

The conflict in East Timor and democratization in Indonesia: The struggle of youths over the discourse on East Timor

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Introduction

The Suharto regime justified its 1975 invasion of East Timor by saying that integration, East Timor becoming Indonesian territory, was consistent with the aspiration of East Timorese.¹ The 24-year struggle produced two generations of actors that became actively involved in the conflict, they are known as the 1975 generation and post-1975 generation. While the 1975 generation were educated under Portuguese colonial rule, the post-1975 generation comprised those educated under Indonesian rule. Known as the ‘new generation’ (*geração Foun*) (Carey 2003), because of the new characteristics brought about with their educational background and identity as a result of the Indonesian occupation. Considering such background, the new generation adapted themselves to Indonesia, and by so doing, *Indonesianized* themselves, at least partially, and nevertheless, they still participated actively in the independence struggle. They carried out a series of joint actions with Indonesian student activists in Indonesia proper from the mid-1990s.² The series of demonstrations with Indonesian pro-democracy activists from 1991, including the occupation of the Dutch Embassy in Jakarta, proved to be the making of the strategy, ‘*Indonesianization* of the conflict of East Timor’ (*Indonesianizaun du Konfliktu*). It was RENETIL, the most prominent resistance group of the East Timorese youths,³ and its use of this strategy that changed the perception of the people of Indonesia towards the East Timorese.

There is a small body of scholarship that examines the relation between the new generation and Indonesia (see Arenas 1998; Carey 2003; Bexley & Tchailoro 2013). Although prior research gives rise to a visible framework in understanding the new generation, it falls short of revealing particularities of the post-1975 generation and little explanation is offered about the junction of two struggles, the independence struggle of the East Timorese and the democracy struggle of Indonesians. In that sense, Weldemichael (2012) offers more appropriate analysis of the activism of the new generation in relation to Indonesian pro-democracy movements. Yet, it focuses on the *Indonesianization* rather as a diplomatic strategy of the East Timorese and does not refer to the conceptual matter of youth activism per se.

Based on those prior studies, I will attempt to determine why *Indonesianization* of the conflict came about, using the biography of former activists, the most recent history of RENETIL,⁴ and with interviews that took place in Dili and Jakarta.

The ‘new generation’ and *Indonesianization*

‘New generation’ – How are they new?

As described in the introductory section, the new generation portrayed different characteristics from those that had come before. It should be noted that part of the complexity of the group’s identity might have derived from their harsh experiences during childhood from 1975 under Indonesian occupation in their formative years. Some time later, these disenfranchised youths mobilized, formed clandestine movements, becoming ‘...children in the forest during the invasion and full-scale war

¹ “In Indonesia’s official discourse on East Timor, it is claimed that the people of East Timor themselves wanted integration, and it is always in this context that the Balibo declaration is referred to” (Matsuno 1996, 179).

² All of the interviewees in my research at Dili and Jakarta referred to support from Indonesian activists and joint actions on and off campus.

³ RENETIL (Resistência Nacional dos Estudantes de Timor-Leste: East Timor Students’ National Resistance).

For details, see Quantiliano (1996).

⁴ Carlos da Silva L.F.R Saky. 2013. *RENETIL Iha Luta Libertasaun Timor-Lorosa’e*

period' (CAVR 2013, 258). Most RENETIL members whom I interviewed suffered violence at the hands of Indonesian military throughout their childhood. Referring to the struggle, Virgilo Silva Gureterres, a former secretary general of RENETIL, said that his family evacuated to the jungle with FRETILIN (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor).⁵ Carlito Caminha (Ze'sopol Caminha), a former member of RENETIL, lost his mother in the jungle when he was an infant.⁶ Moreover, Demetrio do Amaral de Carvalho, a former secretary general of RENETIL mentioned that he and his family were in the mountains of Liquiçá and joined guerrillas when Indonesia's military arrived at Dili.⁷

