

Your friends do not forget you: early Australian activism on the ‘Timor Issue’ 1975-1979

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The initial years after the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, from 1975 to 1979, occupy a curious space in histories of the occupation. Many have acknowledged that international solidarity and human rights activists played a pivotal role in the achievement of East Timor’s independence, yet so far, little historical analysis has focused on international activism in these earliest years. On balance, the majority of analysis addressing activism has focused on the period after 1991. There are several reasons for this lack of attention to the early years of activism, including a strong focus in histories of this period on the armed resistance within the territory (Leach 2002, 43-4), and questioning the exact nature of international acquiescence—who knew what and when (Simpson 2005; Tomohiko 2012). Another reason is that international activism in this period is often viewed as unsuccessful.

This paper challenges the notion that activism during these early years was in vain. It aims to show that whilst Australian activists did not achieve their initial aims during this period—to force a cessation of hostilities, an Indonesian withdrawal, and a genuine act of self-determination—their activism was significant in the way it shaped an enduring and effective movement.

In 1975-76, activists battled government assertions about the legitimacy of the invasion and helped link the armed resistance to the outside world. By 1977-78 activists had learnt from their inability to create mass public pressure to focus their efforts in smaller, more effective ways. From 1979, they had ultimately formalised and institutionalised activism within Australia, creating a sustainable and effective activist network that would endure and be significant throughout the occupation. This was characterised by cooperation between different groups, a focus on human rights, and a style of rhetoric that was publically and politically influential. The early beginnings of the activist movement are therefore an essential element in the history of resistance.

To illustrate this, I will draw on the experiences of two activist groups, the Victorian branch of the Australia-East Timor Association (AETA) and the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA). I have chosen these two groups as a basis for analysis as they were both formed before the invasion and remained active through the period of occupation, and they represent two different forms of activism; AETA can be described as ‘solidarity’ activists, and ACFOA as ‘aid’ or ‘human rights’ activists. This last distinction is important, as it broadly represents the spectrum of types of activism in Australia.¹

ACFOA, a peak-body for charity, trade union, aid, and church groups, represented conservative, respectable views within the community. AETA, by contrast, as a grassroots solidarity organisation, comprised individual members from a broad variety of backgrounds and political outlooks. Where ACFOA’s membership required it to remain apolitical, AETA represented the community, and tried to directly affect a change in Australian foreign policy. The latter could take political sides, and be more strident in its criticism of government.

Framing the facts: contesting the legitimacy of invasion

Until 1976, international resistance was primarily a battle over narrative and truth. The struggle for international activists was to contest the legitimacy of the reasons given by the Indonesian and Australian governments for invasion, and assert the existence of a viable resistance movement within the territory that needed and deserved international public and diplomatic support. As long as the government narrative went unchallenged, the Australian public could not be mobilised to pressure for a change in government policy. Canberra’s support for Jakarta’s invasion was vital to the viability of occupation (Weldemichael 2013, 196-7), and heavily influenced international acquiescence of integration, yet it was not unresponsive to community pressure (Simpson 2005, 287). To challenge the legitimacy of

¹ To understand activism, its distinct streams need to be situated in a structural context of ‘transnational activist networks’, mutually supportive networks that different groups use in order to pursue an issue and bring about changes in policy (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 8-10).

government claims, activists needed a counter-narrative based in some form of believable truth.

Thankfully, between 1974 and 1975, several Australian activists had visited the territory, including members of an ACFOA delegation led by Jim Dunn, who wrote a seminal 1975 report on the visit. After the invasion this report, along with others, became the primary evidence for activists to challenge government assertions regarding the need for invasion and war. It directly contested the Indonesian and Australian governments' narrative about the territory, and laid the basis for counter-claims to legitimacy in debate on the 'Timor Issue'. It also contained the reminder that the Timorese looked to Australians as friends and brothers, holding them in high regard due to shared experiences in World War Two, and now expected Australians to come to their aid (*ACFOA 1975*, 6).

The report challenged each of the Australian government's claims regarding the legitimacy of the invasion. For example, on the situation within the territory in late 1975, the report asserted that 'the war is largely an Indonesian operation', and on Fretilin's supposed communism: 'FRETILIN is not communist or even communist inspired. It is a moderate nationalist socialist movement' (*ACFOA 1975*, 4, 17). Therefore, from the very beginning, activists had the evidence needed to contest government assertions. During 1975-76, both AETA and ACFOA centered their activism on disseminating this narrative of the viability of an independent Timor. ACFOA leveraged their networks to raise awareness through trade unions, church, and aid groups, whilst AETA distributed this information internationally, and supported a delegation to the UN, helping lay a basis for activism in other countries.

