

Foreign Minister Willesee's policy: Searching for a solution based on the will of the Timorese

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Introduction

Despite his two-year tenure as Australia's Foreign Minister, in the Whitlam government, from 6 November 1973 to 11 November 1975, Don Willesee (1916–2003) has attracted little attention from researchers. The primary reason for his marginalisation appears to be recognition of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, who served concurrently as Foreign Minister for eleven months after his appointment on 5 December 1972, as 'unquestionably the dominant foreign policy figure throughout, even after he relinquished the formal portfolio to Don Willesee' (Evans 1997, 14). Yet, Foreign Minister Willesee did not always concur with Prime Minister Whitlam (Renouf 1980, 100–103; Oliver 2010) and sharply disagreed over the question of Timor-Leste (Portuguese Timor). However, as existing literature has not yet closely focused on Willesee's policy and opinion on this question, this paper reviews these aspects. Before starting this research, examining an interview conducted with Willesee in March 1999 proves helpful. Referring to the policy difference with Gough Whitlam, he said:

There is no doubt Gough felt East Timor should be incorporated within Indonesia. I just believed that we should have left the decision to the East Timorese, without any suggestions or trying to lead them to Indonesia. That was the difference between myself and Gough. I was constrained at that time. But as foreign minister you've got to manage your relationship with the prime minister. I had to compromise my way through the entire issue. My view the whole time was that the decision should be left absolutely to the East Timorese, but Gough just had a very firm opinion. (Kelly 1999)

This reflection highlights Willesee's recognition of his failure to implement his chosen foreign policy. However, what policy did he actually pursue? This paper examines declassified documents of the then Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), the most important of which were edited by Wendy Way in 2000, to investigate Willesee's policy.

Department of Foreign Affairs' commitment to 'a genuine and internationally acceptable act of self-determination'

A notable fact about Australian foreign policymaking on the question of Portuguese Timor is that Willesee and the DFA, under Secretary Alan Renouf, supported the right to self-determination for the Timorese as soon as the decolonisation of Portuguese Timor began, following the Portuguese revolution of 25 April 1974. According to Renouf, he 'directed that Australia's policy should be self-determination' and '[t]his was approved by Foreign Minister Don Willesee' (Renouf 1979, 442).

Meanwhile, three Timorese political associations were founded in Dili: on 10 May, the pro-Portuguese *Timorese Democratic Union* (UDT); on 20 May, the pro-independence *Timorese Social Democratic Association* (ASDT), which was renamed *Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor-Leste* (FRETILIN) on 12 September; and on 27 May, *Timorese Popular Democratic Association* (APODETI), which favoured integration into Indonesia. The Portuguese Government officially recognised these groups, and Jose Ramos-Horta, a founder of ASDT, expressed his view that UDT had the strongest support, followed by ASDT and APODETI, during his visit to Australia in July (Hastings 1974). Timorese political leaders gradually expanded their activities and Ramos-Horta emerged as the most active pro-independence politician pursuing international support.

However, indigenous political development in Portuguese Timor was soon clouded by the Suharto government's intention to incorporate the territory into Indonesia, on the pretext of security concerns about the communist powers, namely, China and the USSR. The Indonesians also began keeping the Australian Embassy in Jakarta informed about their integration plan. Moreover, in dispatching Harry Tjan, a staff member of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies involved in making Indonesia's

integration policy, to Canberra, President Suharto informally told the Australian Government about his wish to discuss Indonesia's annexation plan in the upcoming informal summit talks with Whitlam (Way 2000, 85–87).

Nonetheless, Australia's DFA maintained its commitment to a genuine act of self-determination in Portuguese Timor, as seen in its briefing paper for the summit talks. Recommending that Whitlam tell Suharto that 'Australia would be bound by the result of a genuine and internationally acceptable act of self-determination in Portuguese Timor', including the possible three options, i.e. continuing association with Portugal, independence and incorporation into Indonesia, the department suggested he propose that the two governments collaboratively approach Portugal to encourage it to implement a slow and deliberate decolonisation policy. The DFA briefing also recommended explaining the Australian Government's intention to reopen its consulate in Dili, which had closed in 1971, and to develop its ties with Timorese leaders (Way 2000, 90–93). Thus, the DFA intended to give due weight to the Timorese's will while simultaneously checking Indonesia's excessive policy.

