

East Timor: A Lesson in Why the Poorest Threaten the Powerful

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Milan Kundera's truism, "the struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting", described East Timor. The day before I set out to film clandestinely there in 1993, I went to Stanfords map shop in London's Covent Garden. "Timor?" said a hesitant sales assistant. We stood staring at shelves marked South East Asia. "Forgive me, where exactly is it?"

After a search he came up with an old aeronautical map with blank areas stamped, "Relief Data Incomplete." He had never been asked for East Timor, which is just north of Australia. Such was the silence that enveloped the Portuguese colony following its invasion and occupation by Indonesia in 1975. Yet, not even Pol Pot succeeded in killing, proportionally, as many Cambodians as the Indonesian dictator Suharto killed or starved in East Timor.

In my film, *Death of a Nation*, there is a sequence shot on board an Australian aircraft flying over the island of Timor. A party is in progress, and two men in suits are toasting each other in champagne. "This is an historically unique moment," babbles one of them, "that is truly uniquely historical." This is Gareth Evans, Australia's foreign minister. The other man is Ali Alatas, the principal mouthpiece of Suharto. It is 1989 and they are making a symbolic flight to celebrate the signing of a piratical treaty that allowed Australia and the international oil and gas companies to exploit the seabed off East Timor. Beneath them are valleys etched with black crosses where British and American-supplied fighter aircraft have blown people to bits. In 1993, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Australian Parliament reported that "at least 200,000", a third of the population, had perished under Suharto. Thanks largely to Evans, Australia was the only western country formally to recognise Suharto's genocidal conquest. The murderous Indonesian special forces known as Kopassus were trained in Australia. The prize, said Evans, was "zillions" of dollars.

Unlike Muammar al-Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein, Suharto died peacefully in 2008 surrounded by the best medical help his billions could buy. He was never at risk of prosecution by the "international community". Margaret Thatcher told him, "You are one of our very best and most valuable friends." The Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating regarded him as a father figure. A group of Australian newspaper editors, led by Rupert Murdoch's veteran retainer, Paul Kelly, flew to Jakarta to pay their tribute to the dictator; there is a picture of one of them bowing.

In 1991, Evans described the massacre of more than 200 people by Indonesian troops in the Santa Cruz cemetery in Dili, East Timor's capital, as an "aberration". When protesters

planted crosses outside the Indonesian embassy in Canberra, Evans ordered them torn up.

On 17 March, Evans was in Melbourne to address a seminar on the Middle East and the Arab Spring. Now immersed in the busy world of “think tanks”, he expounds on great power strategies, notably the fashionable “Responsibility to Protect”, which NATO uses to attack or threaten uppity or out-of-favour dictators on the false pretext of liberating their people. Libya is a recent example. Also attending the seminar was Stephen Zunes, a professor of politics at San Francisco University, who reminded the audience of Evans’s long and critical support for Suharto.

As the session ended, Evans, a man of limited fuse, stormed over to Zunes and yelled, “Who the fuck are you? Where the fuck are you from?” Zunes was told, Evans later confirmed, that such critical remarks deserved “a smack on the nose”. The episode was timely. Celebrating the tenth anniversary of an independence Evans once denied, East Timor is in the throes of electing a new president; the second round of voting is on 21 April, followed by parliamentary elections.

For many Timorese, their children malnourished and stunted, the democracy is notional. Years of bloody occupation, backed by Australia, Britain and the US, were followed by a relentless campaign of bullying by the Australian government to manoeuvre the tiny new nation out of its proper share of the seabed’s oil and gas revenue. Having refused to recognise the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice and the Law of the Sea, Australia unilaterally changed the maritime boundary.

In 2006, a deal was finally signed, largely on Australia’s terms. Soon afterwards, Prime Minister Mari Alkitiri, a nationalist who had stood up to Canberra and opposed foreign interference and indebtedness to the World Bank, was effectively deposed in what he called an “attempted coup” by “outsiders”. Australia has “peace-keeping” troops based in East Timor and had trained his opponents. According to a leaked Australian Defence Department document, Australia’s “first objective” in East Timor is for its military to “seek access” so that it can exercise “influence over East Timor’s decision-making”. Of the two current presidential candidates is Taur Matan Rauk, a general and Canberra’s man who helped see off the troublesome Alkitiri.

One independent little country astride lucrative natural resources and strategic sea lanes is of serious concern to the United States and its “deputy sheriff” in Canberra. (President George W. Bush actually promoted Australia to full sheriff). That largely explains why the Suharto regime required such devotion from its western sponsors. Washington’s enduring obsession in Asia is China, which today offers developing countries investment, skills and infrastructure in return for resources.

Visiting Australia last November, President Barack Obama issued another of his veiled threats to China and announced the establishment of a US Marines’ base in Darwin, just across the water from East Timor. He understands that small, impoverished countries can often present the greatest threat to predatory power, because if they cannot be intimidated and controlled, who can?

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