

## If My Aunty Had Balls, She'd Be My Uncle: Dubious Counter-Factuals in East Timorese History

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Towards the end of 2010, as the Wikileaks media group and a number of newspapers around the world were publishing excerpts from leaked US diplomatic cables, a former Canadian diplomat posed a counter-factual argument. Had such cables been published during East Timor's war of independence from Indonesia, he argued, the consequences would have been negative. He wrote:

I used to be a diplomat and I used to write secret cables, like the ones being released by Wikileaks ...while posted in Jakarta, my job was to find out as much as I could about the human rights abuses being committed by the Indonesian government, and to help apply whatever pressure we could on Jakarta to make them stop... These cables gave my government the ammunition it needed to lean heavily on the Indonesian leadership at the UN and at summits like APEC... With that information we knew what the Indonesian military was doing and that the government in Jakarta was lying to the international community. And we could confront them, and we could pressure them to change. And ultimately, thanks to the perseverance of the Timorese and the efforts of thousands of diplomats and activists and politicians, this worked. The international arm-twisting led to a referendum, and Timor is now independent (Gilmore 2010).

The argument, therefore, is a sequential one: leaked cables would have revealed the sources of information that went into the cables, the flow of information back to Canada would have stopped, Canadian and other governments would not have engaged in 'international arm-twisting' against Indonesia, there would have been no referendum, and East Timor would not be independent today.

The counter-factual story being told here is that unauthorized disclosures of diplomatic cables would have prevented the Canadian government from confronting, pressuring and leaning heavily on the Indonesian government. The agent of change in this counter-factual story is the Canadian government and its diplomats, whose cables led to 'international arm-twisting.'<sup>2</sup> Missing from this account of Canada's foreign policy towards Indonesia and East Timor is the indispensable role of Canadian activists. In reality, as I show below, it was they who forced the Canadian government to act as it did. The diplomat's account is not only historically flawed, it airbrushes these activists out of history, and leaves intact what Rudolph Rocker called 'the ruinous delusion that salvation always comes from above' (Rocker 1938).

In Canada, there had been very little coordinated activism on behalf of East Timor until 1985. A number of individuals and small groups had spoken up very early on, and people had discussed the case of East Timor as part of a broader critique of North-South relations, but there had not been a coordinated campaign with a focus on East Timor. In the absence of domestic activism, the Canadian government provided diplomatic support to Indonesia from the very beginning: six months after the invasion, the Canadian government played host to Suharto and provided him with a \$200-million mixed aid package (Todd 1991). Two years later, Canada's ambassador to Jakarta visited East Timor on a tour which had been organised by the Indonesian military. The ambassador, Glen Shortliffe, claimed that the Timorese were better off as a result of the invasion, saying that 'anything undertaken by the Indonesians represents an improvement over conditions which existed hitherto' (Hossie 1992; Eglin 2003). In 1984, the Canadian government hosted an arms bazaar for its weapons suppliers in the Mandarin Hotel in Jakarta.

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<sup>2</sup> I set aside the question of whether edited versions of (leaked) cables might have concealed the sources of information.

All this began to change in 1985, when Elaine Briere, a Canadian photographer who had visited the territory for two weeks in 1974, read an article about East Timor by US philosopher-activist Noam Chomsky. Briere, who at the time did not realise the extent of Chomsky's involvement in political activism nor his prestige among other activists, contacted him about his article. By chance, Chomsky had planned to speak the very next week at a public meeting in Victoria, British Columbia. Briere attended the meeting and met him after his talk. She explained that she had taken photographs in East Timor eleven years before. Chomsky immediately connected Briere to all the solidarity networks for East Timor, who were startled to learn that there existed a professionally produced photographic record of life before the Indonesian invasion. These photographs showed a peaceful society which had 'no unemployed or unwanted people in the village', people 'lived a relatively comfortable lifestyle in close relation to their surroundings', and 'no one seemed rushed or in a hurry' (Briere 2004, 3). They gave the lie to the Indonesian government's claims that the East Timorese were unhappy before the invasion. Almost every East Timor activist group around the world used Elaine Briere's photographs.

At first, Briere began trying to enlist the support of Canadian NGOs involved in Southeast Asia, like CUSO,<sup>3</sup> Canada World Youth, and Crossroads Canada. It soon became apparent to her that these groups had no intention of antagonising the government of Indonesia, with whom they had lucrative contracts. For this reason, she worked with activists like Derek Evans from the Canada-Asia Working Group and Maureen Martin, a lawyer from Ottawa.<sup>4</sup> Martin was a professor of law at Carleton University in Ottawa, teaching international human rights and involved in indigenous rights at the United Nations. She learned of East Timor through a friend in the UN bureaucracy, Gudmundur Alfredsson. Martin began teaching about it, and several students came on board. One of these students was Sharon Scharfe, whose thesis became the book 'Complicity' (Scharfe 1996). They began to lobby Parliament and hold conferences about East Timor. This was how the East Timor Alert Network began in Canada in 1986 – with the work of Derek Evans, Elaine Briere and Maureen Martin. There were three other students at the time who were instrumental in the efforts in Ottawa: Gary Evans, Tim Colby and Erik Millet.

