

“Populist Catholics”: Fretilin 1975

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This paper builds on Dr Helen Hill’s pioneering 1978 work on East Timorese nationalism by showing the influence of a populist, Catholic intellectual current on Fretilin’s leaders, many of whom had been educated in Catholic schools and were practising Catholics. It shows how the ‘Communist’ label that Indonesia gave Fretilin reflected a pre-Vatican II hostility towards post-Vatican II Catholicism. In doing so, the paper explains why a senior Australian policymaker described Fretilin as ‘the sort of party we would have welcomed, even encouraged, anywhere else than in Timor’. It suggests that a productive avenue of research would be a full-scale biographical analysis of the 46 deceased Fretilin Central Committee members.

From January to March 1975, a young Master of Arts student named Helen Hill travelled around East Timor carrying out research on the decolonisation process as it was occurring. She was there at a unique period; ominous events had occurred elsewhere with grave implications for Timor. Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and Indonesian President Suharto had met on 6 September 1974 in Wonosobo, Central Java, and Whitlam had expressed his preference for Timor to join Indonesia. Secret meetings had occurred in Lisbon between Indonesia and Portugal, and the Portuguese attitude had to some extent encouraged the Indonesians to incorporate Timor. An Indonesian destabilisation campaign designed to ensure East Timor’s annexation (Operation Komodo) had been in progress since October 1974. Hostile radio broadcasts were emanating from West Timor, and an Indonesian Special Forces team had deployed to Atambua in order to train APODETI fighters.

The month after Helen Hill left, Indonesian Major General Ali Murtopo invited FRETILIN and UDT representatives to Jakarta at the same time but met them separately, stoking the flames of mutual distrust.

The long occupation and war of independence, as well as the interests of powerful states and media commentators, has influenced the way FRETILIN’s founders have been portrayed. 46 members of FRETILIN’s Central Committee in 1975 did not survive the war of independence. Who were they? What exactly was FRETILIN about in 1975? Were they, as Australian politicians, Indonesian politicians and many academics have said, an embryonic communist grouping that alarmed Indonesia’s anti-communist military rulers, or were they something else? We now know, as a result of Australian intelligence records and diplomatic cables that have been declassified progressively in recent years, that the reality was quite different to the image.

Australian intelligence officers and policymakers in the 1970s had made their own assessment of FRETILIN. At the Joint Intelligence Organisation in Canberra (JIO, the forerunner to today’s Defence Intelligence Organisation, DIO), Captain John Florent was the main author of an account of the Indonesian annexation of East Timor. Captain Chris Jones would later add to it. Before Captain Florent, Ms. Jenny Herridge handled the East Timor desk in the Office of Current Intelligence from March 1974 until December 1975². At the Department of Foreign Affairs, Michael Curtin was the head of the Indonesia section.

Australian intelligence reported that:

¹ UNSW Canberra

² As an aside, the NSW Coronial Inquest into the Balibo killings erroneously lists Lieutenant-Colonel Geoff Cameron as the Timor desk officer. In fact, Cameron had been a Lieutenant-Colonel in JIO’s Directorate of Joint Service Intelligence (DJSI) until his compulsory retiring age. He then joined OCI as a civilian analyst on the Indochina desk. He began reporting on Timor after the invasion, when Jenny Herridge left JIO and went overseas. Peter Gibson was the Indonesian Army Desk Officer within DJSI from February 1974 to March 1977.

Fretilin's ideology, largely unformed, was a strange blend of ideas imported from Portugal and the former Portuguese colonies in Africa. Within the party there was an awareness of the urgent need to develop a Timorese political identity and format, superimposed on a Catholic base. Most of the 45-member Central Committee were practicing Catholics; of the 10 main Fretilin leaders, at least four attended mass daily. Xavier do Amaral, Fretilin's president and President of the Democratic Republic of East Timor, was educated at the Jesuit seminary at Dare near Dili and later at a seminary in Macau.

...

Fretilin was a socialist-oriented party, but few members of the Central Committee seemed familiar with Marxist philosophy. Amaral and Lobato persistently stressed the need to develop a political system best suited to the economic and social environment and to an independent East Timor. They seemed to have been deeply committed to the development of cooperatives in commerce and agriculture as a means of improving the living standards and economic power of the indigenous Timorese. Nevertheless, they insisted that free-enterprise arrangements for Chinese entrepreneurs and foreign business interests would continue indefinitely.³

In a secret report, Michael Curtin, Indonesia section at DFA, wrote that Fretilin was 'the sort of party we would have welcomed, even encouraged, anywhere else than in Timor.'⁴

On the one hand, therefore, we see claims that are reported even today that FRETILIN was an embryonic communist grouping that alarmed Indonesia's anti-communist military rulers. And on the other hand, the head of the Indonesia section at Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs writes in a secret report that Fretilin is 'the sort of party we would have welcomed, even encouraged, anywhere else than in Timor.' There is a sharp difference between image and reality.

