

East Timor: the history and politics of the CNRT

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Recent months have seen considerable promotion of the East Timorese leaders by the international media and various governments, particularly in Europe and Australia. Led by Xanana Gusmao and Jose Ramos Horta, members of the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT) have been hailed as veteran fighters for independence.

Portugal, the former colonial ruler of the half-island, has officially feted Gusmao and Horta, as have other European countries. The European Union parliament has bestowed on Gusmao the 1999 Sakharov Prize for human rights, following Horta's 1996 Nobel Peace Prize. Little has been revealed, however, about the history and evolution of the CNRT.

Ever since August 30, when the overwhelming majority of East Timorese people effectively voted for independence in a UN referendum, Gusmao and Horta have been engaged in a continual series of meetings with the United Nations, the major powers, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund over the shape of the UN administration to be set up in East Timor.

At the same time, they have urged restraint on the part of Timor's youth and kept the CNRT's Falintil guerillas confined to cantonments, as they did while Indonesian troops and militias embarked upon the destruction of towns and villages, both before and after the UN ballot. The CNRT's aim is to integrate Falintil into the UN force as the embryo of a future security apparatus.

Despite espousing anti-colonial rhetoric for a brief period in the mid-1970s, the perspective of the CNRT leaders has always remained that of forming a separate state in which a native ruling class could exploit the territory's natural resources and labour power, functioning as a junior partner to the capitalist powers.

One common thread runs through the evolution of the parties and organisations that today comprise the CNRT. They were never based on anti-capitalist or egalitarian principles, nor were they oriented to building an independent political movement of the oppressed layers of urban and rural poor.

Neither of the two groups that later formed the CNRT—the Frente Revolucionara do Timor Leste Independente (Fretilin) and the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT)—conducted any struggle for independence against the long-standing Salazar-Caetano military-fascist dictatorship in Portugal.

By the early 1970s, after Portuguese domination for more than 400 years, East Timor was one of the most impoverished and primitive backwaters in the world. According to Portuguese statistics, average life expectancy in 1973 was 35, and the infant mortality rate was a staggering 50 to 75 percent. By comparison, the infant mortality rate among Australian Aborigines in the Northern Territory in 1975—itsself an international disgrace—was 5.3 percent. 1

In the 1950s and 1960s, only 6 percent of East Timorese children attended school. Adult illiteracy was estimated at 95 to 99 percent. More schools opened in the early 1970s but only 2,000 students could go on to secondary school and there was no tertiary education. For labourers, the

average wage amounted to about \$A1 per week. The colony's average annual income was \$A32 a head, compared to about \$80 across Indonesia—itsself one of the poorest nations.

Yet many of the early Timorese leaders were publicly associated with the Portuguese regime. Horta, one of the founders of Fretilin, was a journalist on the official newssheet, *Voz de Timor*. In one typical article, published on July 27, 1973, he defended Portuguese rule: "Portugal is accused of being a colonialist country. Poor colonialist country that which, instead of taking advantage of the goods from the colonies, sends hundreds of thousands of cargoes every year to the colonies for the construction of schools, roads, hospitals, etc., a not very profitable investment."

Mario Carrascalao, one of the UDT's sponsors, represented the only legal political party—the fascist Accao Nacional Popular. He and his family were the largest coffee plantation owners in the colony.

Both the UDT and Fretilin's forerunner, the Associacao Social Democratica Timor (ASDT), were only formed after the fall of Caetano in April 1974. They were based upon a small, relatively privileged middle class layer of students, Portuguese-appointed administrators and landowners.

There was little real difference in the orientation of the two organisations to the former colonial power. The UDT favoured a federation with Portugal. The ASDT had a more radical stance. Its program spoke of "the universal doctrines of socialism and democracy" and "the rejection of colonialism". But, in practice, it called for a gradual transition to independence, proposing three to eight years of cooperation with the new Armed Forces Movement regime in Lisbon.

