

## Benedict Anderson and the independence of Timor-Leste

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It was February 1976, Ben was not yet 40, I was 25. I didn't know him, but was directed his way by a colleague at an alternative radio project broadcast by the Cornell University station in Ithaca, New York. I had become engaged in the question of East Timor at the time of the December 1975 invasion through moving taped press conferences at the Church Center for the United Nations in New York by Jose Ramos Horta. I was told that Ben was an essential person to know and went to his office at the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, introduced myself and said that a serious effort was contemplated to address this gross injustice. Ben smilingly answered that the staying power of such efforts was not terribly long. 'Well, you know', Ben said, a bit mockingly but with a good natured touch, 'you're interested in this today, but will you be interested two or three months from now? People always drop things, they pick them up and drop them.' Little did we know that this would be the start of a nearly 40-year-long collaboration and friendship!

The year after that initial meeting, Ben asked if I wanted to take steps to become one of his graduate students. For better or worse, a scholarly career was too narrow a focus for me; my orientation at the time, and for decades thereafter, was aimed at having a more direct impact as an activist-journalist. This work then was with the Cornell-Ithaca East Timor Defense Committee, with Ben as advisor, formed after Jose Ramos Horta spoke at Cornell in April 1976.

Despite the absence of a formal relationship, or perhaps because of this very lack of formality, we formed an easy, close bond, and early on, Ben provided me with a desk in his sun-filled office suite on the top floor of 102 West Avenue, the ramshackle old wood structure that served as graduate student offices for the Cornell Southeast Asia Program. There I remained for four years, attending his lectures and receiving guidance on the region and many other subjects. Ben's own mentor, Professor George McT. Kahin, the scholar of Indonesia and Indochina who shaped the Cornell program from the 1950s, also lent his quiet support and counsel.

Though Ben later became acclaimed for his book on nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (early draft typescript chapters of which gradually began to appear on his paper-strewn desk in the late 1970s), other sides of Ben remain relatively little known. This included his skill as an analyst with tremendous common sense, quite apart from his more public role as a witness at Congressional hearings, as a speaker and author. He liked nothing better than to chat about politics high and low, and ranging way beyond Southeast Asia. A sharp judge of character with a priceless ironic sense of humour, he saw through the pretences of politicians, both those he knew personally and others throughout the world, poking fun at them in private with unforgettable wit. This was not simply an intellectual or comedic exercise. Early in our friendship, Ben told me, in essence, when we were discussing problems stemming from a badly behaved individual and how best to approach such difficulties in the course of our work: always think of what really matters to the people 'out there', in East Timor, Indonesia and more broadly. His heart and soul were always 'out there' where one's impact should be felt. An underlying premise was that one must find ways around interpersonal problems, however distasteful, bite one's tongue and just get on with the work for the greater good of those in the places directly affected. One must never forget that one's actions must benefit them, not some bloodless abstract purpose, and still less one's own career or personal ambition.

Early on, Ben was the most prominent Indonesia specialist to challenge American policy on East Timor. In early 1977 James Dunn, the former Australian consul in Dili, then head of the Parliamentary foreign affairs research unit, issued a report based on his interviews with Timorese refugees in Portugal. In March of that year, the key Congressional body focused on human rights received an urgent request from dozens of Australian Members of Parliament to hold hearings on the Dunn report and East Timor more broadly. Ben was consulted by Dr John Salzberg, a staff member of the Sub-committee on International Organizations, chaired by Representative Donald Fraser of Minnesota. In 1976 Ben had presented voluminous, devastating testimony on Indonesian political prisoners and repression in Indonesia before the subcommittee. As Ben told me at the time, Salzberg told him with great determination: 'We must hold hearings.'

In the event, four hearings were held in 1977-78, including on the central question of self-determination. While they had no immediate impact in a concrete sense, history shows that the hearings provided a solid foundation for subsequent activity in Congress in 1979 during the famine crisis that followed. The hearings established a record that ended up exposing falsehoods of the Suharto regime's diplomatic supporters in Washington and Canberra during the 1978-80 years when nearly 200,000 East Timorese perished as a result of the Indonesian occupation and war-induced famine. The hearings also exposed United States complicity with Jakarta, as Ben effectively detailed in Congressional testimony in both 1978 and 1980.

Moreover, as Clinton Fernandes has emphasized, his testimony helped establish a 'structure of legitimacy' for activist efforts at that time and beyond in Congress and with the media. The basis for much of the pressure exerted on the US government in 1999 arose from these very important constituencies in the 1970s (Fernandes 2011, 62).

