Development and its Discontents: The Indonesian Government, Indonesian Opposition, and the Occupation of East Timor

M. Scott Selders


IAGS 9th Biennial Conference,
Buenos Aires, July 2011
In 1974, decolonization began in Portugal’s colony of East Timor.\(^1\) In December 1975, this process was curtailed by neighboring Indonesia’s invasion, after which President Suharto’s New Order regime imposed a brutal occupation lasting until 1999. Between 1974 and 1999, it is estimated that over 100,000, and possibly as many as 183,000, East Timorese perished.\(^2\) The Indonesian government justified the invasion by reminding its Western allies of the Suharto regime’s staunch anti-Communism and by arguing that East Timor’s small size, poverty, and underdevelopment meant it was not a viable independent country.\(^3\) Consequently, after 1975, one of Indonesia’s main justifications for the occupation was that it was balancing the neglect of the Portuguese colonial administration by modernizing East Timor and the Timorese. This paper examines a sample of this development rhetoric from the 1980s. It also shows that such rhetoric was not universally accepted, even within Indonesia, as evidenced by two Indonesian sources from the early 1990s that directly question and contradict the Indonesian government’s civilizing claims. The Indonesian provenance of these


sources is important because it expands the story of the Timorese resistance, which is too often presented solely as one of plucky Timorese and Western activist opposition.

The Indonesian government and its ministries expended enormous effort justifying the occupation by extolling Indonesian development efforts in East Timor. Four of these publications, *East Timor after Integration*, issued by the Department of Foreign Affairs, and *The Province of East Timor: Development in Progress*, a joint publication by the departments of Foreign Affairs and Information, provided insightful perspectives on Jakarta's public relations efforts in the 1980s, efforts that were premised mostly on the argument that Indonesia had embraced the awesome challenge of developing its newest province, which was more than the Portuguese had ever bothered to do.

Both publications presented extensive descriptions of Jakarta's development efforts in all aspects of East Timor. The Department of Foreign Affairs claimed that from 1976 to 1984, the central government had poured over Rp.200 billion into East Timor, far more than was provided to any other province. These funds went towards tangible development programs, leading to improved farming, industry, education,

---

4 Such justifications often took the form of planted pro-occupation articles in international publications, written by Indonesian government officials who were not identified as such; Estêvão Cabral, "The Indonesian Propaganda War against East Timor," in *The East Timor Question: The Struggle for Independence from Indonesia*, eds. Paul Hainsworth and Stephen McCloskey (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2000), 72.

5 *The Province of East Timor* also claimed that Indonesia had a historic claim to East Timor since the province had supposedly been part of Indonesia’s “territorial unity” under the Majapahit Empire in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. Thus, the Indonesian incorporation of East Timor was more of a family reunion than a conquest; Republic of Indonesia, *The Province of East Timor: Development in Progress* (Jakarta: Department of Foreign Affairs and Department of Information, n.d), 7. For a detailed examination of the New Order’s political use of Majapahit history in policy, see Leo Suryadinata, “Determinants of Indonesia’s Foreign Policy: In Search of an Explanation” (Singapore: Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore, 1993), 16-18, 33-34.


7 Republic of Indonesia, *East Timor after Integration*, 92.
health care, and media access, as well as less quantifiable items such as spiritual
development. Sometimes, the publications’ paeansto Indonesia’s development efforts
reached almost absurd levels, as when the Foreign Affairs and Information ministries
bragged about the 342 taxis that Indonesia had sent to Dili.\(^8\) The implication was that
East Timor was so lamentably backwards prior to its incorporation into Indonesia that its
capital lacked the rudiments of public transportation. Such arguments ignored the fact
that visitors to Dili, including Indonesian journalist Hendro Subroto, had easily been able
to hail a cab prior to 1975.\(^9\) These publications revealed the Indonesian government’s
strategy: to deploy masses of data to prove East Timorese lives were infinitely better
under Indonesian rule than they had been before and to reassure readers that the
regime was committed to continuing its developmental policies. Above all, the history of
the New Order’s aggression towards East Timor was ignored. The Indonesian
government was portrayed as selflessly altruistic because the massive annual
disbursements negatively impacted the national budget as a whole.\(^10\) Thus, criticism of
the occupation was misinformed and counterproductive.

This paternal image of Indonesia selflessly furthering the development of East
Timor met with great opposition, not just from Western and East Timorese activists, but
even from some Indonesian critics of the New Order. Two academic studies from the
early 1990s actively contested the image of benevolent development presented in
government publications. These studies detailed the occupation’s harmful effects on

---

\(^8\) Republic of Indonesia, *The Province of East Timor*, 42.
East Timor and the Timorese and debunked the Indonesian government’s figures and rhetoric.

