

CAPSTRANS Summer Session Scholarship Report

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Self-Assessment

I set for myself two main objectives over the summer: to conduct a comprehensive literature review of my thesis topic and to refine the scope of my thesis considerably. I have successfully fulfilled both of these objectives. In conducting a literature review, I accessed and appraised a wealth of secondary material. This proved invaluable, as I was hitherto unfamiliar with the details surrounding my topic. By acquainting myself with the relevant scholarship, I achieved three considerable goals: an understanding of the chronology of Indonesia's invasion of Portuguese Timor (imperative when one attempts to reconcile Whitlam's private endorsements with his public rhetoric); an appreciation of how the invasion fit into an historical context (essential when one considers the motivations of Whitlam and Suharto); and a grasp of the controversies surrounding the invasion (instructive when one contemplates how events may have transpired differently). Thus, I can now write confidently, and from an informed perspective.

In so far as examining primary documents pertaining to my thesis, I opted not to do so in great detail. This was partly because I wanted to avoid being overwhelmed by information I did not yet fully appreciate, and partly because I had not (until quite recently) developed a specific focus for my thesis.

Refining my thesis indeed proved a troublesome endeavour. My initial idea was to write a comparison between Indonesia's invasion of Portuguese Timor in 1975 and the bloodshed unleashed by Indonesian military forces in the wake of East Timor's historic vote for independence from Indonesia in 1999. In particular, I intended to compare the contrasting responses of Whitlam and Howard to these crises. However, after consulting with my supervisor, Professor Adrian Vickers, I scrapped this idea—it was simply too ambitious for a thesis of 20,000 words. I then envisaged writing a thesis concerned with whether another Labor leader would have implemented the same foreign policies as Whitlam. Herbert Evatt seemed the ideal subject, as he was a former Leader of the Opposition with highly developed foreign policies and a revered colleague of Whitlam. However, upon doing some preliminary research, it seemed that the scope for such a thesis topic was limited. The angle I have decided upon incorporates an examination of the Australian media. Specifically, I wish to investigate the extent to which the Australian media influenced government policy and public opinion. Such a topic would enable me to establish the conditions whereby the media is able to exert influence over the Executive. It would also provide an opportunity to conduct fresh research. Obviously it will be necessary to access newspaper articles and news transcripts from the period. Thus, archival material obtained from inter-library loans will be an integral part of my research. The University of Wollongong Library has been extremely helpful in this regard.

Suharto's Motivations

It seems prudent to examine the factors which may have influenced Suharto's decision to invade Portuguese Timor. The first explanation is that Suharto was motivated by fear—he anticipated that Fretilin would establish a communist government in Portuguese Timor, and that the colony would consequently become a haven for insurgents. To appreciate this justification, one must consider the historical context. Suharto consolidated his power by purging the Indonesian Communist Party; the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI). Indeed, Amnesty International estimated that “many more than one million” communists were killed by forces loyal to Suharto between 1965 and 1966.¹ The legacy of this pogrom was that Suharto harboured an irrational fear of communists—their ideology was simply too radical to comply with his essentially conservative agenda. Moreover, Ho Chi Minh's forces had recently emerged victorious in Indochina. This undoubtedly exacerbated Suharto's paranoia. Despite Fretilin's communist leanings, its ultimate goal was independence. It is unlikely that Fretilin would have compromised its objective by fostering communist insurgents intent upon destabilising Suharto's regime.

A second explanation for the invasion is that Suharto feared that an independent Timor might encourage a separatist movement in Irian Jaya. Indeed, Indonesia had incorporated West New Guinea into its territory in 1969. Thus, resentment within the region may still have been considerable in 1975. Moreover, Irian Jaya is on the fringe of Indonesia's territory. Inhabitants thus possessed the geographic means by which to sustain a separatist movement.

¹Chomsky, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*, 1993, <http://cyberspacei.com/>.

A third explanation is that East Timor was likely to be an aid dependency. To be sure, its economic prospects were dismal. Suharto may have wished to avoid an unnecessary drain on Indonesian resources. A fourth explanation—arguably the most compelling—is that Indonesia was influenced by a sense of meta-geography; its natural geographical boundaries were affronted by the presence of a foreign enclave. Although *Konfrontasi* had been abandoned in the 1960s, elements of its appeal still remained.

