

Forty years after 1975: Perspectives from Canadian archival records

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Canadians are eternally modest. At least, so Canadians always tell themselves. In fact, we boast that we are the most modest people in the entire world.

The claim has one virtue for Ottawa's foreign policy: it hides a record of active involvement in cases of mass crimes against humanity. When the *Chega!* report (2005) looked at foreign government complicity in the military occupation of Timor-Leste, it did not look at Canada's role (CAVR 2005). It is true that Canada was not involved in supporting the Indonesian occupation on the same level as Australia and the United States, but Canada did play a role (Webster 2009). My point, however, is not to make a case that Canada was a major supporter of crimes against humanity in Timor-Leste. It is to suggest that drawing on Canadian archival sources helps to build a more complete picture of the international history of the Timor conflict. I offer six short case studies in a longer version of this paper, but here I will summarize four of them. The first two, in 1975 and 1983, show Canada following the lead of its allies, especially Australia and New Zealand, and Canadian documents add to the evidence already found in other archives. Two more case studies, in 1991 and 1998, show Canada diverging from the stance of its allies, but Canadian documents reveal that a 1991 Canadian suspension of aid to Indonesia after the Santa Cruz massacre was less influential than a 1998 Canadian decision to support Timorese self-determination. In these 1990s cases, there is clear evidence of Timorese resistance diplomacy, as well as solidarity movement pressure, affecting Canadian government policy.¹

First, the invasion of 40 years ago. Canada was not a major player, but Canadian archival papers add to the evidence backing up what we already knew: Western governments knew of the invasion in advance and did nothing to discourage Suharto from approving a military invasion even when he himself was undecided. The papers on Suharto's visit to Washington in July 1975 show that Suharto broached a take-over and the United States government had no objection. Suharto raised the same question days later in Ottawa. Canadian officials agreed with Suharto's view that integration of Timor-Leste into Indonesia was the best outcome. As one briefing paper argued, 'stability in the Southeast Asian region is of significance for Canada.' (LAC, RG 25, 20-TIMOR [1], Pacific Division background paper, 3 Oct. 1975). In other words, the invasion was not a 'surprise,' as the man who was director of the Pacific Affairs Bureau of Canada's Department of External Affairs at the time writes in his recent memoirs (Burney 2005, 37). Canadian officials, like Australian and American counterparts, knew it was coming and chose not to deter it when speaking to Indonesian counterparts.

The clincher for Canadian officials was that an independent East Timor would be 'not viable.' Canada here echoed its Commonwealth 'friends' in the region – Australia and New Zealand. But there is more to the story than Canada meekly following its allies – though that would not be a wrong conclusion. As well as adding evidence to the story of Western government complicity that we already know, the documents in Ottawa show that Suharto's regime was so unstable in 1975 that at least one major bank cancelled its line of credit to his government. If the case for the invasion was that an independent Timor-Leste was so unstable that it could not be a viable state, the Canadian documents show that Indonesia at the same time may have been even more unstable. But Western governments chose to ignore that, and chose to bankroll Suharto's government even while it was invading another country. Canada and other governments kept the New Order regime financially afloat. They kept supporting it through the rest of the 1970s in order to protect their investment.

Pierre Trudeau's Liberal government chose Suharto's Indonesia as a 'country of concentration' for Canadian foreign aid. Along with development aid, Canadian investment in Indonesia began to rise. As today, Canada was important as a source of capital for the mining industry. Inco's nickel mine in Sulawesi became the second-largest source of foreign investment in Indonesia, placing Canada fourth

¹ Full paper available from author. The Foreign Affairs files, and others from the Department of Finance, are located at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa. Some are open and others were obtained through Access to Information requests, in whole or in part. Digital copies have been donated to the P-CAVR and AMRT in Dili. The papers of the East Timor Alert Network/Canada are held at McMaster University Archives. Elaine Briere's papers are the University of British Columbia Archives. I have also accessed some private collections.

among foreign investors. Between entering Indonesia in 1968 and the end of the century, Inco invested more than US\$2-billion in the mine and associated operations (Sangadji 2000). When Suharto made his first official visit to Ottawa in 1975, the Canadian government teamed up with the six major Canadian chartered banks to offer an innovative C\$200-million line of credit. Canada-Indonesia trade quickly soared from C\$30-million to \$300-million a year. Indonesia's economy was soon teetering over a debt crisis brought about by over-borrowing by the state oil company, Pertamina. Consequently, the Toronto Dominion Bank cancelled its line of credit to Indonesia – a detail reported to the Canadian government on December 19, 1975. The Canadian government, however, maintained its faith in Suharto, and maintained the government-backed credit that his government could draw upon (LAC, RG 19/5456/7875/I43, Canadian Embassy Jakarta to Department of External Affairs, 19 Dec. 1975). As the TD Bank's analysts had decided, Indonesia was not a good credit risk. Despite that, Ottawa decided for political reasons to maintain support.