If Prime Minister Whitlam had followed the DFA's suggestions, President Suharto, who seriously considered his international reputation and Whitlam's views in particular, might have abandoned Indonesia's plan to incorporate Portuguese Timor. However, on 6 September, Whitlam, wishing to strengthen Australia's relationship with Indonesia and to prevent another small state from acquiring independence near Australia, agreed with Suharto on Portuguese Timor's integration into Indonesia, adding an ambiguous condition that this should occur in accordance with its people's wishes (Way 2000, 95–98).

Willesee's attempt to shift Whitlam's policy

That the majority of the Timorese would voluntarily choose to join the Republic of Indonesia was unrealistic to assume since the beginning, given the awakening of Timorese nationalism towards independence and APODETI's persistent unpopularity. Thus, after the summit talks, Indonesians like Harry Tjan began to talk to Australian diplomats about possible Indonesian military intervention as the last resort, under the pretext of political disorder in the territory (Way 2000, 122–124). To counter this intention, FRETILIN leaders and Australian supporters like Denis Freney, a senior member of the Communist Party of Australia, strengthened their collaborative activities (Freney 1991, 338–356).

Facing these new developments relating to Portuguese Timor, Willesee, surprised to learn what Whitlam had talked with Suharto (Jenkins 1991), opposed a hurried decision on its integration into Indonesia, as he had agreed to do with Portuguese Minister Almeida Santos on 16 October (Way 2000, 121–122). In December, while reviewing Whitlam's policy, Willesee met Ramos-Horta of FRETILIN and directly explained the Australian Government's commitment to a valid act of self-determination (Way 2000, 154–156).

On 13 December, Willesee received a policy paper on Portuguese Timor from his department and endorsed all of its recommendations on 20 December. Although he recognised that 'even if Indonesia were to force Portuguese Timor into an association with her, we should have to go on living with the Indonesians', Willesee never wished to just let it happen. He decided to keep up a constructive dialogue with the Indonesians and to urge them to understand that 'if the Timorese are clearly intent on independence, it should be possible to live with that' and that 'many of their fears about an independent Timor appear groundless or exaggerated'. Simultaneously, he sought to keep a distance from FRETILIN political activities aiming to invite Australia's influence into Portuguese Timor to counter Indonesia's policy (Way 2000, 148–153).

In January 1975, Willesee forwarded this paper to Whitlam and Defence Minister Lance Barnard with his personal letter noting that 'self-determination is likely to yield a result other than the association of Portuguese Timor with Indonesia' and that his department would place more emphasis 'in our future policy on our commitment to the right of the people of the territory to decide their own political future' (Way 2000, 160–161). Thus, Willesee attempted to shift Whitlam's policy towards Portuguese Timor, at the same time as UDT and FRETILIN announced the formation of a coalition for independence on 20 January.

Drafting of Whitlam's letter to Suharto

In February, Willesee decided to encourage the Indonesians to rethink their military integration policy and to consider living with an independent Portuguese Timor, which was 'the most likely eventuality' (Way 2000, 181–183). After the formation of the UDT-FRETILIN coalition for independence, DFA officials were concerned not only that the Portuguese Government might finish its decolonisation policy by simply transferring its sovereignty to the coalition but also that the Indonesians might forcefully take over Portuguese Timor to prevent it becoming independent (Way 2000, 170–174).

On 19 February, Willesee proposed to Defence Minister Barnard, who expressed his concerns over Indonesia's military action, that the two departments renew their 'efforts to bring home to the Indonesians the emphasis placed in our own policy on an internationally acceptable act of self-determination' and on 'Australia's opposition to the use of military force', while noting that 'these efforts need to be complemented by an attempt to promote changes in Indonesia's own policy' (Way 2000, 188–189). On 21 February, when a renowned journalist Peter Hastings's newspaper article entitled 'Jakarta ponders military 'solution'' stimulated Australian public opinion, Whitlam agreed to send his letter to Suharto when Richard Woolcott, his close aide, would move to Jakarta as the Australian ambassador designate (Way 2000, 194–195).

