. [www.etan.org/et99/may/1-8/4ifet.htm](http://www.etan.org/et99/may/1-8/4ifet.htm)

forcing three-quarters of the Timorese to flee their homes, and destroying 75% of the buildings and almost all the infrastructure.

- International solidarity for Timor-Leste was diverse, global and strategic in working with influential constituencies, as elaborated below.

## Timor-Leste today

The disintegration of civil order and government effectiveness in Timor-Leste's capital over the last six months is a tragedy for the people of that country and for all who were inspired by their independence. But just as Timor-Leste is trying to learn from the experiences of oil-dependent countries how to avoid the "resource curse," perhaps Timor-Leste's misfortunes can teach some lessons to and other nations embarking on sovereignty. These lessons may also be helpful for Timor-Leste as it continues its nation-building, and for the United Nations and other international institutions whose actions are sometimes counter-productive to their ideal of self-determination.

It is too soon to comprehend all the reasons of Timor-Leste's current crisis. Some stem from power struggles and recent or long-standing personal conflicts. Recent reports by the United Nations Commission of Inquiry<sup>9</sup> and the International Crisis Group<sup>10</sup> described these, focusing on individual acts, while downplaying more fundamental, instructive and challenging contextual, societal and institutional causes.

La'o Hamutuk<sup>11</sup> is a Timor-Leste NGO which has monitored and analyzed the activities of the UN, the World Bank and other international agencies in Timor-Leste since 2000. While the UN was discussing how to respond to the escalating crisis, La'o Hamutuk made suggestions to the UN Secretariat and Security Council,<sup>12</sup> highlighting issues to consider in the next UN mission, referencing its reports that had identified many of these problems.

## Nation- and capacity-building

Nearly every new nation in history, including many which are affluent and long-standing today, took a decade or more to establish peace, national unity, stable constitutional government and rule of law. Nation-building requires patience, time and trial-and-error. The political priorities of UN Member States began to shift from Timor-Leste as soon as Indonesian soldiers had departed, but the need for international support, including a transitional government, had only begun.

All UN missions have systemic and structural flaws, including an emergency/crisis orientation; personnel responsible to the UN bureaucracy rather than to local situations and needs; few women in decision-making roles; short-term mandates, planning and hiring; under-qualified international staff; not utilizing local capacity; unwillingness to displease powerful states;

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<sup>9</sup> Report of the United Nations Independent Special Commission of Inquiry for Timor Leste, October 2006 [www.ohchr.org/english/docs/ColReport-English.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/english/docs/ColReport-English.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> International Crisis Group, "Resolving Timor-Leste's Crisis", 10 October 2006. [www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4438&l=1](http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4438&l=1)

<sup>11</sup> Also known as the Timor-Leste Institute for Reconstruction Monitoring and Analysis, La'o Hamutuk was initiated by the Timor-Leste solidarity movement in response to Timorese activists who wanted to know more about international institutions that were descending on their newly de-occupied country. The Institute also serves as a two-way communications channel between Timorese civil society and those institutions. The author is a researcher at of La'o Hamutuk. See [www.laohamutuk.org](http://www.laohamutuk.org).

<sup>12</sup> La'o Hamutuk, "Suggestions for the Next United Nations Mission in Timor-Leste", 22 June 2006. [www.laohamutuk.org/reports/UN/06LHSuggestUN.html](http://www.laohamutuk.org/reports/UN/06LHSuggestUN.html)

excessive focus on milestones (e.g. elections). If these are not addressed, simply extending the duration of a UN Mission will not appreciably improve the result.

Capacity-building, mentoring, and transfer of authority to Timorese staff was rushed, half-hearted or poorly executed. UNTAET had governed for two of its 2½ years before its leadership realized that *Transitional* was more important than *Administration* in its name. Many international advisors had little teaching experience and were hired on six-month contracts. With all international positions ending with each mission transition (every one or two years), many internationals spent more time getting oriented or looking for their next posting than performing their jobs or transferring their skills to Timorese counterparts. Given Timor-Leste's history, many Timorese staff had limited education and work experience, but were about to fill positions and assume responsibilities which normally require many years of classroom and on-the-job training.

### **Overcoming injustice**

Indonesian intransigence and limited international political will have blocked accountability for the architects of the most serious crimes committed during the 24-year Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste. Timor-Leste's own government is unable to overcome prevailing impunity, and perpetrators of crimes against humanity between 1975 and 1999 hold powerful positions in Indonesia. This lack of justice, felt deeply by victims of these crimes (the majority of Timor-Leste's people), set the precedent for today's lawlessness. Timor-Leste's own judicial system is crippled by lack of experienced personnel, arbitrary language restrictions, a hodgepodge of legal codes, and scarce material resources and few citizens who have lived in a society ruled by law. In the current crisis, violence has filled the justice gap. Perpetrators anticipate impunity, and victims, lacking confidence in the courts, take matters into their own hands. This was mentioned by the Commission of Inquiry, but not identified as an abdication of the Security Council, which has refused to establish an international tribunal for Timor-Leste.

