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Dili

On 12 November 1991, Indonesian troops gunned down hundreds of peaceful protesters in Dili, the capital of East Timor. This act was intended to intimidate opponents of Indonesian rule. But instead, the killings triggered a huge increase in international support for East Timor's independence. In order to understand the Dili massacre and how it backfired, I review its background and aftermath, giving special attention to the five methods attackers use to inhibit outrage.

Most of the archipelago today called Indonesia was previously a colony of the Netherlands. Indonesia obtained its independence in 1949. The new government, led by Sukarno, fostered a strong sense of nationalism. In 1965, there was a military coup, accompanied by a massive anticommunist purge, with hundreds of thousands of people killed.¹ The new regime, led by General Suharto, was ideologically procapitalist, but it retained its predecessor's strong nationalism.

One of the islands in the archipelago, Timor, had been colonized by Portugal in the 1500s, and later by the Netherlands. Portugal eventually ended up controlling just the eastern half of the island. In 1974, a military coup in Lisbon toppled the Portuguese dictatorship, opening the path for representative government. This also enabled Portugal's

colonies — such as Angola and Mozambique — to gain independence.

In East Timor, Portugal's most remote colony, with a population of nearly 700,000, rival political forces struggled for supremacy in the transition from Portuguese rule, with the liberation movement Fretilin having most popular support. In December 1975, Indonesian military forces invaded and occupied East Timor. According to some commentators, the Indonesian government had obtained agreement for the operation from the Australian and U.S. governments.² Fretilin fought the invasion but soon retreated to the mountains where it maintained a guerrilla resistance to the Indonesian occupiers.

The invasion and occupation were bloody, with many fighters and civilians killed. Indonesian forces perpetrated serious human rights violations, including torture, rape, and killing of civilians; Fretilin did the same, though on a much smaller scale and mainly in the first few years after 1975. The Indonesian occupation led to famine among East Timorese living on the land, leading to the death of up to 180,000 people.³ On a proportional basis, this was one of the most lethal conquests in the century.

For several years, the United Nations passed resolutions condemning the Indonesian takeover, but none of these was backed up

1. Robert Cribb, ed., *The Indonesian Killings 1965–1966* (Melbourne: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990). On the lack of backfire from this bloodbath, see Brian Martin, Wendy Varney, and Adrian Vickers, "Political Jiu-Jitsu against Indonesian Repression: Studying Lower-profile Nonviolent Resistance," *Pacifica Review* 13 (2001): 143–56.

2. Joseph Nevins, *A Not-so-Distant Horror: Mass Violence in East Timor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 51–52, 62–63.

3. Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation Timor-Leste, *Chega!* (East Timor: Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation Timor-Leste, 2005). I thank Joe Nevins for referring me to this source.

with action. Most governments and corporations preferred to keep on good terms with the Indonesian regime, which ruled one of the world's most populous countries. However, in the following decades, only the Australian government formally recognized the incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia. Within several countries, notably Australia, Japan, and Britain, there were active solidarity movements supporting the East Timorese liberation struggle.⁴

The Indonesian occupiers kept tight control over communications in and out of East Timor. After the 1975 invasion, supporters in northern Australia for some years maintained short-wave contact with Fretilin in the face of Australian government efforts to shut down the radio link.⁵ The restriction on information flow helped to reduce outrage over atrocities carried out by Indonesian troops. Often the only word of these came via individuals who were able to leave East Timor. Their testimony often lacked credibility because there was no independent verification or endorsement by western sources.

The Indonesian occupiers in the late 1980s faced reduced pressure from Fretilin and

4. On the East Timorese liberation struggle, see for example Carmel Budiardjo and Liem Soei Liong, *The War Against East Timor* (London: Zed Books, 1984); Jill Jolliffe, *East Timor: Nationalism and Colonialism* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1978); Arnold Kohen and John Taylor, *An Act of Genocide: Indonesia's Invasion of East Timor* (London: TAPOL, 1979); John Pilger, *Distant Voices* (London: Vintage, 1994), 231–323; Constâncio Pinto and Matthew Jardine, *East Timor's Unfinished Struggle: Inside the Timorese Resistance* (Boston: South End Press, 1997); John G. Taylor, *Indonesia's Forgotten War: The Hidden History of East Timor* (London: Zed Books, 1991).

5. Rob Wesley Smith, "Radio Maubere and Links to East Timor," in *Free East Timor: Australia's Culpability in East Timor's Genocide*, ed. Jim Aubrey (Sydney: Random House, 1998), 83–102.

reduced criticism from other governments. The governor of East Timor asked for easing of restrictions on travel to, from, and within East Timor, in order to foster investment, to which President Suharto agreed. From 1989, tourists and western journalists — but not human rights observers — were allowed into East Timor.