The suffering of the new generation continued throughout their resistance not only because of the savage violence meted out by the Indonesian military, but also psychologically in terms of their relationships with previous generations. More furtive than their predecessors, the new generation tended to resist Indonesian rule in non-violent ways, such as through clandestine movements which reinforced guerrilla fighters of the elder generation and with demonstrations on the street from the late 1980s.⁸ At least until the late 1980s, new generation activists were subordinate to their elders since most decision-making was conducted by the leader of 1975 generation: namely, Xanana Gusmao, who was tasked with supporting guerrilla fighters of the elder generation. Youth activism changed in the late the 1980s, especially after the Santa Cruz massacre, the shooting of at least 250 East Timorese pro-independence demonstrators in the Santa Cruz cemetery, in 1991. It was the first savage massacre by Indonesian military and was witnessed by international society, it also spurred a new urgency from activists. As Bexley and Tchailoro (2013) explained, the new generation was, in a sense, consumed by both the guerrilla leaders of the elder generation, as well as the Indonesian military. The youths of East Timor became sandwiched between being East Timorese and yet Indonesian, and given this, they were creatures of ambivalent circumstances and therefore unique. They are the new generation created in the third world colonialism; colonial rule by both Portugal and Indonesia.

Indonesian public education taking place in Indonesia proper created space where Indonesian democratic movements started to harmonize and shift from the elder generation. Most of the prominent activists of this new generation, including RENETIL members, had a liberal education at universities in Indonesia proper. As Arenas (1998) explained, the public education that was offered functioned as a crucial conditioning mechanism in the formation of nationalism for Timorese youths. Carey (2003) also revealed unfair treatment⁹ towards East Timorese students in school which contributed to harden political awareness. Mariano Sabino Lopes, deputy leader of RENETIL's chapter in Indonesia, was one such student who was inspired by Indonesian education.¹⁰

RENETIL as the actor of Indonesianizing the conflict

RENETIL, the most prominent resistance group of East Timorese youths that was founded in Bali in 1988, carried out the *Indonesianization* of the conflict with all the resources that were available in Indonesia. This resistance group mostly consisted of East Timorese students and youth that were staying in Indonesia proper. The *Indonesianization* of the East Timorese conflict is something that was new and unique. Referring to the process, a former secretary general of RENETIL said that *Indonesianization* was a strategy to make the conflict of East Timor that of Indonesia.¹¹ Substantiating this, Demetrio do Amaral de Carvalho, insists that *Indonesianization* was a strategy to 'expand the East Timorese conflict to Jakarta.' The idea was to make the people of Indonesia realize that the

⁵ Interview with Virgilo Silva Gureterres (10/11/2014)

⁶ Interview with Carlito Caminha (Ze'sopol Caminha) (18/11/2014)

⁷ Interview with and Demetrio do Amaral de Carvalho (5/1/2015)

⁸ As Gregorio da Cunha Saldanha, a former president of OJETIL and the organizer of the demonstration in Santa Cruz in 1991, said, "demonstration was the only way to do for the youths" (interview: 15/11/2014).

⁹ For instance, many Indonesian students had passed their exams for entry into senior high school, while the East Timorese had failed (Carey 2003, 42).

¹⁰ interview with Mariano Sabino Lopes: 29/12/2014

¹¹ Interview with Virgilo Silva Gureterres (10/11/2014), Lucas da Consta (12/12/2014), Mariano Sabino Lopes (23/12/2014), Domingos Saramento Alve (26/12/2014), Demetrio do Amaral de Carvalho (5/1/2015), and Fernando de Araujo (7/1/2015).

conflict in East Timor was one of their own issues. They could relate to Indonesia, and when channeled to activism, the new generation could connect with Indonesians and change their perceptions. Even though impacts were sometimes limited to radical leftist parties in Indonesia, space could be made for East Timorese and even Indonesian youths to undertake a series of joint actions from the 1990s.

Indonesianization of conflict in East Timor and the discourse on East Timorese

From Santa Cruz massacre to Indonesianization

The Santa Cruz massacre in Dili in 1991 was the turning point of *Indonesianization*. The idea of *Indonesianization* had been moderately successful in altering the discourse of the East Timorese in Indonesia and then in obtaining solid support from Indonesian leftist and human rights groups for East Timorese activists. Although RENETIL had already put weight on the strategy of *Indonesianization* in 1988, it became more active after the Santa Cruz massacre in 1991. The impact was felt by the most vocal and influential in Indonesian society, perhaps also the world, and it created new space to *indonesianize* the conflict. After the incident, in Indonesia the perspective in regards to East Timor dramatically shifted. There had been mass media broadcasts of the massacre both to the local and world audience. Writing about the massacre, Seno Gumira Ajidarma (1995), a former editor of *Jakarta Jakarta*, offered an account of the Dili incident, *Saksi Mata (Eyewitness)*:

I think the Dili Incident was a unique event. We couldn't just write: 'A number of soldiers accidentally shot dozens of demonstrators who were running around widely', or, 'bullets fired by soldiers flew through the air and took the life of a demonstrator who immediately collapsed in the gusts of hot wind that blew around the town of Dili' (Ajidarma 1995, 25).