Having been checked and signed by Prime Minister Whitlam, his letter, largely drafted by officials of the two departments, was completed on 28 February. Besides his invitation to President Suharto to another informal meeting in Australia in early April and his wishes to maintain good relations with Indonesia, the letter noted several points: the direction of the political development in Portuguese Timor seemed headed for eventual independence; the Australian Government did not observe any immediate dangers of communist influence from China or the USSR in the territory, and public opinion in Australia widely supported an internationally acceptable act of self-determination in Portuguese Timor. Reminding President Suharto that no Australian Government could allow itself to be perceived as supporting Indonesia's military action, the letter encouraged him to consider establishing cooperative and friendly relations with the Portuguese Government as well as with leaders of the UDT-FRETILIN coalition, which had proposed a policy of non-alignment and a pact of non-aggression and cooperation with Indonesia (Way 2000, 200–202). This letter was handed to the Indonesian authorities on 4 March. Then, prior to the informal summit talks in Townsville from 3 April, the DFA suggested Whitlam talk with Suharto in line with it (Way 2000, 236–238).

If Whitlam had accepted the DFA's suggestion, President Suharto might have reconsidered Indonesia's annexation policy. However, Whitlam again told Suharto that 'he still hoped that Portuguese Timor would be associated with or integrated into Indonesia', adding that 'this result should be achieved in a way which would not upset the Australian people'. In return, Suharto explained Indonesia's plan of annexing Portuguese Timor by assisting the pro-integration APODETI and influencing the policies of UDT and FRETILIN (Way 2000, 244–248). After these talks, the Indonesians urged UDT leaders to review their relations with FRETILIN, whose leadership contained some communists, while keeping Indonesia's military option open. In late May, UDT announced the termination of its coalition with FRETILIN, leading to the deterioration of politics in Portuguese Timor.

Policy conflicts between Willesee and Whitlam

After the summit talks, it also became clear that Prime Minister Whitlam, who was in favour of Indonesian integration, would not listen to Foreign Minister Willesee while collaborating with Ambassador Woolcott (Way 2000, 253). It became essential for Secretary Renouf to consider not only Willesee's but also Whitlam's policy when making policy recommendations (Way 2000, 638).

Firmly believing that Whitlam was wrong (Way 2000, 270), Willesee did not change his policy in support of self-determination, including the option of independence for the Timorese, as seen in his public speech in Tokyo in June (Way 2000, 279–280). In early July, Willesee reminded Ambassador Woolcott that '[w]e should continue our efforts to persuade the Indonesians that an independent Timor, if that is what it is to be, need not be detrimental to their interests' (Way 2000, 286). Willesee clearly supported the Macao programme, the decolonisation plan for Portuguese Timor that had been outlined in a conference organised by the Portuguese Government, with the participation of UDT and APODETI

delegations, from 26 to 28 June in Macao. On 11 July, a Portuguese constitutional law was promulgated on the basis of the outcome of this conference that reaffirmed the right to self-determination for the people of Portuguese Timor, noted the establishment of a transitional organisation by the Portuguese administration and Timorese representatives, and fixed the date of election for a Popular Assembly in October 1976. What made Willesee concerned was that Harry Tjan, frustrated with the Macao programme, revealed Indonesia's military intervention plan for Portuguese Timor in more detail on 10 July (Way 2000, 290–291). To counter this, on 15 July Willesee instructed the Australian Embassy in Jakarta to tell Tjan and others to seriously consider the adverse effects that Indonesia's military intervention could have on Australian-Indonesian relations (Way 2000, 292–294). This point was conveyed to Tjan on 1 August (Way 2000, 297–298).

Willesee earnestly sought to discourage the Indonesian military from intervening, after the UDT leaders' coup attempt to expel 'communists' from Portuguese Timor on 10 August, which further deteriorated their relationship with FRETILIN. The possibility of Indonesian intervention apparently increased after 14 August, when General Yoga Sugama, having chaired the Suharto government's committee on Portuguese Timor, discussed it with Ambassador Woolcott and asked for the Australian Government's understanding and Whitlam's views (Way 2000, 306–309). On 20 August, two days before travelling overseas for over a month, Willesee tried to persuade Whitlam. Having referred to Woolcott's latest report that Suharto had decided to refrain from military intervention for the time being, partly because of his concerns about Australia's reaction, Willesee wrote to him that 'I believe we should attempt to trade on that influence and dissuade the Indonesians further from trying to integrate Portuguese Timor forcefully' (Way 2000, 320).