The first study, published in 1991, was a damning description of the occupation’s effect on the East Timorese. Led by economist Professor Mubyarto, a team from Java’s Gadjah Mada University was commissioned by East Timor’s provincial government and the Bank of Indonesia to review the impact of Indonesia’s development efforts in East Timor. While Mubyarto et al.’s *East Timor: The Impact of Integration* concluded that East Timor’s incorporation into Indonesia undoubtedly resulted in more rapid economic development than occurred during the Portuguese colonial period, the authors nevertheless stated that the East Timorese were not acclimated to their new status as Indonesians. Indeed, the report argued, the bloodiness of East Timor’s integration into Indonesia created lasting scars. The arrogance with which Indonesian officials often treated the Timorese, stereotyped as backward and lazy, exacerbated popular resentment as the East Timorese responded to this contempt with a marked distrust of Indonesians and their policies. This mutual stereotyping, coupled with what Mubyarto et al. considered to be an “excessive” Indonesian military presence, fostered secessionist tendencies and thus perpetuated the problems that Indonesia was trying to overcome. Indeed, much of Mubyarto et al.’s report consists of detailed descriptions of East Timorese society, an anthropological examination designed to acquaint Indonesian officials with their East Timorese subjects and thus hopefully dispel negative feelings characterizing Indonesian-Timorese interactions. More specifically, *East Timor:*

---


12 Ibid., 4.

13 Ibid., 60-62, quotation on 61.
The Impact of Integration recommended that only by involving the Timorese more intimately in their own province’s development would the Indonesian government have any hope of winning support for integration.14

East Timor: The Impact of Integration was also noteworthy for its description of the practical effects of Indonesia’s developmental policies. While the ministries’ publications presented a uniformly positive view of the government’s economic policies, Mubyarto’s team discovered that many development projects actually proved harmful. For example, while the Indonesian government was correct when it asserted that it had constructed many low-cost houses in East Timor, Mubyarto et al. found that the program was actually ineffective because the houses were similar to Javanese homes, and thus unsuited to East Timor’s climate.15 Likewise, the New Order bragged about how it devoted a great deal of effort and money to improving East Timor’s agriculture, only to have Mubyarto’s team point out that East Timor’s agricultural output had yet to recover from the conquest and that most Timorese farmers were unable to afford modern tools.16 While Mubyarto et al. did not attribute these failings to deliberate avarice or cruelty, their conclusions nevertheless painted a grim portrait of Indonesia’s development efforts in East Timor. While Mubyarto and his colleagues stopped short of calling for Indonesia’s withdrawal, considering East Timor’s integration ultimately to be beneficial to the Timorese, their report nonetheless offered a major correction to the Indonesian government’s rosy view of political and economic circumstances in East Timor.

14 Ibid., 65-68.
15 Ibid., 10.
16 Ibid., 22.
Indonesian sociologist George Aditjondro’s *In the Shadow of Mount Ramelau: The Impact of the Occupation of East Timor* presented a blistering attack on both Indonesian occupation policies and the New Order government itself. Aditjondro, who fled to Australia in the mid-1990s to avoid arrest by the regime, questioned both the Indonesian government’s economic occupation policies and Jakarta’s justification for its invasion. Similar to Mubyarto *et al.*, Aditjondro concluded that few of the billions of rupiah pumped into developmental projects in East Timor ever reached the Timorese directly. Instead, he argued, development funds were often absorbed by Indonesian companies associated with the military. These companies were established immediately following the invasion and given lucrative monopolies over high-value exports such as sandalwood, marble, and coffee. Military involvement in business was endemic to and encouraged by the New Order, and the military’s economic dominance in East Timor had been commented on by Western authors. However, Aditjondro’s critique was especially bold since he argued that the military’s exploitation of East Timor’s resources made the Timorese people themselves poorer. For along with monopolies came price controls: the military’s company purchased a product at fixed below-market prices in East Timor, then sold it on the open market at an unregulated price, resulting in hefty profits. Thus, Aditjondro stated, coffee was sold for

---

19 Roland Challis, a BBC Southeast Asia correspondent, disparagingly characterized occupied East Timor as a “colonial fiefdom…rather like a huge plantation” for Indonesia’s special forces; Roland Challis, *Shadow of a Revolution: Indonesia and the Generals* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2001), 209. John G. Taylor quoted an unnamed Indonesian commander as saying that P. T. Denok, the coffee monopoly, was “the only company that landed with the marines [in 1975]. They came together”; Taylor, 125.
Rp.2,500 per kilogram more in West Timor than its per-kilogram cost in East Timor.\textsuperscript{20} Occupied Timor’s economy was therefore geared more towards providing profit for the occupying military forces than towards benefiting the people.