Fretilin, with declining numbers of fighters in the late 1980s, changed its strategic orientation, also taking into account the increased access by visitors. Rather than seeking liberation primarily through armed struggle with a guerrilla army based in the countryside, the new approach emphasized civilian resistance in urban areas. Fretilin retained its weapons but decided to use them only for defense, not to launch attacks. The aims of this new orientation were to foster East Timorese unity in the struggle and to gain greater support for independence both within Indonesia and internationally. Fretilin gave special attention to mobilizing protests to coincide with visits by foreign dignitaries.⁶

A delegation of Portuguese parliamentarians planned to visit East Timor in late 1991. Independence supporters organized a major demonstration; at the same time, the Indonesian military prepared for a crackdown. The Portuguese visit was called off at the last minute following a procedural disagreement between the Indonesian and Portuguese governments. Tensions were predictably high.

On the night of 28 October, there was a fight between pro-independence and pro-Indonesian Timorese in the Church of Saint Anthony of Motael in Dili. Many young people had sought refuge in the building prior to the cancelled visit; the church was surrounded by Indonesian troops, who tried to make the East Timorese leave. Two people were killed, one of them a Timorese working for the Indonesians and the other an 18-year-old supporter of independence named

6. Chisako M. Fukuda, "Peace through Nonviolent Action: The East Timorese Resistance Movement's Strategy for Engagement," *Pacifica Review* 12 (February 2000), 17–31.

Sebastião Gomes. Bishop Carlos Belo — the leading Catholic Church figure in a largely Catholic country — went to the scene. The Indonesians tried to claim Gomes had been killed with a knife, but Belo saw the bullet holes in his body. In a funeral mass for Gomes, the bishop fiercely criticized the Indonesian occupiers, saying they had ultimate responsibility for the deaths.⁷

The resistance movement decided to go ahead with the protest it had planned for the Portuguese visit, but to make it part of a memorial procession and service at Santa Cruz cemetery for Gomes, scheduled for 12 November. Indonesian troops surrounded the mourners along its route. While expressing political sentiments, the large procession was almost entirely peaceful, except for one incident.

Suddenly there was a brief scuffle as an Indonesian major waded into the crowd with a group of soldiers bearing fixed bayonets. The major threw a young woman to the ground as he tried to grab a nationalist flag she was carrying. Some accounts say the major was then stabbed by the boyfriend of the young woman. The stabbing, later cited by Indonesian authorities as the reason for the tragedy that day, was hardly noticed at the time, and to this day it is not clear what happened.⁸

The march proceeded without hindrance until its arrival at the cemetery.

Indonesian troops arrived and opened fire on the crowd at point-blank range, without warning or provocation. It had all the appearance of a planned, disciplined operation. The fusillade lasted

several minutes — no one could be sure how long.⁹

This event might have become just one more instance of an alleged atrocity, without authoritative documentation. The difference this time was that western journalists were present at Santa Cruz cemetery, witnessing the massacre, among them Alan Nairn of the *New Yorker*, Amy Goodman of Pacifica Radio, and Steve Cox, a British photographer, each of whom was severely beaten. Their eyewitness accounts provided vivid, credible evidence of what had happened.¹⁰

Most powerful of all was video footage shot by British filmmaker Max Stahl, from Yorkshire Television. Stahl hid his videotapes in the cemetery and picked them up later. The next day, Dutch reporter Saskia Kouwenberg smuggled the tapes out of East Timor and then out of Indonesia. This video footage was screened initially in the Netherlands, then in Britain and other countries, and totally discredited Indonesian government denials that an atrocity had occurred.¹¹

The Dili massacre severely backfired on the Indonesian occupiers. International outrage led to a huge increase in support for the East Timorese solidarity movement in many countries. Movement groups continued with their activities, raising awareness of the injustice and brutality of the occupation and putting pressure on western governments and corporations over their overt or tacit support for the Indonesian government. The outrage over the massacre boosted these efforts. Journalists and editors were more willing to run stories about East Timor. Politicians, many of whom saw Stahl's footage, were more willing to support legislation penalizing

7. Arnold S. Kohen, *From the Place of the Dead: The Epic Struggles of Bishop Belo of East Timor* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 154–58.

8. *Ibid.*, 162.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Also present was Australian journalist Russell Anderson, who tells his story in “The Massacre of 12 November 1991,” in Aubrey, *Free East Timor*, 145–52. I thank Joe Nevins for this point.