However important, these were only the most visible products of an invisible community - informal yet real -which, as historians can demonstrate, had a profound impact on East Timor and Southeast Asia over the decades. What has not been previously explained in public was a crucial element: Ben's interactions with former Cornell students in various branches of government, the military, research institutes, non-governmental and international organizations. Put simply, there was a wide network of scholars who had studied at Cornell who helped shed light on and ultimately influenced events in ways that would otherwise not have been possible.

This 'invisible network' was based on the values embodied by Ben that permeated his lectures, seminars and private discussions, and that were transmitted to students from various walks of life in the USA, Europe, Australia, Asia and other parts of the world. At the heart of his work were the values of justice, human rights and integrity, based on rigorous, well-documented scholarship with an underlying devotion to truth and fairness. Somehow Ben was able to elicit the better side of many (if not all) of his students in a truly extraordinary manner. And because of their respect for him, they did not want to let Ben down or appear to be found wanting in the qualities he prized most.

This was evident, if only in a subterranean manner, at various stages of the East Timor drama. Lying by the State Department - there is no other accurate way to describe it - about the actual situation in East Timor when the Dunn report surfaced in 1977 was privately confirmed by well-placed former students. One or more may have even been involved or complicit in the lies, and, in some way, they 'confessed' to Ben. Truth mattered, especially when it had a direct impact on the fate of the people 'out there.'

Thus, certain former students of Ben were able to provide a fuller picture of what might euphemistically be called 'policy development' at a time when East Timor was closed to the outside world and information was relatively sparse, but also later, when information on the evolution of Indonesian and international positions was of pivotal importance in the evolution of international efforts to end the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. One thinks of the late 1970s, when a former student was able to describe to Ben the findings from US satellite monitoring of East Timor at a time when the territory was closed to independent scrutiny and misrepresentation by the State Department to protect the Suharto regime from criticism was to all intents and purposes official policy. The evidence from the satellite monitoring painted a searing portrait of killing and starvation.

Ben's influence reached well beyond those relatively early days to the period leading up to Santa Cruz and beyond. To cite a notable example, Ben arranged for Ford Foundation backing for a conference on East Timor in April 1991 at American University in Washington, DC, which I prepared and coordinated over a period of 18 months in 1989-91.

Especially after the October 1989 visit of Pope John Paul to East Timor, it was evident that the youth of East Timor who had grown up under Indonesian rule were emphatically rejecting the occupation. The April 1991 conference in Washington included Donaciano Gomes, aka Commandante Pedro, a leader of the protests by Timorese youth during the Pope's visit who had been tortured in together with dozens of his compatriots in the period after the Pope's departure, which first received prominent attention through a statement in the New York Times by Geoffrey Robinson, a student of Ben's who was a researcher at Amnesty International from 1989-95.

Ben's invisible network extended to international human rights organizations and the United Nations. Robinson was the latest of a number of Ben's students who served at Amnesty International over more than a decade, producing dozens of reports, lobbying governments and the United Nations, etc.

(Robinson, also a student of George Kahin, went on to work with UNAMET, monitoring human rights and political developments, witnessing critical events during the September 1999 conflagration).

Donaciano Gomes was the first leader of his generation to visit the United States and Ben had a keen interest in this youth movement. He shared this interest with the retired Episcopal (Anglican) Bishop of New York, Paul Moore, who had visited East Timor on behalf of Human Rights Watch after the Pope's visit and warned in the New York Times of the possibility of a Tiananmen Square-type crackdown. With Ben closely advising, Bishop Moore chaired the Washington-based Timor Project (later The Humanitarian Project), generating activities on East Timor involving Congress, the media, churches and human rights organizations. At the conclusion of the April 1991 conference Bishop Moore arranged a meeting with editors at the Washington Post, including Ben Bradlee, of Watergate fame, a close friend of Bishop Moore's since their childhood days. Donaciano spoke about the growing tensions and repression in East Timor, while Ben provided historical perspective and commentary.

Growing Congressional interest was emphasized at the meeting at the Post; a broad bipartisan majority of the US House of Representatives, led by Rep. Tony Hall, had recently signed a letter to US Secretary of State James Baker calling for American action on human rights problems made manifest in East Timor in the wake of the Pope's visit, as well as the need for efforts leading to a political solution. (On Ben's passing, Marty Rendon, Hall's aide from 1978-93, wrote: 'He was such a hero to all of us.'). In short, the April 1991 Washington conference prepared the groundwork for numerous hard-hitting editorials in the Washington Post and other major media coverage when the Santa Cruz massacre took place scarcely six months later.