Martin began to work closely with Jose Ramos-Horta, attended the international seminars in London and Portugal, and later became a member of the International Platform of Jurists for East Timor, convened by Pedro Pinto Leite. As conditions worsened in East Timor and the general public continued to be ignorant on the subject, Martin decided that they needed a high-profile celebrity to put East Timor on the map. She started another NGO, Artists for East Timor, in 1992. She recruited Norwegian musician Morten Harket of the pop group A-Ha! and Michael Hutchence of the group INXS. Harket would later play an important role in the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Bishop Belo and Jose Ramos-Horta. The Canadian solidarity movement made it increasingly difficult for the Canadian government to continue its overt support for Indonesia. All these individuals go missing in a historically-flawed account that claims that it was the sanctity of its diplomatic cables which enabled the Canadian government to pressure Indonesia.

Counter-factuals do have a role, of course, and my point is not to rule out counter-factuals *in toto*. But some counter-factuals are so implausible given the historical circumstances that they serve no purpose other than to devalue the role of activists and other so-called 'ordinary people' in bringing about change. 'What if the New Order hadn't been so violent?' - well, how plausible is that? It came to power through massacres, and its leaders regarded psychological warfare operations as a legitimate way of governing. Why would they act differently in East Timor? Typically, counter-factuals often culminate in predictable conclusions that downplay the importance of activists' actions, or the fact that their tactics were designed to cope with a particular set of conditions. ('If the Asian Financial Crisis hadn't happened...', 'If Suharto hadn't been so corrupt...', then 'Indonesian democracy wouldn't have happened...' or 'East Timorese independence wouldn't have happened...') The implication of these counter-factuals is that the activists got lucky, and that any further political progress will depend on luck, not on anything that can be influenced by 'ordinary people'.

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<sup>3</sup> CUSO was originally an acronym for the Canadian University Service Overseas. At the time of Briere's activism it was known only as CUSO because most of its volunteers were tradespeople, not university students.

<sup>4</sup> She was known as Maureen Davies at the time.

Interestingly, it is rare to see the other kind of counter-factual being run – what about ‘our’ actions: what if Australian foreign policy hadn't supported the dictatorship? In October 1975, during Indonesia's terror and destabilisation campaign in the border areas of East Timor, five foreign journalists (two Australian, two British and one New Zealander) were at the town of Balibo, which was not militarily significant in itself but was on the road to the Indonesian objective of Maliana. If the foreign journalists had obtained film footage of Indonesia's military campaign and conveyed it to the outside world, the Indonesian operation, which relied on deniability, would have been blown. Indonesian special forces captured and killed the journalists on the morning of 16 October. The killing caused alarm in the Indonesian high command. Worried about the international diplomatic consequences, they called a halt to the military operation. Indonesia's concern about a negative international reaction combined with its own logistical problems and the onset of the wet season led to nearly five weeks of inactivity as it waited to see what the reaction would be. But there was no adverse reaction from Australia, Britain or New Zealand. This was the real ‘green light’; the lack of international condemnation at the killing of five foreign journalists meant that the Indonesian military could treat the East Timorese as they wished.

What if more Western academics who built their careers on the study of Indonesia had spoken up about the human catastrophe in East Timor? After all, several academics at the Australian National University ‘were known supporters of Indonesia's 24-year annexation of East Timor,’ as Geoffrey Gunn writes in a perceptive article:

Very few of the ANU Indonesia scholars broke ranks with the official Australian-Indonesian orthodoxy on legal recognition of East Timor as part of the Indonesian Republic. More than that, a number of ANU academic economists and political scientists – here dubbed the Jakarta Lobby – actually spoke out in defence of Jakarta's occupation of East Timor. ... the Lobby set research priorities more or less to accommodate the Jakarta government's own priorities. There was simply no space for an independent East Timor in this arrangement... With the new reality looming, namely the UN takeover of East Timor, the Lobby were hastily obliged to readjust their positions with respect to Indonesia and the former occupied territory. For the experts among them, the new reality offered both challenges and rewards (Gunn 2007).

Another counter-factual: what if academics who discussed death tolls had been more numerically literate? What if they'd used Leslie matrices? Instead, there were numerically illiterate objections to estimates of a death toll of 200,000 East Timorese. One objection was that the official population estimate of 1970 was unreliable because the Portuguese collected a poll tax during each census and their population counts were probably underestimates (Cribb 2001). What this objection misses, of course, is that ‘undercounting the 1975 population will make excess mortality counts more *conservative* if later censuses are better-enumerated’ (Staveteig 2007, 12). A different objection was that Indonesia had built schools and other forms of infrastructure – unlike the Portuguese. This objection misses the consequence that ‘the likely resulting decreases in “natural” mortality would actually have far more excess deaths to account for than others. This is because if Timorese mortality due to “normal” circumstances was in any way decreasing during the period... then projected population totals would have been much higher, along with the counts of missing persons’ (Staveteig 2007, 24).