Fretilin's leaders, almost all of whom were in their twenties, sometimes used florid rhetoric. But their program focused on decolonization, land reform, administrative reform, popular education and the development of small industries based on primary products like coffee. In fact, one of the things that threatened UDT was a Fretilin initiative called 'alfabetizacao' or basic literacy. Many in UDT, which was dominated by conservative, land-owning families, complained that the workers on their coffee plantations and farms were happy and contented, and didn't need to be stirred up by troublemakers with their literacy programs.

The Indonesian New Order's hostility to the prospect of an independent East Timor must be understood in the context of its broader hostility to popular political activity in villages. The New Order regime had adopted an anti-democratic political ideology known as Organicism, which holds that the state and society form an organic unity. There was no room in this ideology for political competition or a democratic opposition. Organicism had been influential among Indonesian legal scholars who drafted the constitution in 1945. They had been influenced by anti-Enlightenment Dutch orientalism, Japanese proto-fascism and elitist Javanese political thought (Bourchier 1996). Under Suharto, Organicism was revived in full measure. Accompanying it was a political concept known as the 'floating mass', whereby 'people in the villages' were not to 'spend their valuable time and energy in the political struggles of parties and groups' but rather to 'be occupied wholly with development efforts.' Accordingly, the people were a 'floating mass' who 'are not permanently tied to membership of any political party' (Murtopo 2003, 45-46).

Thus, opposition to village-level mobilization was a foundational principle of the New Order regime. FRETILIN's commitment to working in the villages and its pursuit of land reform and public education would have been a successful example of a democratic alternative in the middle of the Indonesian archipelago. This is not to say that Fretilin was a model of libertarian political thought; rather, its work in mobilizing the inhabitants of the villages of East Timor was intolerable because the Indonesian public would be able to see a successful alternative to the New Order in their geographic midst. Influential Australian policymakers understood the Indonesian regime's concern. Michael Curtin acknowledged this frankly when he wrote, 'If an independent and politically radicalized East Timor were to make a go of it,

³ NAA 13685: JIO 1978

⁴ NAA: A1838, 3038/10/2, ii.

with political and economic help not to Indonesia's liking, it would certainly become something for discontented Indonesians to look to.⁵

What exactly did Helen Hill say about all this at the time? There has, of course, been no history of FRETILIN in the resistance, and no history of FRETILIN's external delegation (the latter probably for a very good reason!)⁶. And Helen's original research had been done as if the thesis was to be on the process of decolonisation as a whole, not on FRETILIN.

But while Helen was in Timor, the leaders of FRETILIN and UDT, most of whom were under the age of thirty, had formed a coalition. Both parties had agreed that East Timor should become independent. Indeed, they had agreed that they would form a transitional government.

Helen writes in her Introduction to the 2002 edition that 'In 1975 there was a sense of excitement, of expectation, among students and youth, a sense of "we can do anything" now that they believed independence was coming.' And Helen's research, with its seven 'themes' of early Fretilin nationalism, is a vital resource for reassessing who the FRETILIN leaders were, what they believed in, what they represented and whether their plan in the 1970s has any relevance for East Timor today.

Helen begins by describing East Timor before April 1974. There is a clarity to her gaze – an unflinching, unsentimental use of primary and secondary sources. She doesn't portray the Portuguese era as a completely happy time; far from it. She quotes a foreign eyewitness who visited East Timor in 1947 and saw forced labour in action, with Timorese labourers being whipped by a Timorese overseer while a Portuguese army Sergeant watched. 'The wounds on the men seemed to indicate that it was a fairly regular occurrence.'

Her analysis of education policy in East Timor under Salazar and Caetano is invaluable, and prefigures her lifelong interest in education as more than simply a transfer of information from teacher to student. She outlines how, even as international pressures forced Portugal to demonstrate a commitment to education in its colonies, it used its education policy to assimilate the East Timorese. She quotes Portuguese educationalist Adriano Moreira: 'Any people, seeking to convert a people of different culture to its own conception of life, has no choice but to turn to a special class, the intermediate, which abandons its traditional culture and makes it its mission to spread the new ways.'⁷ Moreira wrote that education policy in Timor was designed 'to create a new class of people, the *assimilados*, who will carry out this task among the rest of the population, on behalf of the Portuguese.