When the invasion happened, Canada made no complaint and, with its allies, abstained at the UN. Why? This was partly out of alliance solidarity and acceptance of an Australian and American lead. It was also in part for the financial reasons mentioned earlier. Canada could not risk its 'substantial' ties to Indonesia by protesting, as one government briefing note pointed out (LAC, RG25, 20-TIMOR [3], briefing note for CIDA, 8 Jan. 1976). This underpinned the decision that Canada took in 1979-1980 to switch its UN vote from an abstention to support for Indonesia, a change recommended by the Canadian ambassador in Jakarta on the basis that reports of famine in East Timor were exaggerated and Timorese independence was a 'lost cause.' (LAC, RG25, 20-TIMOR [6], EA internal memorandum (GPP to UNP), 9 Oct. 1979). For years after, the standard letter sent to Canadians who wrote letters to the minister of external affairs stated that: 'the annexation of East Timor is an accomplished and irreversible fact.' This wording came about starting in 1978 with the embassy report and was influenced by the decision of the New Zealand government, revealed in Maire Leadbeater's (2006) book, that Indonesian rule was 'irreversible.' What we see here is the 'official mind' (Robinson and Gallagher 1961) of Commonwealth and other Western governments operating to create a groupthink in support of Indonesian occupation.

In 1983, the Australian newspaper *The Age* reported that Indonesian forces had used incendiary devices in bombing runs over East Timor. Australian officials denied the story. Yet Timorese leaders and human rights groups continued to insist that the Indonesian armed forces had used bombs in this way, and even used napalm – specifically, a version known as opalm purchased from the Soviet Union and dropped in bombing runs from American-supplied aircraft. To this day, the Indonesian government denies the use of napalm. Australian documents unearthed by Clinton Fernandes confirm the use of napalm and the Australian government's knowledge (Dorling 2015; Fernandes 2015). Canadian documents add to the evidence, confirming the use of opalm, and demonstrating that the Canadian Department of External Affairs was aware. Canada's embassy in Jakarta confirmed 'that bombing runs with napalm and cluster bombs began on September 23.'² The high commission in Canberra confirmed with Australian counterparts that the chemical dropped was 'opalm, a more virulent form of napalm' (LAC, 20-TIMOR, Canadian embassy in Canberra, telegram to DEA, 3 Nov. 1983). Canadian diplomats chose not to act on the information, and they withheld it from members of the Canadian parliament in a subsequent briefing note on East Timor. Instead, they argued against Canadian support for Timorese self-determination at the UN on the grounds that Indonesian rule was 'unchangeable' (LAC, 20-TIMOR House of Commons briefing note, 16 Jan. 1984). The Canadian records on napalm do not tell us anything new; we know this already from the *Chega!* report and from Australian documents. But contemporary history requires multiple levels of confirmation, and the Canadian documents add to the weight of evidence that this particular crime against humanity did, in fact, take place.

The napalm case shows Canada acting, in a much more limited way, much like Australia – silently taking part in a cover-up. The next case study, on the other hand, shows Canada acting in an apparent divergence. Several sources describe Canada a 'leader' in cutting off aid to Indonesia after the Santa Cruz massacre in 1991, along with Denmark and the Netherlands. Was it? Yes and no. This was a period in which Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney made a passionate declaration at the 1991 Commonwealth heads of government meeting that Canada would 'no longer subsidize repression and the

² J. Scott, counsellor Jakarta, a personal and confidential letter to DEA, 10 Oct. 1983, LAC file 20-TIMOR. This and other documents on the use of napalm are posted at <https://davidwebster.wordpress.com/2015/05/11/a-crime-against-humanity-confirmed-indonesian-use-of-napalm-against-east-timorese-civilians-1983/>

stifling of democracy' (Mulroney 1991). Less than a month after Mulroney uttered those words, the Santa Cruz massacre in Dili provided the first test case. Reaction to the killing produced a global upsurge in activism, and reinforced the global solidarity movement. The massacre spurred the creation of the East Timor Action Network in the US and it also saw the creation of a host of new local groups for Canada's East Timor Alert Network, which had been formed in 1986.

After the massacre, Canadian foreign minister Barbara McDougall ordered the Canadian ambassador to Indonesia, Ingrid Hall, to express the 'rising public concern' in Canada and to inform her hosts that McDougall was reviewing the Canadian aid programme for Indonesia. The Indonesian government responded to international protests with a government commission of inquiry and asked its donors to do nothing until the commission reported. But McDougall *did* act before the Indonesian inquiry reported, ordering a freeze on implementing three major aid projects worth \$30-million, in order (she said) to express that 'Canadians were outraged at the recent killings in East Timor' (ETAN, DEA news release, 9 Dec. 1991). It was not announced publicly, but McDougall added an unofficial ban on any arms export permits – in other words, Canada would not sell any weapons to Indonesia in 1991-93, a departure from the position of its allies and a decision the minister took on her own initiative and partly on the strength of public protests (including outside her own constituency office in Toronto).³

Yet existing aid and export promotion efforts continued unhampered. Indonesia remained a Canadian trade priority, with two-way trade reaching \$563-million in 1992, a 47 percent increase on the previous year (Southard 1997, 117-8, 159). Indonesian officials exempted Canada from the angry reprisals that it directed at the Netherlands when the Dutch government linked aid to human rights (Dagg 1993). Jakarta shut down the Dutch-led aid consortium IGGI (Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia), but directed no such actions at Canada. Why? Canadian officials continually assured Indonesian counterparts behind closed doors that aid would be resumed soon and that they made no effort of any sort to encourage any other government to suspend aid. In other words, there was no leadership in the sense of Canada seeking to give a lead to any other government, but only an effort to appease domestic public opinion. Could Canada have done anything to encourage Australia, or the United States, or other governments, to cut their aid to Indonesia? Perhaps, but we will never know. The archival evidence indicates that an apparent leadership signal and an apparent crack in Western solidarity for Jakarta was more apparent than real, and that Jakarta understood this very well.