Moreover, both groups told the impoverished Timorese masses that they had a common interest—a national unity—with the landowners, like Carrascalao, who had exploited their labour under Portuguese rule. By "socialism," the ASDT leaders envisaged a type of national-based reformism, along the lines of European- or Labor Party-style social democracy, not popular control over the means of production. Writing in the ASDT newspaper *Nacroma*, Horta defined social democracy as "freedom of ideas on the one hand and a mixed economy on the other".

Within months of its formation, the ASDT transformed into Fretilin, with its name and structure modelled on Frelimo, the nationalist movement in Mozambique, another Portuguese colony. While Horta favoured diplomatic manoeuvres with Indonesia, Portugal and other powers, some Fretilin leaders took a more stridently nationalist approach, advocating Timorese self-reliance and the exclusion of foreign capital. Others, including several junior Portuguese military officers, were regarded as "Marxists" but their policies did not go beyond calling for various reforms. They promoted literacy and health programs, and tried to form rural cooperatives.

The Fretilin leaders adopted the word "maubere"—a derogatory Portuguese term for poor, backward peasants—as a symbol of national identity. They sought to reconcile the aspirations of the downtrodden with

the interests of an aspiring native capitalist class.

Above all, both Fretilin and the UDT rejected any common struggle with the West Timorese and Indonesian working class and oppressed masses against the Suharto military dictatorship that had been installed throughout Indonesia by the bloody US-backed coup of 1965-66.

One of ASDT's first actions, in June 1974, was to send Horta to Jakarta to assure the Indonesian generals of the organisation's desire for mutually beneficial relations. Horta informed the Suharto regime that if East Timor were granted statehood it would align itself with Indonesia. Horta held talks with Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik, who, on the basis of their discussions, gave Horta a letter promising "good relations, friendship and cooperation" with an independent East Timor "for the good of both countries".

But by late 1974, the US, backed by Australia and other Western powers, was urging the Suharto military dictatorship to move into East Timor. They regarded the Indonesian military as the best guarantee of stability throughout the region in the face of looming defeat in Vietnam. US President Gerald Ford and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were in Jakarta the day before the Indonesian invasion was launched in December 1975. Australian Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam had earlier assured Suharto of Australia's non-intervention at summit meetings in Yogyakarta and Townsville in 1974-75.

In the final days before the Indonesian invasion, with the Portuguese authorities having abandoned the territory and UDT having effectively swung behind Indonesia, Fretilin's leaders declared independence. In doing so, they appealed for the support of the major powers on the basis that Fretilin had defeated the UDT's attempts to "usurp the legitimate authority of the Portuguese colonial administration in East Timor". Horta and others reiterated that Fretilin was not "communist" and favoured foreign investment.

This has remained the basic orientation of the East Timorese leaders ever since, including among those who escaped the Indonesian invasion and took to the mountains, where they resorted to guerilla tactics. Even as the US, Australia and Portugal turned a blind eye to the Indonesian military's massacres throughout the 1970s and 1980s and attempted to black out all news from the island, the Timorese leaders continued to seek the favour of these same powers.

While Horta travelled the world, pleading for the ear of one government after the other, the leadership of Falintil's decimated forces fell to Gusmao, as the only remaining member of Fretilin's central committee. Given command of Falintil in 1981, he first sought a settlement with the Indonesian regime and then a rapprochement with the UDT and the Catholic Church, with a basic orientation toward Portugal.

In March 1983, he struck a ceasefire agreement and initiated negotiations with the Indonesian authorities, including Carrascalao, who was by then the Indonesian governor of East Timor. The ceasefire broke down, however, whereupon Jakarta launched a new offensive. In 1986, Gusmao forged a "Policy of National Unity" with the UDT and the Church, giving rise to the National Council of Maubere Resistance or CNRM.

Meanwhile, Fretilin had established its office in Lisbon. Portugal, still recognised by the UN as the sovereign power in East Timor, had revived its colonial claims to the territory after multi-billion dollar reserves of oil and natural gas were discovered in the Timor Sea between Timor and Australia during the 1980s.

The CNRT only emerged once Suharto's grip on power began to disintegrate. It was founded in April 1998, just before Suharto's fall, at a congress in Peniche, near Lisbon. The CNRT's formation marked even closer ties between Fretilin and the UDT, with Gusmao proclaimed as the movement's supreme leader. The organisation's objective was to create a state through the intervention of the major powers, by convincing them that they would benefit from an "independent" East Timor.

