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# East Timorese activists campaign for independence from Indonesia, 1987-2002

- [\(mainly or initiated by\) indigenous participants](#) [1]
- [\(mainly or initiated by\) people of color](#) [2]
- [\(mainly or initiated by\) student participants](#) [3]
- [an example of paradox of repression](#) [4]
- [an example of regime change](#) [5]
- [included innovative organizational forms/communication forms](#) [6]
- [included participation by more than one social class](#) [7]

## Timing

Time period notes:

Most East Timorese actions ended by 1999, but the country did not gain independence until May of 2002

1987

to:

May

2002

## Location and Goals

Country:

East Timor

Country:

Indonesia

Location City/State/Province:

East Timor and Jakarta, Indonesia

Location Description:

Throughout the territory of East Timor, though mostly in urban centers

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

The initial goal was the right to self-determination. The goal was to achieve this largely through revealing the brutality of the Suharto regime to the outside world and gaining international support. Later in the campaign, the goals were the release of Gusmao, an end to human rights abuses, and a referendum on self-determination.

## Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications>students unfurl pro-independence banners at the pope's pulpit during mass

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 004. Signed public statements
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 045. Demonstrative funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support>protest to gain international recognition

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 162. Sit-in>occupied the U.S. embassy to interrupt an APEC conference

Methods in 5th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support>mass student demonstrations

Methods in 6th segment:

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 013. Deputations
- 050. Teach-ins

Segment Length:

2.5 years

## **Classifications**

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- East Timorese independence activists
- East Timorese students

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

Leaders:

Xanana Gusmao, the National Council of Maubere Resistance (CNRM), National Resistance of East Timorese Students (Renetil), National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT)

Partners:

Jose Ramos-Horta, Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo

External allies:

The United Nations Security Council, Amnesty International, Indonesian Legal Aid Society, Solidamor, Institute for Human Rights Study and Advocacy, Infight (Indonesian Front for Human Rights), East Timor Action Network (ETAN)

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

## **Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo
- CNRM
- Jose Ramos-Horta
- Renetil
- Xanana Gusmao

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- ETAN
- Indonesian Legal Aid Society
- Infight
- Institute for Human Rights Study and Advocacy
- Solidamor
- The United Nations Security Council

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Amnesty International

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Human Rights Study and Advocacy

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

This report is lacking many international external allies because it is beyond the scope of this particular report.

Segment Length:

2.5 years

## **Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

Opponents:

The Indonesian government and military

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Unclear. There was a guerrilla faction of CNRM, but by 1989, Gusmao ordered them to engage in violence as

little as possible.

Repressive Violence:

Torture, massacre, sexual abuse, harassment on university campuses, scorched earth campaign

## Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

4 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

8 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

While the campaign took a long time, in the end East Timor did get a referendum on self-determination, Indonesia pulled out (after much violence), and political prisoners were released. This all occurred after East Timor gained the support of a UN military force

East Timor, a portion of the Indonesian archipelago, was colonized by Portugal in the 16th century. It was not until 1975 that Portugal decolonized the area, at which point East Timor declared independence. Shortly after this, however, the Indonesian army, under the orders of Indonesian President Suharto, invaded and annexed East Timor. 60,000 East Timorese were killed or died of starvation during the invasion.

East Timorese resisted the occupation from the beginning of the invasion, largely in the form of guerrilla organizations engaging in armed conflict with the Indonesian military. The main organization was the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN). One of Suharto's justifications for annexing East Timor was based on a claim that FRETILIN was a communist threat to both East Timor and to Indonesia.

Suharto installed a puppet government, instituted a heavy military presence, and allowed 100,000 Muslim Indonesian settlers to move into East Timor, the population of which was mostly Catholic. The Indonesian government also controlled all of the information and people that went in and out of the territory.

From 1975 to 1978, FRETILIN fought against Indonesian troops using guerilla tactics, but in 1980 the military massacred about 200,000 East Timorese (nearly 1/3 of the territory's population), which effectively shut down most FRETILIN guerrilla activity. In 1987, Xanana Gusmao, one of the FRETILIN commanders, stepped down and created the National Council of Maubere Resistance (CNRM). CNRM had three pillars: an Armed Front, a Diplomatic Front, and a Clandestine Front.

The Clandestine Front, largely made up of students, organized nonviolent resistance. Much of the youth was involved in relaying messages, body counts, eyewitness testimonies, and other valuable information to international human rights organizations. This wing of the organization was very dispersed and decentralized. The students relied heavily on educational campaigns and nonviolent protests to raise awareness about human rights abuses in East Timor. The Clandestine Front was also the link between the FRETILIN guerillas in the mountains, headed by Gusmao, and the diplomatic faction led by Jose Ramos-Horta, the CNRM foreign minister.

In 1989, a group of students who had received scholarships to study in Indonesia formed the National

Resistance of East Timorese Students (Renetil). They had three main strategies: maintaining distance from Indonesian influences, revealing the brutality of the Suharto regime and Indonesian occupation to the outside world, and preparing East Timorese professionals to be able to help build an independent East Timor. From the start, the organization was concerned with preparing for any potential chaos or power vacuums.

One of the main goals of these organizations was to gain attention on the international stage, over both human rights abuses and issues of self-determination. However, East Timor was not prominent within international political dialogue.