She describes how the Catholic Missions, although 'heavily subsidised by both metropolitan and Provincial governments ... still carried out education for the Timorese at much less cost to the government than the State run schools.'

She shows how the *ensino rudimentar*⁸, later called *ensino de adaptacao*⁹ was inferior to the *ensino oficial* (education provided by the State for European children), but that that was the whole point. In a

⁵ NAA: A1838, 3038/10/1/2, ii.

⁶ See for example Dr Juan Federer (2005, 98), who has written of 'disappointments with the not very effective nor too honest leadership of the Fretilin External Delegation.' Federer writes, 'The "Fretilin External Delegation" functioned in Maputo and Lisbon. An Ambassador of the Democratic Republic of East Timor was recognized by Angola as well. Little documentary evidence exists of the work of this Delegation to foster the end of Indonesian occupation of East Timor. As mentioned earlier, they did, however, maintain contacts with leftist groups in various countries during the 1970s and 1980s that opposed the Indonesian occupation of their homeland. Stories of infighting, and misuse of funds donated for the work of the Delegation by well-meaning philanthropists do exist. The Delegation Head had no qualms in using such funds to buy an apartment that he simply turned into his personal property, nor did he later show any misgivings to turn a Portuguese wine exporting business, developed by Japanese supporters with the aim of generating funds for the resistance, into a personal business that made him wealthy. No effective disciplinary action was taken against him. For me, this reflected alarmingly on the prevalent attitudes of the group towards public property and the common good, and on their eventual conduct once they would be in power.'

⁷ Moreira was Professor at the Institute for the Study of Overseas Territories in Lisbon. He later became Overseas Minister.

⁸ Rudimentary education.

⁹ Functional education.

memorable turn of phrase, Helen writes, ‘The general aim of the *ensino de adaptacao* was to inculcate in the pupils a generalised feeling for being Portuguese while not giving them too many aspirations.’ One would do well to ponder whether this description fits the education system in poorer schools today – both in East Timor and in wealthy countries!

Helen writes that ‘the first year in *posto* and *suco* schools run by the missions was a preparatory year aimed at giving the children a grasp of the Portuguese language. Those who did not succeed in this year were severely handicapped in the rest of their education.’ Once again, this 35 year-old description has powerful relevance to East Timor today.

Noam Chomsky has written about how reforms in early education can be a major lever of social change, and can lead the way to a more just and free society. Education can be used to encourage a combination of citizenship, liberty and individual creativeness, which means that ‘education is not to be viewed as something like filling a vessel with water but, rather, assisting a flower to grow in its own way... in other words, providing the circumstances in which the normal creative patterns will flourish.’

This is worth keeping in mind when reading Helen’s description of the curriculum of the next four years in *posto* and *suco* schools. The curriculum, she writes, ‘consisted of reading, writing, arithmetic and the history of Portugal. Maps of Portugal hung on the walls of all classrooms, even in the remotest villages. Children were required to commit to memory the rivers, railways and cities of Portugal. Some of the later textbooks depicted life in the African colonies in addition to metropolitan Portugal but always stressing the superiority of the Portuguese way of life. Timorese culture and traditions were not mentioned in the classroom and neighbouring Asian countries rarely mentioned. There was a very high drop-out rate even at the primary school level.’

It’s easy to picture many Timorese children sitting in class, bored but having to stifle their boredom, wanting to be elsewhere but forced to endure their daily routine. This happens in many schools in the richer countries too, and it does have a purpose – it prepares you for life as a worker, where what counts is punctuality, ability to stifle boredom and obedience to illegitimate authority.

Helen describes how ‘Catholic religious orders, some from countries other than Portugal, ran some larger boarding schools which provided more significant education opportunities for the Timorese who attended them.’ She writes that the Jesuit-run school at Soibada, founded in 1904, ‘played an extremely crucial role in the education of the Timorese elite’ and that ‘the Jesuit-run *Seminario de Nossa Senhora de Fatima* at Dare, in the mountains behind Dili was an important centre’ too.

Like the rest of Helen’s thesis, these important observations should be read closely. We should remember that her thesis is a work of political analysis rather than a work of history. It’s now read as a historical piece but that’s only because of the passage of time, the oppressive 24-year occupation, the deaths of many of the people mentioned in her study and the shortage of subsequent scholarship in this area. But when it was written, it was a work of political and sociological analysis.