However, Whitlam would not accommodate Willesee. On 26 August, when the hostilities between UDT and FRETILIN escalated into a civil war and the Portuguese administration requested international intervention, Whitlam made a statement on Portuguese Timor in the House of the Representatives, in which he asserted that 'Portuguese Timor is in many ways part of the Indonesian world' (Way 2000, 347–348). On the same day, he told Indonesian Ambassador Her Tasning that the Australian Government would not exercise a veto on the Indonesian response to Portugal's request (Way 2000, 345–346). Thus, Whitlam tacitly supported Indonesia's 'humanitarian intervention' into Portuguese Timor.

Foreign Minister Willesee's statement on 30 October 1975

When Willesee returned to Canberra in late September, preventing Indonesian military intervention without causing serious diplomatic setbacks became more difficult for the Australian Government, as President Suharto had already agreed with his general officers, albeit reluctantly, on the deployment of thousands of Indonesian troops, called 'volunteers', into Portuguese Timor (Way 2000, 439–440), where FRETILIN, having won the civil war, had established its *de facto* rule. On 16 October, the Indonesian military, with UDT and APODETI members who had fled to the border areas, launched a major offensive in the territory, killing five journalists from Australian television companies in Balibo, a border hamlet.

On the following day, amid mounting domestic concerns, Willesee approved Secretary Renouf's proposal that, while recognising the overall importance of the long-term Australian-Indonesian relationship, the Australian Government was publicly committed to 'the right of the people of Portuguese Timor freely to decide their own future' and 'opposition to the use of armed force' (Way 2000, 477–479). Endorsed by Whitlam too, these points were communicated to Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik (Way 2000, 488–491). On 28 October, while drafting a ministerial statement, Willesee and DFA officials met Ramos-Horta of FRETILIN and discussed the possibility of returning to the Macao programme with the participation of the three Timorese political associations (Way 2000, 522–524).

On 30 October, Willesee publicised a statement on Portuguese Timor, on behalf of the Australian Government in the Senate, that declared the Australian Government's opposition to Indonesia's 'reported' use of force. Willesee urged the Indonesian Government to pursue its interests through diplomatic means. Also, stating that the people of Portuguese Timor should be allowed to determine their own future, he expressed the Australian Government's expectations for the talks between the Portuguese and Indonesian Foreign Ministers, scheduled from 1 November in Rome, and other talks between the Portuguese Government and the three Timorese political associations. He said, 'Were all the parties to wish it, the Government would be prepared to offer an Australian venue for round-table talks'. Finally, while Willesee said that 'the Australian Government does not pretend to know what the people of Portuguese

Timor want', he stressed that 'we do want them to have the opportunity to say what they want' (Willesee 1975). Thus, Willesee's policy in support of the right for self-determination became the Australian Government's official policy.

However, despite Willesee's earnest efforts and the Portuguese and Indonesian Foreign Ministers' apparent interest, expressed after the Rome talks, in convening talks on Portuguese Timor in Australia (Pires 1981, 359–360; Way 2000, 554–555; 557–559), these never took place. Continuing policy differences between Willesee and Whitlam and fear of collisions with the Indonesians prevented DFA officials from initiating such talks. Meanwhile, on 11 November, Australia's domestic political crisis having become more acute since the middle of October culminated in the dismissal of Prime Minister Whitlam. Accordingly, Foreign Minister Willesee resigned and decided to retire from politics. In late November, the Indonesian military stepped up its activity in Portuguese Timor, understanding that Malcolm Fraser's caretaker Australian Government would not strongly oppose it. This led to FRETILIN's desperate unilateral declaration of independence on 28 November, followed by Indonesia's full-scale invasion of Timor-Leste after 7 December.

Conclusion

Don Willesee seriously sought to prevent Indonesian military intervention in Portuguese Timor and to realise a solution based on the right to self-determination for the Timorese. However, he failed to make effective foreign policy or to have decisive influence over events because of Prime Minister Whitlam's dominance over policymaking and the understanding of Indonesia's annexation policy. Nevertheless, in retrospect, the significance of Willesee's statement on 30 October 1975, the first major statement of the Australian Government, and in the region, emphasising the importance of the will of the Timorese, must be rightly acknowledged. Foreign Minister Willesee's ethical, consistent and far-sighted policy should not be dismissed as trivial.

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