



Australia's response to East Timor invasion by Indonesia

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The Australian Labor Party (ALP) under Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was in power at the time of Portugal's 1974 Carnation Revolution. Labor had come to power in the 1972 elections, and Australia-Indonesia relations were running smoothly at the official level by this time. Whitlam, an erudite and cosmopolitan figure who spoke of the need for Australia to be "at home in Asia," nevertheless regarded a stable Indonesia under the Suharto regime as vital to the Australian national interest. He therefore supported Indonesian claims to sovereignty over East Timor. He argued that an independent East Timor would be "an unviable state and a potential threat to the area."

Whitlam had plenty of alternatives: he could have lobbied internationally for a UN-supervised referendum at any time after the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal. Furthermore, a de-colonisation process under the auspices of the UN would have obstructed the Indonesian invasion by internationalising the issue. Australia could have recognised FRETILIN and UDT, and insisted on their legitimacy as representatives of the East Timorese in any de-colonisation process. Australia could also have informed the US that its preference was for an independent East Timor, even if under heavy Australian influence. None of these steps was taken.

Whitlam had to contend with the hostility of the Australian population to Indonesia's plans. Since public opinion was at odds with policy, Australian policy makers issued perfunctory statements supporting the East Timorese right to self-determination. Indonesian and Australian officials understood that these statements were merely for public consumption; no meaningful action would be taken to prevent an Indonesian invasion or to support the right of self-determination for East Timor. Whitlam's thinking was encapsulated in a diplomatic cable as follows: "I am in favour of incorporation but obeisance has to be made to self-determination. I want it incorporated but I do not want this done in a way which will create argument in Australia which would make people more critical of Indonesia."

The Australian government blocked avenues through which the East Timorese might advance their cause. In 1974, for example, Don Willessee, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, wrote to Whitlam arguing against the ALP's own proposal to organise a parliamentary delegation to visit East Timor. The problem, as he saw it, was that any parliamentary delegation that went to East Timor would see immediately that the population supported independence under the leadership of FRETILIN. Privately, Australian officials acknowledged that "FRETILIN's claims have to be taken very seriously. Its credentials as the legitimate representative of the people of Portuguese Timor are potentially strong in an international debate; as indeed they are within Portuguese Timor."

The Liberal-Country Party coalition led by Malcolm Fraser succeeded the Whitlam government in 1975. The overwhelming majority of the deaths in East Timor occurred due to starvation in a military-induced famine between 1977 and 1979. As the death toll mounted, Fraser ordered the interdiction of supply boats carrying humanitarian aid from Darwin to East Timor, the surveillance and arrest of activists who tried to communicate by radio from the Northern Territory, and the denial of a visitor's visa to Jose Ramos-Horta and other East Timorese independence campaigners. Australian ambassador Tom Critchley visited East Timor along with ten other foreign ambassadors from 6 to 8 September 1978. The ambassadors were briefed that approximately 125,000 people had come down from the mountains, and that as many as a quarter of them were suffering from cholera, malaria, tuberculosis and advanced malnutrition. The Ambassador reported in confidence that the visit had been carefully controlled by the Indonesian authorities, who were clearly anxious that the tragic plight of many of the refugees seen should not be blamed on their administration. Many ambassadors came away shocked by the condition of the refugees, and one ambassador said that the children in one camp reminded him of victims of an African famine.



Fraser was so worried about the Australian public's hostility to any recognition of Indonesia's takeover that the Department of Foreign Affairs avoided getting formal legal advice on the question. It feared getting an embarrassing answer. By 1978, however, policymakers assessed that the political conditions would permit de facto recognition; the volume of letters the government received about Timor had dropped substantially, and newspaper and television interest was declining. Consequently, on 20 January 1978 Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock announced Australia's de facto recognition of Indonesia's sovereignty. This was followed by de jure recognition with the opening of negotiations on the seabed boundary in the Timor Gap in February 1979. Australia became the only western country to officially recognise Indonesia's annexation of East Timor.

Further reading:

Aarons, Mark & Domm, Robert. *East Timor: A Western Made Tragedy*. Sydney: Left Book Club, 1992.

Fernandes, Clinton. *The Independence of East Timor: Multidimensional Perspectives*. Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2011.

Taylor, John. *East Timor: the price of freedom*. New York: Zed Books, 1999.