

Ten years since East Timor's independence vote

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Yesterday marked the tenth anniversary of the referendum that saw nearly 80 percent of the East Timorese people vote to secede from Indonesia and become a separate nation-state.

A decade later, independence for the tiny island state has proven to be a fraud. The enclave is entirely dependent on and subservient to the imperialist powers; Dili is a nest of intrigue, with officials and corporate executives from Australia, the US, Portugal, China, and other countries manoeuvring for access to the Timor Sea's vast oil and gas reserves. At the same time, Timor's 1.1 million people remain among the most impoverished in the world, and subject to an increasingly repressive Western-backed government. Several key social indicators have actually worsened during the past 10 years.

The record stands as a tragic confirmation of the bankruptcy of nationalism and the associated myths of "self-determination" and "national independence" in the 21st century.

The 1999 referendum followed the collapse of the Indonesian Suharto junta amid mass protests in defence of democratic rights and living standards. However, the leaders of the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT) regarded the movement of Indonesian workers and students not as a powerful potential ally in the struggle against oppression, but rather as a vehicle for ingratiating themselves with major regional powers and corporate investors concerned about mounting instability and uncertainty. In a revealing episode, CNRT supreme leader Xanana Gusmao held secret meetings from his Jakarta prison cell in mid-1998 with executives from Australian mining company BHP, assuring them that an East Timorese administration would protect international

oil and gas investments.

After the 1999 referendum, Gusmao refused to permit the pro-independence FALINTIL guerrilla force to defend the Timorese population when the Indonesian military and its local militia proxies unleashed a wave of violence. Nothing, including an estimated 1,400 deaths of ordinary East Timorese, was to be allowed to interfere with efforts to secure the support of the major powers for the transition to so-called independence.

The Australian military with Washington's support subsequently led a UN-sponsored intervention force amid official claims of a "humanitarian" operation.

In reality, the safety and welfare of the Timorese population played no role whatsoever in Canberra's calculations. The Australian government's stance on East Timor was driven solely by its determination to advance its strategic position in the region and secure critical energy investments. After allowing the carnage to unfold, the government of Prime Minister John Howard, enjoying the complete backing of the Labor Party, launched its long-prepared military operation.

The various petty bourgeois political organisations in Australia played a critical and reactionary role—organising a series of "troops in" demonstrations to provide a "progressive" cover for the neo-colonial intervention.

Canberra's manoeuvres were entirely consistent with the filthy record of Australian imperialism in East Timor. Successive Labor and Liberal governments backed the Indonesian occupation—beginning with the Labor government of Gough Whitlam that, like the US administration of Gerald Ford, encouraged the 1975 invasion that resulted in an estimated 180,000 deaths.

The Howard government's tactical shift to end its recognition of Indonesian sovereignty after it calculated that secession was inevitable and fears were mounting over the activities of rival powers, especially of former colonial ruler, Portugal. Having deployed more than a thousand troops to the tiny statelet, Canberra quickly regained the upper hand. The Howard government then flouted international law and threatened to cut off all funds to the Timorese government in order to seize large swathes of the Timor Sea's energy reserves.

By 2006, the first Timorese post-independence administration of Fretilin's Mari Alkatiri was regarded as insufficiently compliant with Australian dictates and oriented too much towards Portugal and China. As a result, the Australian government launched a provocative regime change operation, dispatching another military intervention force.

That the tenth anniversary celebrations of the 1999 referendum were being held yesterday while around 800 Australian and New Zealand soldiers remain stationed in East Timor—together with more than 1,000 mostly Portuguese and Malaysian UN police—underscores the reality of the country's so-called independence.

The official celebrations were marked by the Timorese government's abject prostration before Australia and Indonesia. President Jose Ramos-Horta awarded Peter Cosgrove, former Australian general and head of the 1999 intervention force, the Collar of the Order of East Timor.

This followed a 45-minute delay caused by the late arrival of Indonesia's foreign minister. In Ramos-Horta's remarks to the assembled dignitaries, he stressed his intention to do whatever was required to develop closer ties with the Indonesian ruling elite—including whitewashing its brutal record as an occupying force. The president has angrily rejected calls for an international tribunal to be convened to investigate the Indonesian military's crimes from 1975 to 1999 and has also called for the UN's Serious Crimes Unit, responsible for prosecuting those responsible for the destruction unleashed after the independence referendum, to be shut down.

Post-independence Timorese governments have heeded World Bank and International Monetary Fund dictates and

locked away oil and gas royalty revenues in a US treasuries-based Petroleum Fund that is now worth \$US5 billion. Meanwhile, almost half the population lives below the official poverty line of less than 55 US cents a day, and the unemployment rate is estimated at about 50 percent—up from about one-third of the population in 1999. Basic health, education, and other social services remain widely unavailable—and, as a result, infant mortality is nearly 10 percent at 88 deaths per 1000 live births, average life expectancy just 60 years, and about 30 percent of the adult population is illiterate. The majority live in rural areas, dependent on subsistence farming and typically without running water and/or electricity.

The conditions of the East Timorese people stand as a damning indictment of the “liberation” promised to them by their nationalist leadership ten years ago.

The East Timor tragedy is among the sharpest expressions of the historic failure of bourgeois nationalism. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the formation of the modern European nation-state was a progressive development, bound up with the abolition of outmoded feudal barriers that were constraining the development of society's productive forces. In the current epoch of global capitalism, however, national bourgeois elites are incapable of delivering even the most basic requirements of the masses—including decent living standards and fundamental democratic rights. National “independence” means nothing but the creation of new enclaves, where tiny elites appeal for foreign investment and imperialist patronage by ruthlessly exploiting the local population.

The working class and rural poor in East Timor and other oppressed countries can only secure genuine liberation from exploitation and poverty through the development of a political movement that unites with the working class in Indonesia, throughout Asia and internationally in a common struggle against the profit system, on the basis of the fight for world socialism.

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