

East Timor – A fragile state

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Review essay by Dr Clinton Fernandes, UNSW@ADFA The UN in East Timor: Building Timor Leste, a Fragile State, by Dr Juan Federer, Charles Darwin University Press, 2004.

There has been a plethora of commentary about East Timor. Unfortunately, much of it has been inadequately informed and sensationalist. However, there is a book that deals with the underlying forces affecting the country. It is well informed and clearly written, and its author is uniquely placed to offer penetrating insights about his subject. It is, unfortunately, not very well known. That book is “The UN in East Timor: building Timor Leste, a fragile state” by Dr Juan Federer. This essay will review Dr Federer’s book and highlight some of its salient points.

Federer, who worked closely with the most prominent spokesman for East Timor, Jose Ramos-Horta, was a Latin American diplomat who lived in Jakarta. He visited East Timor in Portuguese times and had planned to live there in due course. The Indonesian invasion changed all that. He married an East Timorese woman and became a crucial figure behind the scenes of that country’s independence struggle for more than two decades. His fluency in Indonesian, Portuguese, Tetum, English, French and Spanish, combined with his ability for hard work and rational, unsentimental thinking has given him a superb command of his subject.

As the Director-General of International Relations for the National Council of Maubere Resistance (known by its Portuguese initials, CNRM), Federer dismisses the image of unity and organisational cohesion promoted to the world during the independence struggle. He writes that CNRM was never more than a concept whose real significance lay in its ability to satisfy the international community’s expectations of a cohesive liberation movement. It served as a legitimate contact point with the promoters of self-determination in the UN and other international bodies. Federer shows that despite its international acceptability, the wider public inside East Timor never consistently accepted CNRM. It was never properly set up, nor did it have periodic meetings, nor adopt policy decisions. But it was “a necessary and useful symbol, which allowed us to fit into expected international moulds as a representative national liberation movement.”

In order to unite all East Timorese in the diaspora, CNRM would be renamed CNRT (National Council of Timorese Resistance). It too was a poorly functioning outfit whose real value was the appearance it gave outsiders that a cohesive liberation movement was in existence. Federer notes that “much attention was given to devising pompous sounding titles and the creation of enough of them to co-opt all the vociferous East Timorese pro-independence activists. Little or nothing existed in terms of substantive constitutional documents, definitions of functions, work procedures, information and reporting mechanisms, or work programs and their implementation.”

The point of such groupings was to “keep alive the fiction that the East Timorese resistance was a well-constituted pro-independence movement, and as such that the struggle fitted into moulds the world could understand.” A crucial CNRM proposal was its peace plan, which argued for a three-phase process to end the conflict with Indonesia. In Phase One, which would last for one to two years, Indonesia-Portugal talks would be held under the auspices of the UN Secretary General, with East Timorese participation. Political prisoners would be released and Indonesian military personnel would be reduced. In Phase Two, there would be a period of autonomy lasting five years, with the possibility of extension for another five years by mutual agreement between Indonesia and the East Timorese population. This would be a transition stage in which East Timorese would govern themselves democratically through their own local institutions. Phase Two would prepare the East Timorese for any future decision on self-determination, ensuring that they would have the technical skills required to manage themselves, their society and their economy. In Phase Three, which would last for a year, preparations would be made for a referendum on self-determination with the population being allowed to choose between independence and integration with Indonesia. Unfortunately, the collapse of the Indonesian economy and the resignation of President Suharto led to a rapid decision by his successor, President Habibie, to give East Timor a “take it or leave it” offer of autonomy within Indonesia. Should they reject it, they would be granted independence. The CNRM peace plan, which had called for seven to twelve years of preparation prior to any such ballot, was shelved and East Timor broke free within nine months of Habibie’s offer. Its exit was accompanied by an Indonesian military campaign of state-sponsored terror and crimes of universal jurisdiction including systematic and mass murder, destruction, rape, enslavement, forced deportations and other inhumane acts.

Federer writes that “while CNRM and its successor CNRT had been useful symbols to portray the East Timorese opposition to Indonesian occupation as being akin to a conventional pro-independence movement”, they became dysfunctional “once the invader had been removed.” CNRT “conveyed an illusory and misleading appearance of a modern organisational maturity of the East Timorese pro-independence population.” After the departure of the Indonesian troops, Federer and Horta grew deeply concerned with the way the international community was fitting the East Timor situation into a conventional, post-colonial independence framework. As Federer points out, the situation there was actually quite unique: “there was little cohesive organisation and leadership available” there was a traumatised population whose values, especially its civic ones, had been severely damaged by a long, destructive occupation following a most rudimentary [Portuguese] colonial presence that had done virtually nothing to prepare the country to take its place as a viable member of the international system of sovereign states.” Horta, he writes, was “quickly made to realise by some veto-holding UN Security Council members that an international tutelary presence to prepare the country for successful independence” would not be available for the ten or more years required at a minimum but only two or three years at the most.