11. Kohen, *From the Place of the Dead*, 167.

Indonesia. Speakers about the occupation, especially those from East Timor, were in much greater demand.

Commenting on western media coverage on East Timor, journalist Hugh O'Shaughnessy stated:

Whether the Indonesian authorities recognized it at the time or not, Stahl's film was the death knell for the continued dominance of Indonesia in East Timor. It put the territory on the world political agenda in a way that no other document had done, inspiring people around the globe with the desire to help to put an end to the occupation. Stahl's film inspired print, radio and television journalists worldwide to continue the coverage of East Timor. John Pilger and David Munro, for instance, used footage from Max Stahl and others as an indispensable part of a long television documentary, *Death of a Nation* (1994), which was screened widely and updated and re-screened in 1999.¹²

In the United States, the testimony of journalists Amy Goodman and Allan Nairn, plus photos and videotape, led to media coverage and to the creation of the East Timor Action Network, a grassroots movement. Some members of Congress were outraged by the massacre and initiated legislative moves banning U.S. provision of military training and weapons to Indonesia.¹³

The increased visibility of the East Timor issue was almost certainly a factor in the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 to

two prominent East Timorese figures, Bishop Belo and José Ramos-Horta, head diplomat of the resistance. The award significantly lifted the profile of the independence cause.

The global context in the 1990s also helped supporters of East Timor independence. Following the end of the Cold War, communism no longer served as such an effective pretext for oppression; governments were more prone to use the rhetoric of human rights. A number of small states gained independence, including the Baltic states and parts of former Yugoslavia, giving greater plausibility to demands for East Timor to have the same opportunity.¹⁴

The mobilizing effect of the Dili massacre did not derive solely from the scale of the killings, because there had been many previous massacres in East Timor, some of them worse than the one in Santa Cruz cemetery. For example, in 1981 a party of Fretilin guerrillas surrendered along with their women and children. Aside from a few women, they were all shot and their bodies burned, with some 400 killed. In August 1983, following a Fretilin attack that killed more than a dozen Indonesian troops,

First some 200 Timorese were burnt alive in their homes, while another 500 were killed at the Be Tuku River. ... According to Mario Carrascalão, provincial governor of the time who personally investigated the atrocity, more than 1000 Timorese of all ages were massacred. Yet there was no international response, let alone pressure on the Suharto government to stop the killing. A statement by an Australian cabinet minister to the effect that Falintil [Fretilin troops] should stop provoking the Indonesian military was the best that Canberra could come up with!¹⁵

12. Hugh O'Shaughnessy, "Reporting East Timor: Western Media Coverage of the Conflict," in *The East Timor Question: The Struggle for Independence from Indonesia*, ed. Paul Hainsworth and Stephen McCloskey (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 31–40, at 36.

13. Charles Scheiner, "The United States: From Complicity to Ambiguity," in Hainsworth and McCloskey, *East Timor Question*, 117–32.

14. James Dunn, *East Timor: A Rough Passage to Independence*, 3d ed. (Sydney: Longueville Books, 2003), 333.

15. *Ibid.*, 292–93.

In the past, cover-up and a highly regulated media had been effective means for minimizing awareness of the brutalities of the occupation, but this time information from credible independent observers reached the rest of the world. Indonesian officials, though, did what they could to prevent publicity about the Santa Cruz killings. Immediately after the massacre, phone services to the outside world were cut off. The Australian government, with strong economic and security ties to Indonesia, attempted to assist in preventing information about the massacre reaching a wider public,

by ordering its immigration officials in Darwin to conduct a rigorous search of the belongings of both Stahl and [photographer Steve] Cox when they flew out through Northern Australia in late November (fortunately, both had had the presence of mind to entrust their film to reliable couriers, one of whom exited Timor by another route).¹⁶

Indonesian officials denigrated the victims. For example, General Try Sutrisno, commander-in-chief of the Indonesian armed forces (and later vice-president of Indonesia), shortly after the massacre,

defended the action, telling a graduation ceremony at the National Defence Institute, Lemhanas, that dissent must be quashed by “exterminating anyone who disrupts stability ... They are people who must be crushed. This scum must be eliminated ... ill-bred people who have to be shot ... come what may, they cannot ignore ABRI [Indonesian armed forces] ... ABRI is determined to eliminate anyone who creates disturbances ... Delinquents like these agita-

tors have to be shot and we will shoot them.”¹⁷

As well as denigrating the victims, Indonesian officials attempted to undermine the credibility of East Timorese leaders by misrepresenting what they said and wrote. After East Timorese leader Xanana Gusmão was captured in 1992, a military-controlled newspaper accused him of rape and murder, among other slurs.¹⁸