The right of the Timorese to self-determination was initially strongly backed by the Australian public (Simpson 2004, 455-6), with the East Timor Relief Appeal, launched in November 1975, receiving strong public support. The trade union movement, churches, and other charity groups donated \$190,000, and the general public \$160,000. Publicity campaigns reminded Australians that Dili was closer to Darwin than Hobart to Melbourne, and of the debt owed by Australia due to the sacrifices of Timorese for Australian commandos during World War Two (Walsh 1979a). During this conflict the RAAF dropped leaflets over the territory promising that Australia would not forget its friends (*FELO 1939-45*). Australians were likewise urged not to forget East Timor when remembering World War Two (*ETRA 1979*). The appeal was frustrated, however, in being able to distribute this aid effectively due to the closure of the territory. Even with this support, and the 1975 ACFOA report challenging the legitimacy of invasion, activists could not shake the Indonesian government's determination for integration or the Australian government's insistence on appeasement. Knowledge of the situation alone was insufficient to build public pressure within Australian for a change in government policy.

However, domestic pressure did have some bearing on Timor policy, provided it could be maintained. This was seen at several junctures, including Australia's actions at the 1975 UN vote, and its lukewarm response to the so-called 1976 'act of self-determination' (Viviani 1978, 260). The Australian government's support for integration could only exist to the point of domestic tolerance. Activists quickly realised that this point was defined by what the public knew about the war (John Sinnott, interview with author, 9 April 2014). To maintain pressure, activists had to access information that proved a continuation and escalation of violence, and communicate this information to the public. They had failed to substantially change policy through challenging the justification for invasion, and from 1976 therefore moved to demonstrate that integration was immoral and untenable due to its basis in systematic state violence. They aimed to make the Australian public aware of the violence of occupation, expecting that this would force a change in Australian government policy.

The issue becomes invisible: the challenge of accessing information

Without access to the territory, activists were reliant on information that could be smuggled out. Given the Indonesian military's success in sealing off the territory, this was exceptionally difficult, and media coverage suffered as a result (Hyland 2012).

A difference in tactics between activist groups had started to emerge immediately after the invasion, and they continued to diverge during 1976-77. Solidarity groups, such as AETA, focused on mobilising public support through demonstrations and vocal condemnation of the Indonesian government, constantly seeking to remind the Australian public of the debt it owed the Timorese (Sinnott 2014). But, with little new information to sustain them, they were from the point of invasion onwards fighting a losing battle for visibility. Simultaneously, the perceived urgency of their message only declined as time passed. Angry public protests began to draw less media attention, allowing the Australian government to shift

from its 1975 position opposing integration at the UN. Australians came to view the conflict as intractable, and the armed resistance as crushed (Scott and Tanter 1978, 1).

In theory, solidarity activists like AETA were aiming for public outcry at the violence to be manifest through the media, leading to constituent pressure on government, whilst aid activists like ACFOA focused on exerting pressure through the weight of their institutions. Both groups' aim was the same: build enough pressure to force a change in government policy. However, the coordination between their strategies was poor. The lack of pressure on each front was primarily due to a lack of reputable information through which to contest government assertions about the 'pacification' of the territory, which had the effect of quieting public outcry that had existed upon first news of the invasion.

There were two main sources of information through this period. Radio Maubere, the illegal communications link between Fretilin and activists in Northern Australia, was the primary source of information coming out of the territory, but unfortunately proved of little practical assistance to activists in generating public, media, or government support. Communist Party of Australia (CPA) members were heavily involved in receiving, translating, and distributing the broadcasts, but many newspaper and media sources refused to touch the information because of this party link. In addition, the reports were by nature difficult to verify, and the broadcasts were prone to a degree of Fretilin rhetorical flourish (Scott and Tanter 1978, 3-4). During this period, whilst the CPA played an important role in helping bring information from the Timorese to the outside world, rightly or wrongly their involvement had the unfortunate effect of making much of this information unusable for media purposes, and unpalatable to politicians (Pat Walsh 2014, interview, 12 April; Sinnott 2014). Whilst the CPA's efforts did play a vital role in informing other activists, that same message did not reach the public.

Church and aid figures also provided information. Whilst these were more easily verifiable, and therefore printable, they were not regular enough to sustain a dissenting voice in the media to government assertions, despite several journalists being sympathetic to the cause (Sinnott 2014). Compounding this, there were no visual prompts to trigger an emotional public outcry. The Australian public proved relatively unmoved by facts and figures. For instance, 1976 reports from church sources, published in the major dailies, that some 60,000 people, or 10% of the pre-invasion population had been killed (Skelton 1976), elicited comparatively little public reaction compared to the publication of photographs of emaciated Timorese children by Peter Rodgers (1979), which brought widespread international attention to the famine situation within the territory.

This paucity of media coverage was simply insufficient to sustain either public outcry or institutional pressure on government. Contrast this information vacuum to Indonesian government reports, unchallenged by the Australian government, and it is not hard to understand why the public was not more outraged. It is not that latent support for the Timorese dissipated, rather the public came to think that all was well. Activists realised that in order to be heard, they needed reputable and consistent access to information. It is tragic that the period when armed resistance within the territory was at its strongest coincided with it being least heard internationally.