And he continues:

The difference between the Dili incident and criminal incidents was that [the] Dili incident had a political dimension, so that the details of the affair explained a certain position (ibid, 26).

Writing on the same topic, *Tempo* talks about how this phenomenon opened the space for Indonesian activists to demonstrate against the Suharto regime and contribute to changing the perception towards East Timor.¹² Indonesian activist Helmi Fauzi writes about the impact of the massacre:

It opened the mind of Indonesian: there is a problem in East Timor. At least, there was a beginning; Indonesia began to question Indonesian suppression in East Timor. After Santa Cruz, there was an increasing pressure to Indonesia from the international community. It also created more space for student to organize demonstration, created more democratic space.¹³

Another Indonesian activist, Rachland Nashidik, describes the context of those days:

At that time, I think people still believed that the unification of East Timor was accompanied by flowers and joy and was not the product of invention and colonialism by Indonesia. So, it was hard for Indonesians to believe that what was happening in Santa Cruz massacre was really because of the charismatic Indonesian army.¹⁴

¹² See *Tempo* No. 39 and No. 40.

¹³ Interview with Helmi Fauzi (24/1/2015). Fauzi was a former member of INFIGHT and a board member of Solidamor.

¹⁴ Interview with Rachland Nashidik (27/01/2015). Nashidik was a former member of INFIGHT and one of the founders of PBHI.

In the days following the incident in Dili, television pictures of the massacre were shown worldwide and activists' activities took on a new urgency. East Timorese youths centered on RENETIL became more active with Indonesian dissidents after the incident. A recent biography of RENETIL explains that they started to practice the strategy of *Indonesianization*, particularly from 1993 because of the advantageous situation after the Santa Cruz massacre and the capture of La' Sama by the Indonesian military.¹⁵ They established relations with student activists and intellectuals in Indonesia. George Junus Aditjondro and Arief Budiman were intellectuals who strongly supported the East Timorese youth struggle and criticized the occupation of the Suharto regime (Sakyi 2013, 490). RENETIL was successful in establishing strong ties with such scholars.¹⁶ In my interviews, many former RENETIL members and Indonesian student activists explained how discussion groups in universities became the channel for East Timorese student activists to contact with Indonesian student activists from the 1980s. Indonesian students often formed campus groups, discussing critical issues such as democracy, anti-militarism, and self-determination because it was quite difficult to organize demonstrations in the 1980s.¹⁷ More remarkably, RENETIL also used an organization established by Indonesian government for it to mobilize. IMPETTU (Ikatan Mahasiswa-Pelajar Timor-Timur) was the organization originally set by the government to monitor and control East Timorese students. But turning this on its head, students used this as a network for unity and to organize all the East Timorese youths in Indonesia proper.¹⁸ IMPETTU became an effective resource to promote their movement in Indonesia. Again, it is an example of *Indonesianization* being carried out through such a process.

New trend of opposition in Indonesia proper

It is significant to mention that there were other trends in Indonesian society which indirectly assisted the *Indonesianization* of the East Timor conflict. Student activism, more generally, became activate again in the late 1980s (Aspinall 1995, 31). Many Indonesian student activists championed the common themes of Democracy and Human Rights (Uhlen 1997, 105). Another trend was a new generation of pro-democracy and human rights NGOs such as INFIGHT, PIJAR, Geni, Laper and others.¹⁹ Those changes were advantageous for the East Timor youths in implementing *Indonesianization* because it could be easily linked to the crucial themes and suffering in their struggle; the referendum for liberation²⁰ and human right abuse.²¹ More importantly, there was growing support politically in Indonesia as the result of the implementation of *Indonesianization* by East Timorese youths. The PRD (Partai Rakyat Demokratik) a major political party against the Suharto regime established SPRIM (Solidaritas untuk Penyelesaian Damai Timor-Leste), it was an agency that supported the East Timorese struggle for freedom.²² As Nald Rei a former student activist describes, SPRIM offered a program of action, implemented together with the East Timorese, about the occupation of the Dutch embassy²³ in Jakarta, and importantly, active action of this kind was something new at that time (Rei 2007, 150). The idea of *Indonesianization* of the conflict in East Timor became predominant and ultimately successful in engaging other Indonesian dissidents into their orbit in the 1990s. By using all resources in Indonesia, RENETIL and East Timorese youth activists intensified their struggle.