One of the most challenging tasks of a victorious anti-colonial struggle is transforming people's relationship with government from resistance to ownership, and neither international civic educators nor Timorese political leaders have been effective in this area. Politicians and political parties attack their adversaries' integrity, rather than propose alternative policies or build coalitions. Dissatisfied voters insult or give up on their elected representatives, rather than lobby them. Elected officials are beholden to their party or patron, rather than to the voters or constituents. Media coverage amplifies charges and counter-charges, without analysis or facts to help the reader decide what is true. Timor-Leste will hold its first Presidential and Parliamentary elections in about six months; some are concerned that they may not be peaceful, free or fair, given the current crisis and the limited experience with democracy.

National unity, relatively easy to maintain while fighting a common enemy, becomes much more difficult after the occupier is gone. Mistrust remains between actual or suspected collaborators and those who fought for freedom. Regional and tribal differences become magnified. Skills of returning exiles, who often had more educational opportunities, need to be utilized without generating resentment from those who stayed and struggled. Unrealistic expectations that life would improve quickly after independence are not met, resulting in social jealousy when some inevitably prosper more than others. Corruption, nepotism and cronyism exist in all societies – but are more pervasive in an illegal occupation by a corrupt occupier, a challenging pattern to overcome.

Decades of trauma and displacement, as the Timorese people endured, create lasting psychological effects. People panic easily; some experience flashbacks or irrational anger. These problems need to be addressed as a public health measure, and as a prerequisite for confidence in democratic processes. Effective, responsible, reliable media and communications systems are

also essential: when people do not trust information from official or public sources, they depend on rumor, imagination and disinformation.

Timor-Leste is fortunate that the current Indonesian government is not trying to destabilize Timor-Leste, which still buys most of its imports – virtually all manufactured goods are imported -- from Indonesia. The two governments enjoy friendly diplomatic relations, as long as Timor-Leste does not press to hold Indonesian criminals accountable. Although most Indonesian people still consider the Timorese ungrateful, there is little popular sentiment for re-invading their new neighbor. Indonesians who choose to remain in Timor-Leste as immigrants or citizens are accepted by society.

### **Armed forces**

Timor-Leste's resistance leaders had hoped to create a nation without an army. But after the 1999 terror campaign, they decided that they needed a defense force to deter cross-border attacks. When UNTAET created FALINTIL-FDTL, Timor-Leste's military, the basic decisions were made by international consultants with limited understanding of Timor-Leste's needs, history and society. F-FDTL's hybrid name represents the conversion of FALINTIL (Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste) into the FDTL (Forças Armadas de Defesa de Timor-Leste). Although the new defense force honored and provided employment for some veterans of the guerilla resistance, it has not been needed for border security. Shortly after independence, Timor-Leste proposed a demilitarized border, guarded by police, and most soldiers were stationed in the eastern part of Timor-Leste, far from the border. Instead, the army has been used for internal security several times, in violation of Timor-Leste's constitution; their deployment in Dili on 28 April 2006 exacerbated the current crisis and led to the ouster of Prime Minister Alkatiri. Like Indonesia's TNI, some in Timorese military and police have used their positions for personal gain, distributed guns to civilians, or engaged in smuggling and corruption.

In addition to the unclear roles and misinterpreted mandate of the armed forces, international and Timorese leaders gave little thought to the difficulties of transforming an underground liberation army into a national defense force. During the Indonesian occupation, FALINTIL guerillas had to work secretly and independently in a decentralized structure, taking their own initiative and obtaining weapons from black-market sources. Distinctions between soldiers and civilians were blurred, as people moved between the armed resistance and the civilian underground, often taking clandestine roles in Indonesian civil or military structures. Although these tactics and skills are necessary for a successful guerilla resistance, the current crisis shows how disastrous they can be in a peacetime defense force answerable to a civilian government and legal system.

During a quarter-century of resistance, thousands of Timorese men and women served time in the guerilla forces. Although these sometimes numbered only a few hundred soldiers, and although they have infrequent combat since the 1980s, FALINTIL veterans were far more numerous than could be included in the defense force. The inevitable exclusion of many former combatants, some of whom had sacrificed decades to the struggle, created a group of resentful men available for recruitment or manipulation by those with personal or political agendas.

Another complexity is the makeup and role of the police force, tasked with internal security. Upon independence, the only experienced Timorese police were those who had served in the Indonesian occupation police force. Although some of these had demonstrated their commitment to Timor-Leste's people, the loyalties of others were questioned. With many new recruits, extensive but often ineffective training, numerous weapons including automatic and assault rifles, and militarized border patrol and rapid reaction units of debatable necessity, the police are perceived by some past and current soldiers as usurpers or worse. In mid-2006, rivalries and

mistrust within and between elements of the police and the army escalated into open combat, claiming dozens of lives.