One of the CNRT's first resolutions pledged that an East Timorese state would offer oil companies and other investors a "more secure and predictable environment, for the benefit of all stakeholders".

The Timorese leadership's response to the development of widespread anti-Suharto protests in Indonesia was not to turn to this growing movement of youth and workers but rather to intensify its diplomatic activities aimed at securing the backing of Portugal, Australia and the United Nations.

The creation of a new state comprising about 800,000 people on half an island, which will be little more than an economic base for its former colonial ruler Portugal and other powers, is both an absurdity and a tragedy. At the end of the 20th century, it is perhaps history's way of declaring its verdict on the political perspective of the bourgeois and petty bourgeois national movements.

The success of "national self-determination" and "the struggle for independence" has come to be measured by the inflows of international capital, the number of special export zones, the flourishing of sweatshops and factories with appalling and unsafe working conditions, and the mushrooming of shanty towns where workers are forced to exist in abject poverty.

This is the future that Gusmao and Horta have prepared for East Timor. Gusmao has spoken of developing the country as a Swiss-style offshore banking centre and establishing "special economic zones" for foreign investors. Horta has expressed a preference for the "Singapore model," which relies on police state repression to make the island attractive to global financiers.

Behind the evolution of the CNRT, like that of the PLO in the Middle East and the ANC in South Africa, lie profound economic and political processes. The ability of these organisations to posture in the post-war period as anti-colonial and even as "socialist" depended on two interlinked factors.

During the Cold War they were able to manoeuvre between the major powers led by the US and the Soviet bloc. Moreover, the Stalinist bureaucracies in Moscow and Beijing, which used the nationalist movements as pawns in their relations with the US, were quite willing to bestow revolutionary credentials on figures like Yasir Arafat and Nelson Mandela, as well as Fidel Castro in Cuba.

The collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe not only ended these political relations but, at the most fundamental level, reflected far reaching changes in world economy. What had been shut-in, autarkic economies were undermined by the growing global integration of production and investment over the previous two decades. Their demise was the sharpest expression of the breakdown of all forms of nationally regulated economy.

In the former colonial countries, the old policies of import substitution, controls on foreign investment and currency flows, and a degree of state ownership of industry, were soon replaced by efforts to set up export processing zones and entice international capital by providing cheap labour. This shift has fuelled the break up of nation states such as Yugoslavia and now Indonesia, as aspiring capitalists in local areas seek their own relations with the IMF, the financial markets and the major powers.

The pitiless logic of the orientation of the CNRT leaders was demonstrated in the weeks before and after the UN ballot in East Timor on August 30. As the Indonesian militias terrorised and torched entire towns and villages, Gusmao ordered his Falintil fighters to remain in their assigned holding areas and do nothing. During his recent visit to Australia, Gusmao admitted that he had screamed down a satellite phone link from Jakarta, where he was still under house arrest, to Falintil commanders, urging them not to attack the militias or return fire. "I was crying because we had not been able to avoid the very worst outcome," he said. "I was crying when I asked Falintil not to fight. People were yelling at me on the

phone: 'How can you ask us to stay calm, how can you stay quiet when we are being killed?'"

The question is: why did Gusmao issue such orders and why were they obeyed? Because to mobilise the population to repel the militia attacks would have cut directly across the arrangements that were being made with the UN, the IMF, Portugal, Australia and the major powers. Gusmao, Horta and their backers did not want a government established through a popular and widespread struggle against the Indonesian army and its lackeys. They would then have been obliged to confront a militant population determined to win its democratic rights and a decent standard of living.

The UN is now forming an unelected administration in which at least some CNRT leaders will participate. Others will become businessmen, presiding over the island's poverty, unemployment and economic backwardness. But there will undoubtedly be more critical layers of East Timorese, particularly among the youth, who will begin to examine the bitter experiences of the past quarter century, and seek an alternative road.

Note

1. See Bill Nicol, *Timor--The Stillborn Nation*, Visa, Melbourne, 1978.



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