A usual method by which the occupiers attempted to reduce backlash from atrocities was to misrepresent what had happened.¹⁹ For example, Lieutenant Colonel A. Tampodang claimed the Dili events were due to the presence of “more than 100 clandestine separatists, armed with Portuguese-made G-3 rifles and hand grenades.” Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas claimed protesters had thrown grenades at the troops, who had to defend themselves against the threatening crowd.²⁰

Lies did not convince the local East Timorese population, but usually were effective with the population of Indonesia and the wider world. The Indonesian media were regulated and monitored by the government, so only the official line was covered. In other countries, Indonesian government views were usually reported. Standard western media practice gives priority to statements by government officials — especially when the government in question is allied to the west — and gives government opponents little or no voice. Because the East Timorese resistance had little access to the western media, partly

17. Andrew McMillan, *Death in Dili* (Sydney: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), 162. Ellipses in the original.

18. Estêvão Cabral, “The Indonesian Propaganda War against East Timor,” in Hainsworth and McCloskey, *East Timor Question*, 69–84, at 75–76.

19. Cabral describes many of the techniques of misrepresentation.

20. McMillan, *Death in Dili*, 161–62.

16. Steve Cox and Peter Carey, *Generations of Resistance: East Timor* (London: Cassell, 1995), 52.

due to Indonesian censorship and partly to cultural, language, and logistic barriers, it was difficult to offer a credible challenge to the official Indonesian government line. The Santa Cruz events were quite different: the testimony of experienced western journalists, plus video footage, provided a powerful counter to Indonesian government lies.

Indonesian officials initially stated 19 people had died at Santa Cruz cemetery. They later raised this to 50. A separate, non-government assessment gave a figure of 271, with many hundreds more injured.

A publication by the Indonesian Department of Foreign Affairs in 1992 gives the following account of the Santa Cruz “incident”:

The tragic outcome of the demonstration that occurred in Dili, East Timor, on the 12th of November 1991 was deeply regrettable, as was immediately and repeatedly expressed by the Indonesian Government at the highest levels. Most unfortunately, the demonstration was not entirely peaceful and indeed displayed premeditated provocation and belligerence. It triggered a spontaneous reaction by some security personnel, acting outside the control or command of senior officers, and resulted in a deplorable loss of lives and a number of wounded people. It was a tragic incident and clearly not an act ordered by or reflecting the policy of the Government or the Armed Forces.²¹

21. Republic of Indonesia, *East Timor: Building for the Future* (Jakarta: Department of Foreign Affairs, July 1992), vi–vii. The language in this document is much more subdued than Sutrisno’s speech, reflecting the different audiences for their accounts. Sutrisno was addressing an Indonesian military audience whereas the Department of Foreign Affairs document, written in English, was expected to be available to foreign officials and others. I thank Philip Kitley for this point.

Many independent observers — including an official UN delegation — concluded, to the contrary, that the attack was indeed premeditated.

In response to the international outcry, the Indonesian government set up an official inquiry into the massacre. The inquiry report was released on December 26, 1991. Compared to testimony by East Timorese witnesses and western observers, the inquiry reported a very low number of deaths. But the very existence of an inquiry was an indication of the seriousness of the backlash against the Indonesian occupation. Following the investigation, two generals were removed. According to Kohen,

One prominent expert on the Indonesian military, who said that Suharto saw the Santa Cruz events as a major blunder, noted that it was the first time that any Indonesian army officer of that rank “had ever been so publicly humiliated” during the Suharto era.²²

The massacre led to other official responses. The army conducted its own inquiry, which may have led to changes in the command structure. As well,

Amid the international outcry, ten members of the Indonesian security forces were tried for disciplinary offenses in connection with the Santa Cruz massacre. All received sentences of between eight and eighteen months, mainly served under house arrest, and were reportedly released well before serving their full sentences. In stark contrast, East Timorese accused of organizing the demonstration at Santa Cruz on November 12, 1991, and a subsequent demonstration in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta received sentences ranging from five years to life.²³

22. Kohen, *From the Place of the Dead*, 170.

23. *Ibid.*, 171.