Other actions of more immediate human consequence came about at the time of Santa Cruz via Ben's network, through which it was learned that a crucial way to effectively influence the Indonesian military was through Indonesian-speaking US military officers in Jakarta. Continuing killings mounted in the days after the 12 November 1991 massacre, according to close contacts of Father Reinaldo Cardoso, another member of The Timor Project, a former missionary from the Azores who had spent 12 years in East Timor and then lived in Rhode Island in the USA. A meeting was arranged with senior State Department officials on 26 November 1991. They were confronted with accounts of ongoing murders, the military-to-military channel was emphasized, and it was demanded that the US use its close ties with the Indonesian military to end the killings. Less than two days later, prison chaplains in Dili informed Father Cardoso that the killings had stopped, at least for the moment. In the post-Santa Cruz period, Ben wrote and lectured on themes he had begun to develop as it became clear that the Indonesian-educated youth of East Timor were playing a similar role to the Dutch-educated leaders in the anti-colonial Indonesia of the 1930s and 1940s. He liked nothing better than to quiz young Timorese about their thoughts, motivations and ambitions for the future.

Despite the increased attention and activity in the wake of Santa Cruz, more was needed if East Timor were to free itself from the 20-year-old Indonesian occupation. In June 1995, amid speculation that Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo might be a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, and knowing that the bishop was en route to Oslo and might have a private meeting with some in the Nobel circle, Ben came to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to meet the bishop (who was on a quiet visit to the USA) to engage him in conversation on prospects for the future and how Indonesian and international policies might be affected in the event of a Nobel Peace Prize. They got on well. Bishop Belo was interested in Ben's insights, aspects of which were ultimately transmitted to influential quarters in Oslo in the form of arguments as to why a Nobel Peace Prize would make a profound difference to East Timor's future. That bright June day had a sparkling quality about it as Ben and the bishop talked, as if history were being made before our very eyes. No one, certainly not at that stage, of course, was able to predict the terrible price that East Timor would pay in the year of the 1999 referendum.

After the Indonesian occupation came to an end, Ben was able to make his one and only visit to East Timor. With the war over, he returned to his mode of traditional field work. As he recounted it to me, aside from a visit to Xanana Gusmao, whom Ben had met in Salemba prison in 1999, he deliberately avoided East Timorese political leaders, preferring to travel from one end of East Timor to the other with a group of his former students, drinking in the atmosphere of the newly liberated nation, spontaneously engaging ordinary East Timorese in conversation. It was a pleasure to talk with young people frolicking in fountains in Baucau, for instance, posing the question to them, how does this compare with the past? Their reply was that they could never do this under Indonesian rule - which for Ben symbolized the freedom that had been won at such great cost.

The denouement in 1999 actually had its parallels with the final stage of Indonesia's struggle for independence in 1949, when George Kahin and representatives of the Indonesian Republic in Washington convinced US Senate leaders to cut off Marshall Plan aid to The Netherlands unless the Dutch withdrew. Firmly rooted in the historic intellectual influence of Ben and Professor Kahin and those with whom they worked closely, in September 1999 the U.S. suggested that vital World Bank and International Monetary Fund loans to Indonesia could be withdrawn unless Indonesian forces withdrew from East Timor.

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For all his joy in seeing a free East Timor, Ben was not romantic about the future. With his knowledge of the transition from revolutionary Indonesia to an independent country in which people competed for power, jobs and other advantages, he was forthright in saying privately that this too would happen in East Timor. He knew that the time would come when the East Timorese would no longer be able to credibly blame Indonesia or the occupation for their plight, when neither past history nor Jakarta's actions nor any other foreigners could be cast the primary villains, and when East Timorese people would have to hold their own leaders accountable, and rely on their own efforts.

The Timor-Leste Studies Association fits squarely within that vision, and it is perhaps fitting that my final conversation with Ben, just weeks before his death, was in part about the TLSA.

As fate would have it, our final project was centered on my request to Ben that he support the application of Clinton Fernandes for academic promotion. We had several long conversations. I emphasized that it was crucial that a new generation of students and scholars pursue research on Timor-Leste in the decades to come. It was a pleasure to sense the real excitement in Ben's voice when he learned of the existence of the Timor-Leste Studies Association, of which he was unaware.

As Ben saw it, independence is what one makes of it, and rigorous scholarship and critical analysis can play a pivotal role in helping Timor-Leste reach its potential in the years to come. The Timor-Leste Studies Association has an obvious role to play, unbiased by vested interests or personal agendas, in the interest of improving the lot of the people 'out there' - which is to say, in Timor-Leste.

## **Bibliography**

Fernandes Clinton, 2011, *The independence of East Timor*, 1<sup>st</sup> Sussex Academic Press, UK.