Fretilin’s leaders, almost all of whom were in their twenties, were heavily influenced by the intellectual, cultural and political climate of the 1960s. Their teachers in the Jesuit schools had also been influenced by the same atmosphere, and by the Catholic Church’s reforms in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). For more than two decades before the Council, the pope had been the ‘deeply authoritarian and antidemocratic’ Pius XII (1939-1958). He had remained publicly silent in the face of the genocide in World War II, had excommunicated all members of the Communist party everywhere in the world but ‘had not the slightest thought of excommunicating the Catholics Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels and Bormann’ (Kung 2001, 177-79). Under his successor, Pope John XXIII, the Council corrected him on almost all decisive points. John XXIII had been an outspoken advocate of international social justice in his 1961 encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*. He had called on the Church to be open to the modern world and to affirm human rights in his 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*. The Second Vatican Council instructed the faithful that Church resources should serve truth, peace and justice, with special attention to the poor and dispossessed. Many of the future nationalist leaders of East Timor encountered the exhilarating intellectual atmosphere of the Second Vatican Council during their studies in the Jesuit schools, where their teachers critiqued colonialism and introduced their students to new ideas (CAVR 2005, section 7.1, 68). Fretilin’s

young leaders absorbed all these lessons, to the annoyance of clerics who had spent the better part of their careers in the time of Pius XII.

Alongside Helen's seven 'themes' of early Fretilin nationalism is clear evidence of a populist Catholic intellectual current that exerted a major influence on Fretilin's early leaders. This is something I wish to explore in my paper. It has not received much scholarly attention, even though the great James Dunn pointed out that most FRETILIN leaders attended mass, some every day, and were upset that they were being refused communion (Dunn 1983). Dunn, a contemporaneous observer, realised that they were being called communist because they had absorbed the spirit of the Catholic Church's reforms in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

As Helen writes in her Introduction to the 2002 edition of her book, 'In 1974 the FRETILIN leaders, despite almost all being Catholics, found themselves at loggerheads with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, which they found to be a legitimiser of colonial rule under the Portuguese.' The Church enjoyed state subsidies, tax exemptions, a privileged position in education and large land grants. Fretilin's leaders, many of them fresh out of the seminary and the ferment of the 1960s, criticized the Church's complicity in Portuguese colonialism, its wealth and its large land holdings. The head of the Church in East Timor was Bishop Dom Jose Joaquim Ribeiro, a conservative figure who was keen to protect the Church's privileged status in East Timor.

It is no accident that the first description of FRETILIN as a communist outfit comes from the Catholic church in Portuguese Timor. Bishop Ribeiro retaliated by describing Fretilin as communists and forbidding Catholics to vote for them (Smythe 2004, 36). His counterpart across the border, Bishop Theodore van den Tillart of Atambua, joined him in describing Fretilin as communists. He informed Australia's Cardinal Knox that Fretilin was receiving help from international communism and had committed extensive human rights abuses. Cardinal Knox subsequently worked in the Vatican (Smythe 2004, 72). The Apostolic Pro-Nuncio in Jakarta, the late Vincenzo Farano, was another Church figure who helped depict Fretilin as communists. He would host dinners for other foreign ambassadors at his official residence in Jakarta. A foreign diplomat who attended these dinners recalled that 'Indonesian officials would pontificate at the table about the Chinese and the Cubans interfering in Timor and the danger it represented to the region. And of course all these other ambassadors were sitting at the table totally ignorant of the situation, lapping this up as information.'¹⁰ In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, the Vatican adopted a position that these bishops were pushing. Various missions would come to the Vatican in later years and talk among themselves about how the situation in East Timor ended up as bad as it did. They would say that these clergymen had been partly responsible.

The New Order's hostility to an independent East Timor found its expression in the workings of a group of Indonesian Catholics who were closely linked to the Suharto regime and were instrumental in the decision to invade East Timor. These Catholics came out of the milieu of elite Jesuit schools such as Canisius College (known in Indonesia as Kolese Kanisius) and university student groups such as the Association of the Catholic Students of the Republic of Indonesia (PMKRI).¹¹ Indeed, following the rise of Suharto, PMKRI – a Chinese Catholic group – renamed itself the Centre for Strategic and Independent Studies (CSIS), which played a crucial role in the invasion of East Timor. PMKRI's principal members renamed *themselves*, choosing non-Chinese names. Many influential Catholic and non-Catholic Indonesians are alumni of Canisius College: politicians Akbar Tandjung, Ginandjar Kartasasmita, Marzuki Darusman and Rachmat Witoelar, Jakarta governors Fauzi Bowo and Wiyogo Atmodarminto, Kostrad commander Erwin Sujono, businessmen R. Budi Hartono, Sehat Sutardja, Pantas Sutardja, Peter Gontha and Sofjan Wanandi, Head of CSIS Jusuf Wanandi, political analyst Wimar Witoelar, and many others.