¹⁵ Saky, Carlos (2013) *RENETIL Iha Luta Libertasaun Timor-Lorosa'e: Antes Sem Titulo, Do Que Sem Patria!*, p. 489

¹⁶ For instance, Domingos Saramento Alve mentioned that RENETIL members watched the film of Santa Cruz massacre which he had brought from Japan (interview: 26/12/2014).

¹⁷ Interview with Helmi Fauzi, a former member of INFIGHT and board member of Solidamor (24/1/2015).

¹⁸ Interview with Mariano Sabino Lopes (29/12/2014).

¹⁹ For the detail see Uhlin (1997, 11).

²⁰ Later East Timorese activists and Indonesian pro-democracy activists upheld a theme; Democracy for Indonesian, Referendum for East Timor; see Rei (2007) and Wilson (2010) for the detail.

²¹ For instance, Santa Cruz massacre opened more space even for Indonesian human rights NGOs. See Quentiliano (1996, 103).

²² Wison, a coordinator of SPRIM (1994-1997), wrote that PRD submitted a proposal to Xanana Gusmao to create the agency in 1994 after the action by East Timorese, fence-scaling action of the U.S embassy in Jakarta (Wilson 2010,155).

²³ This action was the first joint action by East Timorese and Indonesian youths in 1995.

Conclusion: Breaking the discourse on East Timorese

The joint action of East Timorese and Indonesian youths is surprising because right from the offset, many East Timorese were suspicious of Indonesians, even those who supported the East Timorese struggle, and vice versa. As Carey (2003) explains, most East Timorese youths had had negative feelings towards Indonesian students during their school life. Virgilo Silva Guterres told of the negative feeling towards Indonesians, especially the Javanese, seeing these as the enemy before the Santa Cruz massacre.²⁴ Naldo Rei, a former youth activist, describes the situation that some of his *maubere* comrades, although not all, still saw SPRIM as the same as ABRI who had been involved in the savage killings of East Timorese even just before the fence-scaling action in December 1995 (Rei 2007, 150).

More importantly, it was the Javanese who had more difficulties to *imagine* the East Timorese as their comrades before the 1990s since they were regarded as ‘the ungrateful’²⁵ in the national project to create the unitary state in the archipelago. Originally, East Timor was regarded as part of the diversity in Indonesia; namely, as “the youngest province” (propinsi termuda) (Matsuno 1993, 200). “The East Timorese is called Our Brothers” (*Tempo*, November 30, 1991). For Indonesia, East Timor was originally like one of the family members. However, it was labeled with ‘ingratitude’ through the conflict mainly because of its contrary attitude towards the national project of the archipelago. This ‘Ingratitude’ meant they were never on the Indonesian side; more precisely, they were never people of Indonesia in a perceptual sense. Anderson (1993) points out “a deep inability to imagine East Timor as Indonesian” to explain the falsehood of absorbing East Timor. However, the fact that the people of Indonesia could come to *imagine* East Timorese as their comrades made it more difficult to absorb East Timor. The conflict completely changed the discourse on East Timor throughout the *Indonesianization*, and eventually left them as comrades. Even though it was just a small numbers of groups which were involved in East Timorese actions, the commitment of influential pro-democracy groups and intellectuals and the series of joint actions shows that the perception of Indonesians towards East Timorese had changed throughout the *Indonesianization*.

Finally, in the 1990s, the East Timorese, who did not or could not join the common project of creating a unitary state, came to be part of another common project, together with Indonesians, of breaking the Suharto regime. *Indonesianization* linked the suffering of the East Timorese to the feelings of sympathy, disappointment, and shame among Indonesian society. The letter from Wilson to Naldo Rei is fairly suggestive, simply because Wilson expressed his feelings of shame towards his own country²⁶ with feelings ‘bound by a deep horizontal comradeship’ (Anderson 1999, 3). The *Indonesianization* of conflict in East Timor is a lesson for all nationalists, considering that a true nationalist is capable of feeling ‘ashamed’ about crimes that their government might commit (Anderson 1999, 10).

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²⁴ Interview with Virgilo Silva Guterres (10/11/2014).

²⁵ See Anderson (1993).

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