Aditjondro also directly challenged the New Order’s assertion that East Timor was too small to be a viable independent country, a claim used to justify the Suharto regime’s 1975 invasion. Aditjondro compared East Timor’s development to other former Portuguese colonies and found that, in almost all cases, these other countries had higher literacy rates, more doctors, and higher per capita income than East Timor. Angola and Mozambique were major exceptions; however, the poverty of these two countries was at least partly explicable given their ongoing civil wars. Directly repudiating New Order rhetoric, Aditjondro found that even Lusophone countries smaller than East Timor, such as Cabo Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe scored higher marks for development, giving the lie to the claim that independent micro-states were destined for destitution.\textsuperscript{21} Aditjondro provocatively concluded that East Timor was “like a gagged and bound victim of rape…deemed to have enjoyed its own violation” and that the foundations and practices of the occupation were severely detrimental to both East Timor and Indonesia.\textsuperscript{22}

Despite these critics, the occupation was not a predominant issue for the Indonesian domestic opposition. Indeed, noted opposition figures could be heavily critical of the Timorese. Although he would support the referendum that resulted in East Timor’s independence in 1999, Muslim leader Amien Rais demanded an end to the “good-hearted…spoiling [of] our youngest province” and stated that those with “evil

\textsuperscript{20} Aditjondro, 45.  
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 77-78.  
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 83.
intentions towards the republic…must be wiped out” following anti-Muslim violence in East Timor in 1995. Future Indonesian president Megawati Sukarnoputri opposed the 1999 referendum entirely, arguing the peril of any alteration of Indonesia’s borders during times of political tension and transition. Indeed, many pro-democracy Indonesians feared that East Timorese independence would begin the disintegration of Indonesia. However, there were Indonesians who were incensed at the regime’s actions in East Timor, and their voices have been generally neglected in a literature that focuses on Timorese clandestine resistance and Western activism. A major exception was independent East Timor’s truth commission, the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (CAVR), which wrote of the “rare courage” of those Indonesians who risked being labeled traitors in order to support their Timorese compatriots’ battle against the Suharto regime. While the CAVR concluded that East Timor never galvanized Indonesian civil society as a whole, its acknowledgement that Indonesians did not have monolithic attitudes towards the occupation adds complexity to the history of the Timorese resistance.

---

25 CAVR, Self-Determination,” http://www.ictj.org/static/Timor.CAVR.English/07.1_
28 Ibid., 119.
Indonesia’s developmental rhetoric was not purely propaganda. Concerns about East Timor’s underdevelopment and its implications for the territory’s future as an independent country were constant throughout the late twentieth century and were last expressed most concretely just before the 1999 referendum. Indonesia poured money into East Timor, calculating that doing so would buy the population’s loyalty. In this, East Timor’s military rulers were largely mistaken, although one would never have known it from the rosy summaries issued by various ministries. The two booklets discussed in the first part of this paper were only a small representation of Indonesia’s efforts to justify its occupation of East Timor to an international audience. While foreign governments were willing to accept Indonesia’s version of events, it is crucial to note that, even within Indonesia itself, such developmental rhetoric was subject to criticism. Some members of the Indonesian opposition directly questioned their government’s version of events in East Timor. While Indonesian civil society would rarely be overriding concerned with the situation in Indonesia’s newest province, the fact that some Indonesians risked arrest for supporting the Timorese augments popular conceptions of the resistance. From another perspective, Indonesia’s developmental rhetoric in East Timor is a parable for New Order politics as a whole, as Jakarta often argued that the need for modernization meant that human rights should be subservient to economic development. Indeed, George Aditjondro’s criticism of the occupation was a starting point for his wider critique of military rule and corruption. The occupation

of East Timor and the wider debates surrounding Suharto’s rule, both within and outside Indonesia, offer invaluable panoramas of the New Order’s combination of modernization and murderousness throughout the archipelago.

Bibliography


Kaye, Lincoln. “East Timor depends on Jakarta’s largesse.” *Far Eastern Economic*


----. *The Province of East Timor: Development in Progress.* Jakarta: Department of Foreign Affairs and Department of Information, n.d.


