



Australian/Indonesian foreign relations

Source: Clinton Fernandes, Associate Professor, International and Political Studies Program, UNSW Australia | February 2015

Australia supported Indonesia's independence after World War II despite the objections of the Dutch and the displeasure of the British and the United States governments. When the Dutch used force against the independence movement, the Australian government eventually referred the matter to the United Nations Security Council as a "breach of the peace" under Article 39 of the UN Charter. So deeply did the Indonesian nationalists appreciate this support that they nominated Australia as their representative on the United Nations Good Offices Committee. Indonesia's foreign minister, Dr Subandrio, described Australia as the "mid-wife" of the Indonesian Republic.

Australian governments consistently supported the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. Foreign policy operated within a bipartisan consensus; all Australian governments enjoyed the tacit support of their parliamentary opponents. Regardless of which political party happened to be in power, governments could rest secure in the knowledge that no parliamentary opposition would argue seriously for self-determination for the East Timorese. Although the Australian public was never comfortable with the Indonesian occupation, there was little it could do at the ballot box to change Australian policy towards it, since both parties had almost identical policies. The bipartisan consensus therefore gave successive governments a margin of comfort necessary to neutralise public opinion.

The Australian Labor Party (ALP) under Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was in power at the time of Portugal's 1974 Carnation Revolution. Whitlam 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. The Liberal-Country Party coalition led by Malcolm Fraser succeeded the Whitlam government in 1975. As the death toll mounted, the Fraser government legitimized the Indonesian invasion by extending de facto recognition of Indonesia's sovereignty in

January 1978, followed by de jure recognition with the opening of negotiations on the seabed boundary in the Timor Gap in February 1979.

When the ALP was re-elected in 1983 and Bob Hawke became Prime Minister of Australia, he continued the Fraser government's negotiations with Indonesia on the seabed boundary in the Timor Gap, eventually signing the Timor Gap Treaty in December 1989. Hawke's successor, Paul Keating (Prime Minister from 1991-1996), continued in this vein, pursuing closer ties with the Indonesian military. Keating and his foreign minister Gareth Evans accelerated Australia's links with the Suharto regime on the basis of maintaining "order" and "stability." Under their stewardship, Australia carried out more military exercises with Indonesia than with any other country. They awarded Indonesian foreign minister Ali Alatas the Order of Australia in 1995, and negotiated the Australia-Indonesia Agreement on Maintaining Security in secret. Keating stated that the Agreement might have been unachievable had its negotiation been preceded by public scrutiny.

The Howard government, which came to power in March 1996, maintained the bipartisan consensus. Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer said that Suharto was perhaps the world's greatest figure in the latter half of the 20th century. The bipartisan consensus was fractured by the Australian Labor Party's spokesperson on Foreign Affairs, Laurie Brereton. His change of policy while in opposition was one of the most important elements in the final years of East Timor's independence struggle. The Howard government was forced to deploy a peacekeeping mission to East Timor under the pressure of a tidal wave of public outrage in September 1999.



Further reading:

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

Fernandes, Clinton. *Reluctant Saviour*. Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2004.

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

Way, Wendy. *Australia and the Indonesian incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974-1976*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2000.