

Indonesian and Timorese leaders join hands to sanctify 1999 atrocities

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In a particularly disgusting ceremony on the island of Bali on July 15, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was embraced by his East Timorese counterpart, José Ramos-Horta and Timorese prime minister Xanana Gusmão after the two governments took delivery of a report whitewashing the atrocities carried out by the Indonesian regime in 1999.

The 300-page “From Remembering Comes Hope” report compiled by a joint Indonesia-East Timor Truth and Friendship Commission (TCF) has not been released publicly. A copy leaked to some media outlets attributes “gross human rights violations” to pro-Indonesian militias, which Indonesian military, police and civilian authorities “consistently and systematically cooperated with and supported”. But, in keeping with its terms of reference, the report recommends no prosecutions and merely concludes that Indonesia bears general “state responsibility”.

According to previous reports, between April and October 1999 Indonesian forces killed between 1,400 and 1,500 civilians, caused the deaths of another 2,634 people through hunger or illness, drove tens of thousands of villagers from their homes and engaged in systematic maiming, torture, sexual assaults, looting and burning.

At the Bali get-together, Ramos-Horta sought to sanctify the carnage and terror. He referred to the Indonesian military’s eventual withdrawal, after the overwhelming defeat of the August 1999 plebiscite on Jakarta’s proposal for limited autonomy for East Timor, as “not [a defeat]: they left in an act of statesmanship that was extremely difficult for such a proud military.” He added: “Expecting a security force to behave with absolute neutrality and without emotions in providing security for the popular consultation was unrealistic given that these forces lost many of their men in East Timor.”

Ramos-Horta went further, saluting all those who died, both Timorese people and Indonesian soldiers, during the quarter century of Timorese resistance to Indonesian occupation, from 1975 to 1999. “They all share the same sacred soil; I bow to them all—East Timorese and

Indonesians—and pray for their souls.”

An earlier report by the East Timor Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR), released to the public in 2006, provided irrefutable evidence of both the scale of the crimes and the direct responsibility of the Indonesian military regime, which Yudhoyono served as a senior general. The CAVR report indicted the Indonesian government and security forces for the deaths of as many as 183,000 civilians—more than 90 percent of whom died from hunger or illness—between 1975 and 1999. The deaths amounted to almost a third of East Timor’s pre-invasion population.

The TCF report was commissioned in 2005 as part of a continuing effort by the two governments to suppress domestic outrage over the atrocities and silence calls for an international tribunal to try those responsible, including former Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) chief General Wiranto.

Ramos-Horta’s remarks express the political logic of the nationalist perspective of the East Timorese leadership—the deaths and suffering of tens of thousands of ordinary Timorese was a necessary sacrifice to be paid for establishing a mini-state on the half island, and creating mutually profitable relations with neighbouring regimes.

In effect, the president confirmed the calculations made by the East Timorese leaders in 1999, when they urged the Timorese people to participate in the autonomy ballot, despite the violence and “scorched earth” rampage being unleashed against them, in the expectation that the killings would ultimately create the conditions for the Western powers, led by neighbouring Australia, to intervene to back the formation of a separate state.

Reciprocating Ramos-Horta’s message of solidarity, Yudhoyono expressed the hope that the report would permit both sides to draw a line under the events. While giving a pro forma statement expressing “deep regret” at what had happened in 1999, Yudhoyono, who served in East Timor himself during the 1980s, said: “We cannot move forward and reach our dreams if we always focus our attention on the

past.”

A joint communiqué between the two heads of state said it was important to “resolve residual issues” in order to “promote peace and friendship, thereby laying a solid basis for building a stable, friendly and mutually beneficial neighbourly relationship”.

Reactions within the Australian political establishment to the TCF report point to another set of political calculations—those made in Canberra during 1999—as well as the complicity of successive Australian governments in the violence inflicted on the Timorese people over three decades.

In response to an early leaked copy of the report, former foreign minister Alexander Downer rushed into print in the *Melbourne Age* on July 12 to reveal that throughout 1999, the Howard government “was convinced that, at the very least, elements of the Indonesian military were providing support to militias in East Timor”. Previously, Downer has stuck to the claim that he and then prime minister John Howard thought that only “rogue elements” were involved.

Downer has now conceded that the Australian government decided to push for the carrying through of an autonomy referendum “always knowing that there was a high risk of significant violence”. Ramos-Horta, he noted, also strongly opposed any postponement of the ballot.

In other words, both the Timorese leadership and the Howard government had a common interest in using the expected carnage as a trigger for an Australian-led military intervention that would lay the basis for a nominally independent statelet. “We also prepared to send in a peacekeeping force after the referendum should there be an explosion of violence in response to a vote for independence,” Downer wrote.

Leaked intelligence documents have proven that Australian security forces had reliable reports from aid workers, telecommunications surveillance and other sources as early as November 1998 that the Indonesian generals were arming and backing the militias, who were already involved in violence against pro-independence supporters. Throughout most of 1999, however, Downer and Howard steadfastly defended the Indonesian military’s claims that it would ensure the safety of the Timorese people in the lead-up to the autonomy ballot of August 30.

After the ballot produced an overwhelming vote for secession, Howard’s government quickly reversed its position and campaigned for an Australian-led multinational force to occupy the territory. Cynically, Downer and Howard argued that the bloodbath in East Timor had reached such proportions that Australia had to immediately intervene.

Every Australian government since Whitlam’s 1972-75

Labor administration had backed the Indonesian annexation of East Timor, which was a Portuguese colony until shortly after the 1974 overthrow of the fascist Caetano regime in Lisbon. Canberra’s policy was grounded on US-led support for Suharto, whose bloody 1965-66 coup Washington had actively supported, and whose dictatorship was regarded as a bulwark against social and political discontent throughout South East Asia. Also central to Australia’s stance was the Suharto regime’s readiness to cede to Australia the lion’s share of the newly-discovered oil and gas fields beneath the Timor Sea.

However, Suharto’s downfall in 1998, combined with Portuguese moves to reassert its colonial claims, forced a shift. After 25 years of backing Suharto’s brutal repression in Timor, the Canberra establishment posed as a defender of the Timorese masses. Behind the “humanitarian” mask, it saw the creation of a nominally independent but weak and tiny state as the next best means of securing the commercial and strategic interests of Australian capitalism.

Far from protecting the Timorese people, the Australian-led Interfet military intervention in late September 1999 was designed to establish Australian hegemony over an already destroyed country. With East Timor still in ruins, Downer launched a bullying operation to coerce the Timorese leadership into accepting the 1989 Indonesian-Australian Timor Gap Treaty, which gave Australia control over the vast bulk of the multi-billion dollar oil and gas reserves under the seas between the two countries.

The response of the Rudd Labor government to the TCF report confirms the bipartisan character of Australian policy on East Timor. Foreign minister Stephen Smith welcomed it, saying: “Australia will continue to be guided by East Timor and Indonesia’s agreed approach to taking forward the processes of justice and reconciliation for human rights abuses in East Timor.” Like the previous Coalition government, Labor is intent on burying the truth about what actually happened in 1999.



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