A more conservative approach: the famine and a change of focus

By 1978, the territory faced a severe humanitarian crisis, with widespread famine and starvation. This was known by activists, but scarcely by the public until the 1979 publication of Peter Rogers' photographs. At the end of that same year, the main phase of the armed resistance was effectively defeated, reality catching up with what the Australian public already believed. Realising the difficulties facing them, including grassroots organisations' paucity of funds, a change in activist tactics occurred through 1978-79 (Scott and Tanter, 1978a; Sinnott 2014). Activism effectively became formalised and institutionalised, with moves towards professionalism and future planning. It lost much of its left-radical edge, both by design, and through splits within organisations including AETA, which made their message and campaigns more palatable to government, the media, and the public. This period laid the basis for sustained activism through the 1980s and 1990s.

An internal 1978 review of Australian activist activities by Richard Tanter and David Scott, and a seminal 1979 report, 'Aid and East Timor' by Pat Walsh, were amongst the hallmarks of this institutionalisation. Walsh was amongst the first to systematically document the emerging humanitarian crisis in the territory, reaffirming ACFOA's leading role as a reliable source of information (John Waddingham 2014, interview, 5 May). Tanter and Scott recognised that grassroots activists needed to

review their tactics for effecting a change in public opinion and foreign policy as the Indonesian military gained ascendancy. This included professionalising Democratic Republic of East Timor representation in Australia, and de-radicalising the channels through which activists received and distributed information.

New tactics emerged within ACFOA and AETA to place a stronger focus on the issue of human rights, specifically the plight of refugees, with calls for family reunions of Timorese split between Australia, Portugal, and Timor (Byrne 1977). This change in focus was effective, as it shed the hard-left appearance of Timor activism by putting the spotlight on children and families, a vastly more conservative notion than the focus on self-determination and independence (Walsh 2014). Further adding to its efficacy, the media more readily accepted reporting regarding family reunions, which required no difficult to obtain proof of culpability for the violence.

This focus on refugees had gradual success, with families reunited in Australia and greater awareness of the humanitarian situation within the territory. Conversely, this did relieve some pressure on the Australian government, allowing it to respond to public opinion without compromising its support for integration. This shows activists were learning to play a longer game and engage with the media and government on terms where they could be most effective, rather than on the absolutist principle that a full Indonesian withdrawal was the only acceptable outcome. The efficacy and penetration of angry protest was also in decline. For activism to be successful, a shift to a more institutional and conservative form was required. The face and rhetoric of activism had to change in order for activists' message to be palatable to government. As activism evolved through this period, a structure grew that had the potential to be influential on both government and the public.

Walsh's report, in some ways perhaps unwittingly, responded to and cemented this change in activist tactics. It marked the start of a period of professionalisation in ACFOA's advocacy on the Timor issue that would occur over subsequent years, and shifted the tone and style of information published by activists. This marked the beginning of activists creating what sociological literature has termed a 'structure of legitimacy' around their claims (Smith et al 1997, 62), a concept that Clinton Fernandes has deployed with great effect to show how activists coalesced moral weight around the Timorese position (2011, 49-50). What was an effective professionalisation of ACFOA's activities created a permanent, funded, and consistently manned structure that allowed for more effective and 'trustworthy' communication with the media and political spheres. It de-radicalised the heart of the activist movement, allowing for more effective lobbying of the major political parties, and increasing support from aid and church groups. At ACFOA, Walsh created a quasi-secretariat structure that allowed other activist groups to rely on ACFOA for information, and to some degree, loose coordination (Waddingham 2014). This was especially important at a time when solidarity groups had few active members, and limited funds to support their activities.

Activist tactics that had diverged around 1976 therefore became more coordinated. A nexus emerged between ACFOA and AETA, where individual activists were able to continue to make political arguments, engage directly with sympathetic politicians, demonstrate publicly, support Fretilin and the DRET, and advocate for independence; whilst ACFOA focused on human rights promotion, particularly self-determination, advocacy for access, and eventually a negotiated peace. It established legitimacy for the anti-integration position against government opposition, and created a blueprint for how future Australian activism could achieve its aims, redefining success in light of circumstances not necessarily dependent on a withdrawal, but in gradual steps that would benefit the Timorese. Therefore, in 1991, when proof of violence and culpability emerged in a graphic, accessible format, an institutional framework was in place to capture and direct the resultant public energy.

In explaining the difference between the initial activism of AETA and ACFOA and how it came to converge around this time, we come to understand how Australian activism became structured by 1979. Whilst they were not successful in all their campaigns or their main aim during these early years, activist groups stuck with the cause, and created the framework for a movement that would endure. Activists' greatest success was in recognising the strengths and weaknesses of their struggle, and creating a form of activism that was both enduring, and influential. This is not to say that other forms of activism that occurred both during this period and later were not intrinsically linked to the success of the struggle, rather to illustrate the significance of the shift that took place through 1978-79 towards a professional, depoliticised, institutional form of activism. Ultimately, with this structure, the friends of the Timorese, both those who had been present in 1974-75, and those who had joined later, did not forget them.

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