A counter-factual of considerable relevance today: what if more Indonesia scholars start speaking up about the situation in West Papua? A grim observation is that today's Indonesia scholarship stays clear of West Papua, and Pacific Island scholarship stops at the border with Papua New Guinea, and so West Papua is the dash between Asia-Pacific studies.

To reiterate: the point is not to rule out all counter-factuals, but that the focus on Suharto, Habibie and others is often demonstrably implausible, and also denies the indispensable role of ‘ordinary people.’ An example of the latter are the East Timorese who came of age during the occupation. Known as the *juventude* (‘youth’), they generally comprise individuals born in the 1960s and 1970s. They made enormous contributions and sacrifices. The diplomat's account that began this chapter largely ignores them. He writes, ‘these cables gave my government the ammunition it needed to lean heavily on the Indonesian leadership at the UN and at summits like APEC.’ In what follows, I outline briefly the *juventude*'s

spectacular display of strategic non-violent action at the November 1994 APEC summit in Jakarta. They – not the Canadian government – regained the initiative from the Suharto regime, which had taken significant steps to renew its regional and international diplomatic links after the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre.

The Indonesian government made meticulous security preparations before the 1994 APEC Summit. But 29 East Timorese youths gate-crashed Suharto's party in a powerful display of non-violent action, shattering the regime's façade of control. They arrived in taxis outside the US Embassy, climbed over the 2.6 meter railings and jumped into the embassy compound before security guards positioned outside could stop them. Once inside, they unfurled banners and chanted 'Free East Timor.' Dozens of riot police from the Mobile Brigade arrived soon afterwards and surrounded the embassy. A stand-off began in full view of the international media, and the cause of East Timor was dramatically reasserted onto the international agenda.

This was no spontaneous action. It had been planned meticulously, and had its origins more than a year before when seven East Timorese students had entered the Jakarta embassies of Finland and Sweden with the intention of staying there as long as possible. Foreign activists had prepared these students on the procedural details of how to enter the embassies, how to conduct themselves once they had been allowed to enter, how to insist on their rights, and how to resist the pressures to which they would be subjected in order to get them to leave. The external solidarity movement had ensured that Finnish and Swedish media and human rights defenders were briefed about the developing situation. The problem had been that the students – despite their intentions and training – were too frightened by the task and too unfamiliar with the pressure of the situation.

They succumbed to a combination of threats (from the Indonesian police) and guarantees of safe passage (from the Indonesian Foreign ministry). Those in the Finnish embassy left after a day, while those in the Swedish embassy left after 10 days. Several months after their exit, and after considerable harassment by the Indonesian authorities, they were allowed to go to Portugal without much publicity. Embassy staff had been quite unsympathetic to them, and had pressured to leave quickly so as not to upset their countries' relations with the Suharto regime. The students' quick exit from the embassies was unhelpful to the independence cause, which required that they stay put for as long as possible in order to create an international incident and focus the world's attention on East Timor. However, the solidarity movement and the East Timorese students in Indonesia learnt valuable lessons from the experience, and were much more professional at the 1994 APEC summit.

The students' elaborate preparations and rehearsals contributed to their strong discipline. They rejected numerous offers of safe passage and asylum, staying inside the embassy for twelve consecutive days. After ensuring that the international media's focus during APEC was not on Suharto's success story but on East Timor, the students accepted an offer of asylum to Portugal, thus beginning the fourth phase of their operation. They received new clothes at the embassy and were taken in a Red Cross bus to the airport for their flight to Lisbon. After arriving at Lisbon airport on Friday 25 November, they resisted the temptation to speak triumphantly to the waiting media. Instead, they indicated they would say nothing until a press conference the following Monday, which would be led by Jose Ramos-Horta. Thus they maintained self-control and discipline from the start to the finish of their operation. They had achieved their aim, which was not to seek asylum but to stay in the embassy for as long as possible.

There would be several subsequent embassy occupations in Jakarta. In 1995, five East Timorese entered the British embassy, eight entered the Dutch embassy, 21 entered the Japanese embassy (to coincide with the start of the APEC summit in Osaka), nine entered the French embassy, and – on 7 December, the twentieth anniversary of the invasion, 112 Indonesian and East Timorese supporters entered the Russian and Dutch embassies. In 1996, two East Timorese entered the Australian embassy, five entered the New Zealand embassy, 12 entered the Polish embassy and four entered the French embassy. Embassies in Jakarta were practically converted into fortresses to prevent these actions. Counter-factuals about the consequences of diplomatic cables being published by the Wikileaks media group and a number of newspapers around the world ignore all this. These counter-factuals often consign activists' successes to 'luck' (which may never come), or 'objective conditions' (which may no longer be favourable), rather than

encouraging people to think strategically about Justice for East Timor, Peace in West Papua, and other events that they can influence – often decisively.

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