Whatever the Jakarta military regime may have feared, most observers found it difficult to believe that East Timor, with a population of 650,000, could pose a threat to Indonesia, then the world’s fifth most populous nation with 140 million inhabitants.²

Whitlam’s Motivations

It is unfortunate that Whitlam’s abysmal failure to manage the East Timor problem has tarnished his government’s foreign policy record. Apart from this “running sore” in diplomatic relations between Australia and Indonesia, Whitlam’s foreign policies were exemplary. His most lauded achievements in this area were undoubtedly the establishment of diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China and the granting of independence—after decades of stalling by the Liberal Party—to Papua New Guinea. Many commentators have attempted to diminish these achievements—especially Whitlam’s establishment of diplomacy with China—by claiming that they were inevitable; that the political climate within which Whitlam was operating was conducive

²Kohen and Taylor, *An Act of Genocide*, p. 17.

to such reforms. It cannot be denied, for instance, that Nixon was engineering détente with China before Whitlam made overtures towards Chau En-Lai, the Premier of China. However, such an interpretation underestimates the extent to which Whitlam implemented independent policies which were uncircumscribed by the influence of Australia's major allies. As Whitlam asserts, he created the impetus for change in Australia.³

Despite his success in other foreign policy fields, it is undeniable that Whitlam dealt with the East Timor issue poorly. Perhaps his failure can be attributed to the fact that he was hamstrung between two conflicting ideals: the promotion of human rights and the desire to foster closer ties with Indonesia—Australia's most important ally in the Asia-Pacific region. Upon becoming Prime Minister, Whitlam embarked on a radical program of reform. One of his immediate steps was to ratify two major UN treaties pertaining to human rights on 18 December 1972. Equally important to him, however, was the maintenance of cordial relations with Indonesia. Early in his term of office, Whitlam stated: "It goes without saying that the number one [foreign policy] goal of my government is to strengthen relations with Indonesia."⁴ Ultimately, strategic concerns were promoted at the expense of human rights.

One must question why Whitlam tacitly endorsed Operation Komodo—the Indonesian invasion of East Timor which occurred on 8 December 1975. One factor which undoubtedly influenced his decision was East Timor's internal strife and weak economy. Although Whitlam generally championed

³Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government 1972–1975*, p. 26.

⁴Kohen and Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

the plight of former colonies and advocated self-determination, he did not perceive an independent East Timor to be a viable nation-state. Conversely, he shared Suharto's belief that East Timor would become an aid dependency. There were other more compelling factors which induced Whitlam to support Indonesia. Whitlam rose to power after twenty-three years of Liberal incumbency. During Labor's time in Opposition, consecutive Liberal leaders pursued a distinctly derivative foreign policy line, taking their lead in all major international disputes from either Britain or America. In the case of the war in Vietnam, this locked the Liberal Party into an illegitimate and ultimately fatal course of action. By aligning itself with the xenophobic policies of America, the Liberal Party shunned close relations with most countries in South-East Asia. Whitlam aimed to rectify Australia's regional vulnerability by establishing closer links with the Suharto government. To strengthen ties with Australia's neighbours, Whitlam abolished the entrenched Liberal policy of 'forward defence', which supposed that Australia was best defended from Asia. Forward defence was not only costly, but counterproductive; by antagonising its neighbours, Australia exacerbated its susceptibility to attack. Indeed, the Indonesian archipelago forms an umbrella over the Australian continent, and a hostile regime in Jakarta could have caused Canberra immediate, practical problems. In place of forward defence, Whitlam installed a system of 'continental defence'. This involved defending Australia from Australia. An integral component of this strategy was the establishment of friendly relations with Indonesia.

Whitlam had other ideological reasons to back Suharto at the expense of East Timorese sovereignty. Namely, he harboured an aversion to colo-

nialism, believing it to be the primary catalyst for civil strife throughout the world. This was in contrast to the majority of his parliamentary colleagues—both Liberal and Labor—who believed that communism was the more pernicious ideological force. Whitlam sympathised with the Indonesians, who had endured centuries under Dutch colonial rule. He believed that with the disintegration of colonialism in the East Indies, Indonesia had a legitimate claim to all territories within its immediate vicinity. This included East Timor, which had been artificially partitioned from West Timor as a result of colonialism. In condoning Indonesia's 'annexation' of East Timor, however, Whitlam inadvertently supported an act of neo-colonialism. This seems highly hypocritical considering his staunch anti-colonial stance.

Australian interests in keeping a close relationship with Indonesia went beyond general political concerns. The Labor government's desire for closer links was part of a general strategy to increase Australian influence and investment in the ASEAN countries of Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia. Improved relations with Indonesia helped to provide Canberra with greater access to regional forums such as ASEAN, and this in turn led to greater opportunities for Australian political and business interests in the area. Indeed, Australia's *de jure* recognition of Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor in 1979—despite the UN's unyielding refusal to do so—was probably motivated in part by the knowledge that the Timor Gap had significant potential for oil and natural gas production. Thus, Whitlam's decision to support Suharto may have been informed by self-interest.