As Liem Soei Liong, the human rights campaigner and alumnus of Canisius College has said,

¹⁰ J. Federer, Interview June 2009.

¹¹ Perhimpunan Mahasiswa Katolik Republik Indonesia.

In those days, the Muslim schools were not very good. Nowadays of course it's different, so you can send your kids to a very good Muslim school, even very good Muslim universities, that have high standards. In those days we were the elite.¹²

Canisius College was established in 1927 by a group of Jesuit priests. It was named after Saint Peter Canisius, a sixteenth century Jesuit who played an important role in defending Catholicism against Protestant reforms in Europe. He was a key figure in the restoration of the Catholic Church in Germany after the Reformation. Peter Canisius was beatified by Pope Pius IX, a pontiff who was an 'unteachable opponent of all liberal movements ... in politics, culture and theology' (Kung 2001, 160). It was Pius IX who had introduced the dogma of papal infallibility, and had rejected modern thought:

Clerical associations and Bible societies were condemned; human rights generally were condemned, as was freedom of conscience, religion, and the press, along with civil marriage. Pantheism, naturalism and rationalism, indifferentism and latitudinarianism, socialism and Communism were all condemned without any differentiation among them (Kung 2001, 162-63).

The liberal developments of the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council in 1964 would not affect Indonesian Catholics for decades. Many Indonesian Catholic priests at the time were heavily influenced by the anti-Enlightenment views of Pope Pius XII, pontiff from 1939 to 1958. This pope had concluded the first international treaty with Adolf Hitler, who had come to power a few months before, thus giving him recognition in foreign affairs. According to the distinguished theologian, Hans Kung, Pius XII was:

aware of the affinity between his own authoritarian – that is, anti-Protestant, anti-liberal, anti-socialist, anti-modern – understanding of the church and an authoritarian fascist and Nazi understanding of the state: here were unity, order, discipline, and the Fuhrer principle at the level of the natural state, just as they were there at the level of the supernatural church (Kung 2001, 178).

In a very real sense, the 'Communist' label that Indonesia gave to Fretilin reflected a pre-Vatican II hostility towards post-Vatican II Catholicism.

Helen Hill's pioneering research points the way ahead for younger historians and political scientists who would like to undertake further research on who the FRETILIN leaders were, what they believed in, what they represented and whether their plan in the 1970s has any relevance for East Timor today. I suggest that a productive avenue of research would be a full-scale biographical analysis of the 46 deceased Fretilin Central Committee members. There would be some surprising findings. Few today know, for example, that the late Antonio Carvarinho (Mau Lear) had been keenly interested in Althusser's analysis of culture, and had been thinking about how to apply it in the East Timorese context. There is so much more to be uncovered on the 46 deceased Fretilin Central Committee members: Nicolau dos Reis Lobato, Antonio Duarte Carvarino, Vicente Reis, Hamis Basarewan, Juvenal Inacio, Helio Pina, Cesar, Joao Bosco, Domingos Ribeiro, Sebastiao Sarmiento, Guido Soares, Inacio Fonseca, Fernando Tchai, Ceu Pereira, Dulce Cruz, Joaquim Saldanha, Artur do Nascimento, Oscar Monteiro, Hermenegildo Alves, Mario Bonifacio do Rego, Sebastiao Montalvao Lais, Leopoldo Joaquim, Afonso Redentor, Diego Moniz, Antonio Pinheiro, Eduardo dos Anjos, Maria Jose Boavida, Natalino Leitao, Jose Maria, Manecas Crus, Guilherme Lere, Antonio Carvalho, Floriano Chaves, Antonio Barbosa, Paulo Rodrigues, Antonio Padua, Jose Andrade Sarmiento, Venancio, Mariano Bonaparte, Bernardino Bonaparte Goinxet, Fernando Carmo, Guido Valladares, Borja da Costa, Oscar Sanches, Rosa Muki Bonaparte, Luis Carapina.

And there is also the risk of myth-making, poor research practices and outright falsehoods. To avoid this, it's worth paying attention to the great scholarship of Helen Hill – the clarity of her gaze and her unflinching, unsentimental use of primary and secondary sources. Nor can good research be done without those other remarkable qualities of Helen Hill – her lack of ego, her sense of cooperation with others, and her desire for a more just world.

¹² Liem Soei Liong, *Interview with Clinton Fernandes*, 18 June 2009, Thornton Heath, UK.

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