The command of military operations was formally transferred from the peacekeeping force that liberated East Timor to the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor

(UNTAET). It is important to understand that UNTAET did not assist the administration of East Timor but was itself the administering authority. Composed of personnel from more than 100 countries (with the language and cultural problems this implied), UNTAET was immediately confronted with several major problems. Although East Timor had been promised approximately US\$500 million in development aid, it had received only US\$22 million by March 2000. The funding shortage exacerbated the difficulties caused by the Indonesian authorities' widespread destruction of the territory's infrastructure, their evacuation of staff who had previously provided essential services, and their deportation (ethnic cleansing) of 250,000 East Timorese across the border into West Timor. Furthermore, the Indonesian occupation had caused the deaths of nearly 200,000 people. Unsurprisingly, there was a humanitarian crisis.

Federer reminds us that "despite the efforts of their leaders to portray it otherwise, and the often-heroic performance of the resisting population, the East Timor armed resistance did not defeat the occupier and was an almost depleted force in the end." Indonesia's departure was the result of a complex international diplomatic and political campaign "in which the military resistance activity was a mere token component." Therefore, "unlike in decolonization cases where the resistance movements generally became the legitimate and uncontested recipients of sovereignty, the East Timor resistance was not the obvious recipient of sovereignty." Led by the Transitional Administrator, Sergio Vieira de Mello, UNTAET's military component was disproportionately large, with nearly 9,000 troops and 200 military observers. Rather than splitting the mission into an initial peacekeeping and humanitarian operation to be followed by a more important and long-term state-building mission, UNTAET's emphasis was on peacekeeping and reconstruction, with less emphasis regarding the preparation for independent statehood. Yet there was almost no military threat facing the new state. Only a fraction of the total of 10,000 troops was ever needed. With military expenses being easily the highest cost component, a stronger emphasis on state-building would have saved money and prepared East Timor for the challenges of nationhood.

The UN did not focus on state-building in part because funding for peacekeeping missions comes from non-voluntary member-assessed contributions, thus opening such missions to member pressure for a speedy end. UNTAET was therefore put together very quickly. International staff were recruited "from the four corners of the earth to a remote country they had previously never heard of, whose history they did not know, to difficult living conditions, in a mission that was still disorganized and confusing, often on short-term contracts of three to six months." Some staff were recruited "for their Portuguese language skills on the assumption that East Timor was basically a Portuguese-speaking land." It wasn't. Many staff spent the first months of their mission trying to acquaint themselves with East Timor and the last few months trying to either renew their contracts or find another job in some other post-conflict society. Also, as Federer reveals, many foreign personnel "had a strong incentive not to speed up local participation and thus do themselves out of a job, even though readiness to be replaced should have been the attitude of members of a transitional administration." Federer shows that there was a "total lack of functioning social organisations and governance institutions" in East Timor. The only relatively organized institution that had survived was the Catholic Church. "All

the other social 'organisations' were basically labels for groupings lacking a proper structure." Federer cites the Portuguese expression *pra o ingles ver* (for the Englishman to see) in order to show how appearances were created in order to impress a critical, more powerful foreigner whose approval is sought.

UNTAET hired East Timorese civilians, but they were largely employed in low-level positions with little authority to make decisions. They received less than 1% of the total budget and were paid approximately 20-30 times less than the international staff, most of whom did not possess an adequate knowledge of East Timor's socio-economic conditions. This resulted in much hostility, much of which could have been avoided "if a sense of inclusion and ownership" had been "fostered from the beginning by involving the people to a greater extent in the design of the Mission".

More prominent, politically active East Timorese arriving from the diaspora, where they "had not achieved positions of much significance", saw in all this an opportunity to exploit the political situation. They "began to exhibit a vociferously hostile position towards UNTAET and, following their instincts as politicians, quickly sought to capitalize on the popular discontent developing toward the new authority in East Timor". They began to call for the termination of the mission and the transfer of its authority to themselves. They also presented themselves as "the local political counterparts that the UN was so keenly looking for to fit its existing operational models." UNTAET "readily and uncritically yielded to the local challengers that emerged, allowing them to influence the independence timetable." These individuals pushed for Portuguese to be adopted as the country's official language, thereby maximizing their own advantage. By "introducing a linguistic barrier, they could exclude the non-Portuguese speaking Indonesian-educated youth from access to the top." They also pushed for UNTAET to leave as soon as possible instead of calling for "greater resources and a longer-term international commitment to underwrite the essential, necessarily lengthy, institution and capacity building process." All this "was music to the ears of those in charge of finances in New York, who had been pressing for a quick end" to the mission. In order to exonerate the UN from blame, "an exit strategy was quickly defined" and responsibility for success after independence (or blame for failure, as it happened) was laid in the lap of the East Timorese people.

Federer's book may discomfit people who romanticize the East Timorese cause, but it is essential reading for those who wish to understand what happened as well as what can be done now.