Outcomes

In the first of several private meetings he had with Suharto at Wonosobo in September 1974, Whitlam expressed his vision for East Timor's future. His somewhat naïve hope was for East Timor to be integrated into Indonesia, provided this was achieved through East Timorese self-determination. According to official records, Whitlam conveyed the impression to Suharto that relations with Indonesia were paramount; the latter self-determination clause was included chiefly to satisfy domestic public opinion. The problem with Whitlam's proposal is that it was inherently paradoxical—it soon became apparent that a referendum in East Timor would result in a vote for independence. Thus, Indonesia would be compelled to use force if it was intent upon annexing East Timor. Although Whitlam had attempted to dissuade Indonesia from resorting to excessive force, Try Sutrisno—Indonesia's then Armed Forces chief—interpreted Whitlam's moderate show of support as a “green light” to invade East Timor. Thus, having inadvertently committed Australia to a specific course of action, Whitlam was locked into a diplomatic nightmare from which—despite his best efforts—he could not deviate.

Whitlam's other central predicament was that he could not openly state his government's policies to the Australian public—to do so would be interpreted as a political about-face. Thus, the rhetoric he disseminated publicly contradicted his private endorsements to Suharto. This precarious strategy inevitably backfired. The Indonesian government justifiably accused Whitlam of duplicity, which hampered the capacity of Australian ministers to reason with Indonesian officials. Moreover, as a consequence of leaked cables,

the Australian public unearthed Whitlam's deceit. This obviously fostered scepticism towards Whitlam's beleaguered government.

Upon surveying the evidence, it is apparent that Whitlam failed in his objective to seek a satisfactory resolution to the crisis in East Timor. His indecisiveness was not only detrimental to his legacy, but indirectly gave impetus to genocide. In his own defence, Whitlam attributes primary blame to the Portuguese government. Indeed, Portugal assumed no responsibility for overseeing East Timor's transition to independence. Moreover, Whitlam could not reasonably have anticipated that Indonesian military forces would have perpetrated so many atrocities against the East Timorese. Only with the benefit of hindsight have scholars been able to assess the sobering extent of the bloodshed. Despite this, it is arguable that Whitlam could have asserted greater diplomatic pressure against Suharto. Once Indonesia revealed its intent to unleash violence, Whitlam should have pushed for greater UN involvement.

References

- [1] Chomsky, Noam, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*, 1993, http://cyberspacei.com/jesusi/authors/chomsky/year/y501_005.htm. Chomsky draws parallels between the genocide of colonial times and the murder and exploitation associated with modern-day imperialism. He presents a scathing critique of America's illegitimate involvement in Asian conflicts.
- [2] Colombijn, Freek and Lindblad, J. Thomas, 'Introduction' in Freek Colombijn and J. Thomas Lindblad (eds.), *Roots of Violence in Indonesia: Contemporary Violence in Historical Perspective*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Pasir Panjang, 2002. Colombijn and Lindblad contradict the assertion that Indonesian violence has escalated since the collapse of the New Order. They unearth evidence of a stubborn culture of violence in Indonesia which stems from the early colonial period.
- [3] Cribb, Robert, 'From total people's defence to massacre: Explaining Indonesian military violence in East Timor' in Freek Colombijn and J. Thomas Lindblad (eds.), *Roots of Violence in Indonesia: Contemporary Violence in Historical Perspective*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Pasir Panjang, 2002. Cribb deduces that the bloodshed unleashed by Indonesian military forces following Indonesia's invasion of East Timor in 1975 was not a product of deliberate planning. Rather, the atrocities were generated

by a sub-culture of violence whose roots lay partly in a military contempt for civilians dating back to the revolutionary period, and partly in military triumphalism and impunity which rapidly took shape after 1965.

- [4] **Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974–1976*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 2000.** This publication chronicles Australia’s involvement in Indonesia’s invasion of Portuguese Timor. The primary documents included demonstrate the extent to which Whitlam’s public rhetoric contradicted his private endorsements to Suharto.
- [5] **Elson, R. E., ‘In fear of the people: Suharto and the justification of state-sponsored violence under the New Order’ in Freek Colombijn and J. Thomas Lindblad (eds.), *Roots of Violence in Indonesia: Contemporary Violence in Historical Perspective*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Pasir Panjang, 2002.** Elson attributes Suharto’s parochial worldview to his experience in the Indonesian military. Suharto is portrayed as having an arrogant and conservative political outlook—arrogant because he purportedly based his policies on the aspirations of the people, yet didn’t trust them; conservative because he perpetually resisted reforming the fundamental structure of Indonesian society, preferring instead to extol the virtues of Pancasila.