Under a new Liberal government, Canada resumed aid and arms sales to Indonesia in 1993. But when former East Timor supporter Lloyd Axworthy took over as foreign minister in 1995, he privately offered to mediate a resolution to the Timor conflict. Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas rejected the offer. As the Canadian embassy expressed his views: 'Canadian NGOs are the most ferociously anti-Indonesian in the world and he is sceptical, therefore, of the Canadian government's ability to resist domestic political pressure and maintain its neutrality' (DFAIT 20-TIMOR, Canadian embassy in Jakarta e-mail, 3 Nov. 1998). After the fall of Suharto, the Canadian government began to play a more useful role. Timorese resistance had demonstrated that Timorese self-determination was not a 'lost cause.' New Zealand's decision to change its doctrine that Indonesian annexation was 'irreversible' brought about a Canadian request for a briefing that may, perhaps, have influenced thinking in Ottawa.

In October 1998, secretary of state for the Asia Pacific Raymond Chan, a former activist in the Vancouver support movement for Chinese democracy, met Xanana Gusmão in his Jakarta prison cell. Chan and Axworthy then agreed to meet José Ramos Horta in Ottawa, marking the first time that a Canadian cabinet minister had been willing to meet him. Significantly, Ramos Horta then held a joint press conference with ETAN/Canada, the Canadian Labour Congress, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, and others, calling for Canada to support East Timor's right to self-determination. A month later, in November 1998, Chan issued a public declaration that the Canadian government supported East Timor's right to self-determination. This was a ministerial rather than departmental decision (DFAIT 20-TIMOR). Nevertheless, Canadian government policy had shifted, and this new view was communicated to Canada's allies. In December 1998, famously, Australian prime minister John Howard wrote to B.J. Habibie indicating a less sweeping Australian policy shift. Although this was the result of domestic political developments, it's at least possible that changes in the international climate played a

³ McDougall told me about the arms embargo in 1995, after she left office: see David Webster 'Canada expands export of military goods to Indonesia.' *Catholic New Times*, 25 June 1995. Canadian arms export records confirm her statement.

part. Western governments, I'm suggesting, may have influenced each other's views. This suggestion indicates the need for multi-archival research.

Timorese leaders pushed on the new opening presented by the government of Canada's new policy. Xanana Gusmão wrote to Axworthy saying Canada, as an incoming member of the UN Security Council, was 'in a unique position to play a lead role during the upcoming transition in East Timor, which I believe is inevitable.' (Incidentally, this inverted the old 'irreversible' doctrine – Xanana now argued that the mantle of inevitability had shifted to the Timorese side.) Canada tried for the first time to shift its allies' positions. Two key channels were identified: the G7 group of leading industrial economies, though which Canada hoped to influence the United States, Japan and European governments, and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) group, through which Canada hoped to influence Asian governments. It is not yet possible to determine how important these Canadian initiatives were in the absence of comparisons with other archives in other countries. There are intriguing references to Canadian efforts to convince Australia's government to take the lead on a meeting about East Timor at APEC, which Australian officials apparently declined to do. Only when Australia resisted a leadership position, then, did Canada act, teaming up with New Zealand to ensure East Timor was on the agenda at APEC.

In sum, the Canadian government's Timor file, read in comparison with the files of Canadian solidarity groups, reveals a supporter of Indonesia shifting its stance over time. Canada initially supported its allies, especially Australia. Then, it began to take its own decisions but made no effort to influence its allies. Finally it tried to convince its allies to support of Timorese self-determination in 1998-99. Amidst a gradual development of policy at the official level, the occupants of top ministerial offices mattered a great deal – the key ministerial figures being Barbara McDougall and Lloyd Axworthy, one Conservative and one Liberal. Australia and New Zealand were the major influences on Canada and the countries Canada was most interested in influencing.

Canadian government policy proved to be highly vulnerable to public pressure, though this was not evident at the time. Canadian public opinion, as press reports and solidarity movement papers indicate, was affected by Timorese diplomats from Ramos Horta on down, including in the 1990s two CNRM representatives in Canada, Abé Barreto Soares and Bella Galhos. These voices were magnified by church, peace movement, and finally trade union support for Timorese self-determination.

Canada was far from the key player in the international history of the Timor conflict, but Canadian sources help to paint a fuller picture of the exchanges between Western governments who provided more than two decades of complicity with the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste.

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