Although the official inquiries led to more serious consequences for members of the Indonesian military than any previous atrocities, which usually were perpetrated with complete impunity, from the point of view of many outsiders, the official responses were window-dressing:

Some observers believed that the removal of the two generals and court martials of lower ranking officers had little concrete impact but were the very least the Suharto regime could do to appease an outpouring of international protest, and public disquiet in some quarters of Indonesia itself.²⁴

The shootings in Santa Cruz cemetery were only the beginning of the Dili massacre. Indonesian troops then went among the wounded, beating them. Some of the wounded were taken, days later, to a nearby river and executed. According to Mario Carrascalão, former governor of East Timor, between 20 and 50 East Timorese were killed on this occasion.²⁵ The continuing assaults, torture, and killing, plus the arrest, trial, and lengthy imprisonment of leaders of the protest, were powerful means of intimidation. Despite this, Max Stahl reported that

on the morning after the massacre there were smiles on the faces of many Timorese. This was because the foreigners had been there and filmed the event, and the foreigners, for once, were also beaten up and this, they believe, will be noticed. This, they believe, may lift a little the curse which is worse than oppression and death for Timorese, the

curse of their total and relentless isolation in their struggle.²⁶

The outrage from the Dili massacre laid the foundations for East Timorese independence. Indonesia was badly affected by the 1997 economic collapse in East Asia. In 1998, following a campaign that used familiar methods of nonviolent action, Suharto resigned and parliamentary democracy was introduced. A referendum was held in East Timor in 1999, with a vote of nearly 80% for independence. Indonesian troops, police, and militias organized and directed by the Indonesian military then went on a campaign of killing and destruction, leading to UN intervention and then independence for East Timor. But that is another story.²⁷

Conclusion

The Dili massacre was a crucial turning point — a transformative event — in East Timor's struggle for independence, most importantly by greatly increasing international support.²⁸ Ironically, this event appeared on the surface to be a major defeat for the East Timorese: a massacre in which hundreds died. But the very brutality and excessiveness of the massacre made it a prime candidate to backfire on the Indonesian occupiers.

The one additional essential ingredient was communication to outside audiences, provided by visiting Western journalists. The vital role of communication is highlighted by a

26. Max Stahl, "Massacre among the Graves," *The Independent (London)*, 17 November 1991, 19.

27. Don Greenlees and Robert Garran, *Deliverance: The Inside Story of East Timor's Fight for Freedom* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002); Nevins, *Not-so-Distant Horror*.

28. Analysis of the Dili massacre as a transformative event is given in David Hess and Brian Martin, "Backfire, Repression, and the Theory of Transformative Events," *Mobilization* 11 (June 2006): 249–267.

24. *Ibid.*, 172.

25. Lindsay Murdoch, "Dili Deaths 'Just the Start'," *The Age (Melbourne)*, 18 November 1998, 1.

comparison with previous massacres: the Indonesian military was successful in inhibiting outrage primarily through cover-up and intimidation. But with the Dili massacre, these were inadequate, so the Indonesian government eventually used all five methods to inhibit outrage. To summarize:

Cover-up. Indonesian officials attempted to prevent information about the massacre getting outside East Timor, for example cutting off all telephone services. But attempts at censorship were only partly successful. Western journalists gave their eyewitness reports to world media, and Max Stahl's videotape was smuggled out. Indonesian army commanders could have decided to increase the cover-up by killing the Western observers, but this could have backfired even more in the long run, because the presence of the observers in East Timor was well known.

Devaluation. Indonesian leaders denigrated the East Timorese and tried to discredit their leaders. But this had little influence outside Indonesia.

Reinterpretation. The military and government blamed the events on actions by protesters, or attributed them to an unfortunate loss of discipline. Officials gave low figures for the number injured and killed. These views had little credibility outside Indonesia.

Official channels. The government established an inquiry into the massacre, which largely exonerated the military. This, and a military inquiry, had low credibility outside Indonesia.

Intimidation. Troops arrested, beat, and killed independence activists in the wake of the massacre. This brutality did not discourage international supporters of East Timorese independence, but rather added to their outrage.

The international reaction to the Dili massacre shows the power of peaceful protest, in a repressive situation, for generating outside support. Fretilin's armed struggle against Indonesian troops from 1975 to the mid 1980s was courageous but disastrous in human terms. Furthermore, it did little to increase international support, because the independence

struggle was seen as a war, with violence on both sides. Fretilin's military weakness was less important, for wider perceptions, than the fact that both sides were using violence. This greatly reduced the likelihood that Indonesian violence, including atrocities against civilians, would backfire.

After Fretilin changed tactics, downplaying armed struggle and emphasizing peaceful protest in the cities, it was far more successful in building support within East Timor and, after Dili, internationally. The Dili massacre reveals how being the victim of attack can, in the right circumstances, be far more effective than fighting.

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