Timor-Leste needs broad, public discussion about the future role and structure of its military, and to unlearn bad models and habits. Indonesia's *dwi fungsi* (dual function) system uses the military to drive national development, allowing Suharto's military regime to control the economy through monopolies, extortion and graft. UNTAET, with 8,200 soldiers, 1,350 police, and 2,000 civilian staff<sup>13</sup> was one of the most military-heavy governments in history, yet it had almost no skirmishes after 2000. Peacekeepers built roads, repaired bridges and did other jobs normally done better by civilians. Timor-Leste, emulating these bad examples, is considering universal military service regardless of the country's security needs.

## **Economic development**

UN Missions in Timor-Leste gave little attention to economic development, deferring to the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, IMF and UNDP. But often, inexperienced Timorese officials were left to fend for themselves or implement policies dictated by the IFIs, following "Washington consensus" ideology. Initially, this included fees for school and other public services, minimal public sector employment, few restrictions on foreign investment, public services contracted out to private (often foreign) companies, plans for privatization of public infrastructure, and so-called "free trade." Pieces of this dogma are now being modified in response to popular demand and the unemployment disaster, but local rice continues to be crowded out by cheaper imports, and electricity, telephone and potable water remain unavailable or unaffordable to the majority of the population.

Highly paid international consultants and advisors are very concerned about corruption, especially when middle-level Timorese officials are involved. But Timor-Leste's most experienced civil servants learned corruption from Indonesian times, when it was common for Indonesians and patriotic for Timorese to steal from the occupation government. Add a remnant of Portuguese inefficiency and new, overzealous safeguards for accountability, and the result is paralysis – most Timorese government departments have been unable to spend their budget allocations, resulting in public services even more limited than Timor-Leste's poverty requires. The new government is beginning to address economic issues, even as they simplify the bureaucracy for foreign investors.

From 2000 to 2005, UN missions made up most of Timor-Leste's economic activity, spending more than US \$2 billion. Together with approximately \$1 billion in aid projects, foreign "assistance" totaled 50% more than Timor-Leste's non-oil GDP in the same period. Unfortunately, nearly all of this paid foreign consultants and soldiers or bought imported goods and services; only a small fraction entered the local economy.<sup>14</sup> Money which could have built a potable water system and electric power grid for all Dili residents was spent on imported bottled water and fuel for generators for UN buildings. Self-serving UN policies like these sacrificed opportunities to rebuild destroyed infrastructure, which could have jump-started Timorese small businesses and provided employment, income and training for Timorese workers and managers. Had these steps been taken, Timor-Leste might have avoided astronomical levels of joblessness and alienation, at the root of today's gang violence.

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<sup>13</sup> La'o Hamutuk Bulletin, April 2001 [www.laohamutuk.org/Bulletin/2001/Apr/bulletinv2n1.html](http://www.laohamutuk.org/Bulletin/2001/Apr/bulletinv2n1.html)

<sup>14</sup> The average international UN staff was paid 30 times more than the average Timorese UN staff. Less than 1% of the UNTAET and UNMISSET budgets paid Timorese workers. See *ibid* and La'o Hamutuk Bulletin, May 2003 [www.laohamutuk.org/Bulletin/2003/May/bulletinv4n2.html](http://www.laohamutuk.org/Bulletin/2003/May/bulletinv4n2.html)



At the start of 2006, Timor-Leste's per capita yearly income was \$370; fertility was the highest in the world; mothers and babies died faster than anywhere else in Asia. The average Timorese mother will have eight children, but one of them will die before the age of five. Urban unemployment was around 50%. But the IMF was optimistic, believing that "Timor-Leste had made good progress in establishing the basis for a stable and healthy economy."<sup>15</sup> Today the macro-economists have turned pessimistic: "Unfortunately, the crisis has dealt a setback to the growth momentum. The mission finds that following the crisis, economic growth in 2006 is now likely to be somewhat negative, despite the expected end-year higher public spending and international aid. Crisis-related supply disruptions pushed inflation above the low rates previously achieved, with a resulting deterioration in international competitiveness. The crisis also contributed to a further worsening in the repayment of bank loans."<sup>16</sup>

For the next two generations, Timor-Leste will depend on its petroleum resources to escape from its position as the second poorest country in Asia.<sup>17</sup> By 2009, 94% of its government revenues and 90% of its GDP will come from selling offshore oil and gas. Although this money can improve people's lives, the experience of other countries which depend on non-renewable resources is not encouraging. Difficult tradeoffs abound: current desires versus saving for future generations, investing in people or infrastructure versus operational spending, building political patronage versus meeting national needs. The country's petroleum reserves will be exhausted within 50 years, and other sectors must be prioritized to make Timor-Leste's economy sustainable for the long term. Corruption, ubiquitous in the oil industry among both companies and politicians, must be prevented. Planning is challenging, as Timor-Leste's population will double in 17 years and nobody knows what the price of oil will be then.