- [6] **Freudenberg, Graham, ‘Aspects of Foreign Policy’** in Hugh Emy, Owen Hughes and Race Mathews (eds.), *Whitlam Revisited: Policy Development, Policies and Outcomes*, Pluto Press, Leichhardt, 1993. Freudenberg highlights the extent to which Whitlam ‘broke the mould’ of Australian foreign policy making. He discusses in detail Whitlam’s doctrine of the mandate—a factor which may have compelled Whitlam to pledge support for Indonesia even after it became apparent that Suharto was committed to hostile action in East Timor.
- [7] **Goldsworthy, David; Dutton, David; Gifford, Peter; and Pitty, Roderic, ‘Reorientation’** in David Goldsworthy (ed.), *Facing North: A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia*, vol. 1: 1901 to the 1970s, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 2001. The authors of this publication assert that Whitlam’s failure over East Timor stemmed from the fact that he had not developed a clear view of the role of human rights in foreign policy or a coherent policy for promoting human rights abroad.
- [8] **Kingsbury, Damien, *South-East Asia: A Political Profile***, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2001. Kingsbury demonstrates the extent to which contemporary Indonesian political structures are a legacy of Dutch colonial rule. The Dutch established a hierarchical society which rewarded fealty above ability. This phenomenon is still evident in Indonesia.

- [9] **Kohen, Arnold and Taylor, John, *An Act of Genocide: Indonesia's Invasion of East Timor*, TAPOL, London, 1979.** Kohen and Taylor condemn the complicity of Western governments in sponsoring Indonesia's invasion of East Timor. They especially denounce the fact that America and other Western nations sustained the carnage in East Timor by supplying the Indonesian government with military equipment.
- [10] **Oakes, Laurie, *Whitlam PM: A Biography*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1973.** Oakes comprehensively charts Whitlam's meteoric rise to power. He portrays Whitlam as an articulate, inspiring and visionary leader.
- [11] **Pemberton, Gregory, 'Whitlam and the Labor Tradition' in David Lee and Christopher Waters (eds.), *Evatt to Evans: The Labor Tradition in Australian Foreign Policy*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997.** Pemberton concludes that although Whitlam's foreign policies represented a significant break from what preceded them, most of his initiatives echoed those of previous Labor governments.
- [12] **Polomka, Peter, *Indonesia Since Sukarno*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1971.** Polomka highlights the extent to which corruption was endemic in Indonesian society in the 1970s. His perspective is unique in that it was written during the period in question, and is thus untainted by reflection.

- [13] Salla, Michael B., ‘East Timor, Regional Security and the Labor Tradition’ in David Lee and Christopher Waters (eds.), *Evatt to Evans: The Labor Tradition in Australian Foreign Policy*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997. Salla purports that Labor’s foreign policy tradition is based on two imperatives: liberal internationalism—which advocates multilateral intervention through international institutions in civil conflicts—and ardent nationalism—which is a pragmatic assessment of Australia’s national interests. Essentially, Whitlam’s East Timor policy was doomed from the outset because these fundamental ideals were in conflict.
- [14] Terrill, Greg, *Secrecy and Openness: The Federal Government from Menzies to Whitlam and Beyond*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 2000. Terrill appraises the benefits and drawbacks of obtaining government information after an extended period of time has elapsed. He makes the ironic observation that Whitlam advocated greater government transparency.
- [15] Tiffen, Rodney, *Diplomatic Deceits: Government, Media and East Timor*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2001. Tiffen claims that Australia’s policy failure in East Timor was a product of the government’s inability to control the news media. This seems a legitimate assertion, since the government’s official propaganda was contradicted by independent news reports in the months preceding the invasion.

- [16] Turner, Michele, *Telling: East Timor, Personal Testimonies 1942–1992*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1992. Turner assembles an exhaustive compilation of primary accounts, and in doing so, highlights the plight of the East Timorese under draconian Indonesian rule. The majority of subjects interviewed attest that the Indonesians treated them even more abhorrently than the Japanese during World War II.
- [17] Viviani, Nancy, ‘The Whitlam Government’s Policy Towards Asia’ in David Lee and Christopher Waters (eds.), *Evatt to Evans: The Labor Tradition in Australian Foreign Policy*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997. Viviani states that Whitlam’s greatest foreign policy achievement was not the initiation of a radical shift in policy direction, but the reformation of the Australian public’s attitudes.
- [18] Whitlam, Edward Gough, *The Whitlam Government 1972–1975*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1985. In this instance, Whitlam categorically denies conniving with Suharto over the invasion of East Timor. He maintains that Suharto was preoccupied with legalities, and that Indonesia wanted Portugal to maintain authority in East Timor for a prolonged period. Reportedly, Suharto issued a call for war at “the eleventh hour”. These claims are undermined by primary evidence. To portray himself more favourably, Whitlam criticises both the irresponsibility of Portugal in refusing to oversee East Timor’s transition to independence, and the intransigence of East Timorese political parties.