An opportunity to gain exposure came, however, in 1989. In November of 1988, in order to counter accusations that Indonesia's presence in East Timor was harmful and unjust, Suharto had declared East Timor "open territory," and in 1989, invited Pope John Paul II to Dili, the capital. East Timorese activists used this opportunity to launch their first public protest. The pope visited Dili in October of 1989. During the mass, a group of youths ran to the altar and shouted, "Long live the Pope," and, "Long live East Timor." They then unfurled banners saying, "Free East Timor," and, "Indonesia, get out." For the first time, the independence movement gained significant mass media coverage around the world, thoroughly embarrassing the Indonesian government. The action also helped to galvanize the East Timor population behind the independence movement.

Activists (mostly students) staged a series of more protests coinciding with visits from foreign delegations. One such protest was when US Ambassador John Jonjo visited in January of 1991. The activists also managed to get an Australian journalist to publish interviews with Gusmao and the FALANTIL.

November 1991 was a turning point for the campaign. On November 12, 1991, East Timorese youths transformed a funeral for a fellow activist in Dili into a large pro-independence rally. Attendees were unarmed, yet when they reached the Santa Cruz cemetery, Indonesian troops opened fire, killing over 250 people. Two American journalists were there, along with a British cameraman who caught the incident on film. The story circulated throughout the world, inciting international outrage and an international solidarity movement (for more information on the international solidarity movement, see the case "U.S. Activists Pressure the U.S. Government to Withdraw Support from Indonesia During the East Timorese Independence Movement, 1991-1999"). On November 19, eighty East Timorese and Indonesian students marched down the main street in Jakarta from the UN offices in the city. While police were detaining a portion of the students, one student read a statement refuting the police claim that only nineteen people were killed in the Santa Cruz massacre. That same day, twenty people also gathered at the Santa Cruz cemetery where the shooting took place to hold a mass for those who had died.

The massacre also convinced some that the East Timorese and the Indonesian people had the same enemy: the Suharto regime. Renetil started trying to bring Indonesians, in addition to the larger international community, into the cause. They reached out to intellectuals, political opposition leaders, and human rights activists. Students started studying Bahasa Indonesian (the official language of Indonesia), went to school there, started becoming part of Indonesian life, and then protested in the streets in Indonesia itself. They also worked closely with Indonesian human rights groups such as the Indonesian Legal Aid Society, Solidamor, and the Institute for Human Rights Study and Advocacy.

In their campaign to gain the support of foreign institutions and governments, the Diplomatic Front of CNRM, namely Jose Ramos-Horta, traveled to meet foreign diplomats and government officials, as well as UN officials. Additionally, East Timorese activists began to travel around the world to participate in conferences and solidarity meetings, urging people to pressure their governments to push Indonesia to allow East Timorese self-determination. This growing international solidarity helped to encourage the continuing grassroots movement within East Timor. In 1994, the CNRM proposed a Three Phase Peace Plan to the UN. Phase one called for UN-

supervised talks between Indonesia and Portugal with an aim toward ending armed conflict in East Timor, and to release political prisoners. Phase two would be a transition stage of autonomy in which the East Timorese would govern themselves through their own institutions. Phase three would be a referendum on self-determination. However, the Indonesian government ignored this plan.

On November 12, 1994, during an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Jakarta, twenty-nine Indonesian and East Timorese demonstrators climbed the wall of the U.S. embassy where the summit was being held and stayed for 12 days. This further attracted international media attention. Student activity in East Timor continued, resulting in arrests, torture, and assassinations of hundreds of student activists.

A turning point in Western governments' policies toward East Timor occurred in 1996. That December, the leader of the Catholic Church in East Timor, Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo and Jose Ramos-Horta were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. When they each accepted the prize, they called on the international community to support a referendum on East Timor's right to self-determination.

In 1998, East Timorese pro-independence factions joined under an organization called the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT). The CNRT and students helped lead a mobilization of East Timorese, including business elites and members of the Indonesian security forces to call for Suharto's resignation. Shortly thereafter, in May of 1998, Suharto resigned from his position as president. President B.J. Habibie was appointed as his successor.

After pressure from the international community, President Habibie offered East Timor special autonomy in June of 1998 in exchange for recognition of Indonesia's sovereignty. In response, on June 15, 15,000 students demonstrated in Dili and demanded a referendum on independence, as well as the release of Gusmao from house arrest. Due to both internal and external pressure, Habibie offered independence as an option in January 1999, and on May 5, 1999, an agreement was signed between Indonesia, Portugal, and the UN calling for a UN-supervised referendum on the status of East Timor. Close to 80% of East Timorese voted for independence. However, the day after the vote, Indonesia-backed militias invaded East Timor and instituted a scorched-earth campaign that led to mass displacement. Gusmao called on FALINTIL guerillas to not fight back, saying later, "we did not want to be drawn into their game and their orchestration of violence in a civil war... We never expected such a dimension in the rampage that followed."

Finally, on September 14, 2000, the UN Security Council authorized an Australian-led international force to East Timor, and one month later, the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor was established. After a two-year transition period, East Timor became an independent state in May of 2002. Gusmao became the first president of the Democratic Republic of East Timor.

## **Research Notes**

Influences:

This campaign influenced the Aceh campaign for independence from Indonesia (see "Acehnese struggle for self-determination, 1998-2001")(2).

Sources:

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#### Additional Notes:

The details on the actions themselves and the nature of the "protests" carried out by East Timorese activists are unclear.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Hannah Jones, 16/02/2011

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