## Solidarity Forever

During the latter part of Indonesia's occupation of Timor-Leste, the international solidarity movement for Timor-Leste was important in raising the visibility of the prolonged occupation and the political costs for allowing it to continue. Several factors may be instructive for those who work in solidarity with other independence movements:

- Indonesia's near-genocide, the killing of approximately one-third of Timor-Leste's pre-invasion population, was the worst since World War II. By the time he invaded Timor-Leste in 1975, Suharto's military dictatorship had already killed more than a million people in West Papua and Indonesia itself. As the fourth most populated country in the world, Indonesia possessed resources, markets and strategic position which, combined with Suharto's anti-communist credentials, earned him blind-eyed support from the West.
- The cynical complicity and duplicity of Western countries with Indonesia was better-known than international support for Morocco. Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford's in-person, invasion-eve green light to Jakarta, followed by increases in weapons sales and military training, outraged many. Campaigns against Western military support for the Indonesian occupation were especially effective during the intermission between the Cold War and the "Global War On Terror."

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<sup>15</sup> Statement by IMF Staff at the Conclusion of the 2006 Article IV Consultation Discussions with the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, 20 October 2006.  
[www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2006/pr06225.htm](http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2006/pr06225.htm)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Timor-Leste's 2005 UNDP Human Development index rank was 140, while Yemen's was 151, out of 177 countries. Except for Haiti, these are the worst in the world outside Africa.



- Even though the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste was not motivated by religion, Catholics were oppressed by a majority-Muslim nation. This encouraged church networks to educate and mobilize their constituencies. In addition, the Portuguese names and customs of the Timorese people facilitated support from the Lusophone world, in nations which had recently triumphed over Portuguese colonialism,<sup>18</sup> among the people of Portugal and in Portugal's European and American diaspora.
- Indonesia itself is a colonial invention, an archipelagic possession which became a country after World War II. It had no plausible historical claim to Timor-Leste, as stated by its Foreign Minister less than a year before they invaded. Indonesian racism and arrogance led them to underestimate Timorese will, capacity and patience, while overestimating their own military and political prowess, leading to a protracted struggle. They captured the bodies of many Timorese, but never their minds and hearts.
- During the occupation, Timor-Leste's diplomatic representation and governmental allies were sparse, increasing the need for solidarity. Indonesia's regime received diplomatic support from governments in their neighborhood, Southeast Asia. The Timorese diplomatic front and the solidarity movement nurtured activist movements in Indonesia itself, as well as in the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Japan and Australia, to increase domestic political costs of supporting the occupation.
- For anti-imperialists in Western countries, Timor-Leste's case was a teachable moment. As Americans and others learned about our governments' complicity with the killing of one-third of their population, many began asking fundamental questions about our countries' roles in the world, wondering what other criminal policies else had been hidden from them.

When Timor-Leste achieved independence, solidarity activists had to adapt to the transformation of resistance colleagues into government officials. Some shifted priorities to work on other issues; a few joined the well-paid hordes of consultants and advisors that descended on Timor-Leste. But many, realizing that self-government was only a step toward genuine independence, found ways to accompany the Timorese people on their continuing journey.<sup>19</sup>

During the struggle for self-determination, Timorese leaders refrained from telling the solidarity movement what to do, so that the resistance would not be blamed for fallout from activist activities. The solidarity movement was more durable when it avoided identifying with individual Timorese leaders or parties. Today, resistance leaders have become cabinet ministers. Although solidarity activists still count these officials as friends, the international movement has developed new relationships with Timorese civil society, trying to hold all of our governments accountable.

In the end, the Timorese people are in charge of their own destiny, as is every independence movement which achieves victory. With self-determination comes responsibility. People who stand in solidarity can offer advice and support, and join in challenging violations of human and political rights. But when people control their own country, they have to live with their own mistakes. It is harder than they expected.

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<sup>18</sup> Mozambique provided diplomatic support, education and a home to many Timorese in exile who returned to play key roles in FRETILIN and the government. Some Timorese who stayed in the country or went to Australia, Indonesia or Portugal resent the "Mozambique mafia."

<sup>19</sup> The author, representing the International Federation for East Timor, developed these ideas at greater length in "The Role of International Solidarity for an Independent East Timor," a talk given in Dili on 22 May 2002. [www.etan.org/ifet/2001plus/solid.htm](http://www.etan.org/ifet/2001plus/solid.htm)