

How to eliminate the Indonesian 'threat'

Brian Martin

Many people believe that Australian military forces are necessary to defend against an invasion from Indonesia. But there's a much better way to eliminate the alleged Indonesian military threat: support people's opposition to the Indonesian government.

In regional terms, the Australian military is a powerful force. The Defence Department assesses that there are no "credible" threats to Australia's security in the next 15 years. Indonesia, for example, simply does not have the naval capacity to mount a major invasion, nor the firepower to back it up.

It is convenient, then, that many members of the public believe that Indonesia does pose a serious threat. One hundred and eighty million people, most of them packed onto one small island. Surely they are desperate to occupy those vast lands of the Australian outback!

The Defence Department does not encourage this sort of thinking, but others do. It is certainly convenient for those who argue for higher military outlays.

The irony is that the Australian government's policies increase the Indonesian military threat. Indonesia's government is dominated by the military. It stifles dissent and wages war on groups that continue to seek autonomy, most obviously in West Irian and East Timor.

The Australian government provides support for the Indonesian regime in many ways, of which three are most important. First is diplomatic recognition. Acceptance of the legitimacy of the Indonesian government and its policies provides immeasurable support for it internationally and internally. Second is failure to support opposition groups within Indonesia. Third is support for business links.

The Timor Gap Treaty brings together these three types of support. It legitimises the Indonesian government, denies the significance of the opposition in East Timor and was concluded to promote the interests of industry.

There are a number of other ways in which the Australian government supports the Indonesian regime, such as providing military aid, but the three ways mentioned are crucial. Other groups are implicated in this support too, including Australian businesses, workers and tourists.

The result is a neat reinforcement of current policies. Support is given to Indonesian military rulers. Indonesia is thought to pose a military threat to Australia. Therefore, strong military forces are needed to defend against the threat. (An added bonus is that Australian military power can, if necessary, be used by Indonesian rulers to justify their own militarisation and repression.)

There have been many critics of this process, such as supporters of East Timorese independence and critics of Australian military spending. Most of the energy has gone towards criticising Australian government policy. Unfortunately, this is the area where progress is least likely, because trying to change government policy means becoming one lobby group among many, without any way of acting directly.

A more promising avenue is to support non-violent, democratic opposition groups within



Indonesian troops move in on protesting students.

Indonesia. The long-term aim should be a bloodless collapse of the regime, such as occurred throughout Eastern Europe in 1989.

The weakest link in any dictatorship is the people themselves. Few Indonesians want to come to Australia to live. Few would want to be in the army if there were decent alternatives. The Indonesian people want most of all a chance to live in peace and security in their own land.

There are many actual and potential oppositions: religious groups, workers' groups, students, professionals, not to mention nationalist movements in East Timor and elsewhere. The challenge is to help these groups wage a struggle for non-violent overthrow of the Indonesian regime and its replacement by a democratic, participatory system.

Why a non-violent struggle? Non-violent methods — strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, sit-ins — are ones in which all people can participate, and provide the best opportunity for forging a truly popular movement. Repression against non-violent opponents undermines the legitimacy of the regime. Non-violent opposition has a much better chance of winning over members of the army, whereas guerilla struggle tends to unify the military. Given that the regime has the overwhelming military power, it makes most sense to undermine loyalty rather than fight violence with violence.

Of course, Australians are hardly in a position to criticise guerilla struggles against Indonesian repression. The Indonesian people must make their own decisions about methods of struggle. But if Australians decide to intervene in another society, they are on much safer ground if they support only non-violent methods of struggle — namely the methods of struggle which should be considered acceptable in any free society. Let it be only the governments and corporations that supply training and technology for killing, maiming and repressing dissent.

What can be done to support democratic opposition within Indonesia? Quite a lot.

- Symbolic support for opposition groups: articles, petitions, letters.
- Visits to groups in Indonesia; sponsoring of trips by Indonesians.
- Circulation of information on non-violent methods of struggle, by mail, leaflets, computer networks and radio.
- Promotion of "ethical tourism": encourage people to refuse to visit a dictatorship.
- Workers' action against trade with Indonesia, especially trade in weapons or other technology aiding the regime.
- Boycotts of Indonesian goods.
- Action against Australian companies that

do business with Indonesia, especially businesses that help to maintain the regime.

If the Australian government were involved in a campaign to promote non-violent transition to democracy in Indonesia, things would be much simpler. Radio broadcasts could be set up and statements made in international forums. It is even possible to imagine production of cheap short-wave radios and their distribution throughout Indonesia by "tourists" or even drops by airplanes. An act of war? Not exactly. It would be an act of non-violent offence.

Setting up communications is of crucial importance. There are two reasons why the November massacre in Dili generated such outrage internationally. First, those killed and injured were involved in non-violent protest. Use of violence by the protesters would have provided a convenient justification for the action by Indonesian troops, which is why those justifying the massacre alleged that there was violence from the protesters.

The second reason the massacre created headlines is that there were credible witnesses present, including television footage. The greater the communications links, the greater the opportunity for internal dissent without repression.

Even without government support, a campaign to support non-violent opposition in Indonesia could be quite effective. It would also have important spin-offs in Australia. It would provide many people with skills and experience which could be used in struggles against repression and inequity in Australia. It would build powerful links with many Indonesians who, consequently, would be willing to support democratic struggles in Australia. Finally, it would provide a convincing alternative to that perennial justification for Australian military strength: the alleged threat from Indonesia.

At some stage, the present Indonesian regime will be toppled, and current opposition groups will provide the country's leaders. These people are greatly alienated by present Australian government policies of appeasing repression. How much more sensible it is to build their trust by adopting the principled position of supporting democrats and opposing dictators. Since the Australian government refuses to do this, the Australian people must do it on their own. ■ [Brian Martin teaches in science and technology studies at the University of Wollongong and is author of *Uprooting War*.]

Military excluded from conscientious objection

By Monique Choy

A bill now before federal parliament, to amend the 1903 Conscription Act, has been presented as liberalising rules for conscientious objection. But according to at least two parliamentarians, there is a major flaw in the bill.

Independent MP Ted Mack and WA Greens Senator Christabel Chamarette point out that the bill, introduced on March 30, specifically excludes serving members of the armed forces from obtaining conscientious objector status.

Military personnel can thus be required to serve in a war to which they have moral objections. This situation arose during the Gulf War,

when several sailors — the best known being Terry Jones — sought to object to serving on the Australian frigates sent to the Gulf.

"I would have thought that individual rights extended to certain parts of the population should be extended to all", Chamarette's electorate officer, Theo Mackaay, told *Green Left*.

The amendments will also allow women, Aborigines and non-citizens resident in Australia for more than six months to be conscripted.

Mackaay pointed out that Australian troops are being sent to Cambodia as part of the United Nations peacekeeping operation. "If that situation were to degenerate, people who happen to be Cambodians who are members of the Australian armed forces ... would not be able to object on conscientious grounds." ■