



## Independence vote (1999)

### Timor Leste

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When Suharto resigned on 21 May 1998, his vice-president, B.J. Habibie, was sworn in as President. The Habibie cabinet faced three urgent challenges: the financial crisis, the pro-democracy movement, which was calling for more reforms, and the provinces of Aceh, West Papua and East Timor, which were demanding greater autonomy and even self-determination. Many ministers in the Habibie cabinet were technocrats who had played no part in the decision to invade East Timor. They did not wish to bear the burden of a policy for which they were not responsible, with which they did not agree, and from which they derived no benefit. Habibie himself had been a technocrat in Indonesia's industrial system. He had never invested much political capital in the politics of the occupation, which was a heavily infantry-based, low-tech affair. Senior military personnel in the Habibie cabinet, by contrast, were opposed to an independent East Timor. However, they believed they could manipulate a ballot in East Timor just as they had done in the fraudulent 1969 Act of Free Choice in West Papua, in which 1,022 West Papuans out of a total population of 700,000 were coerced into joining the Indonesian republic.

On 27 January 1999, Indonesia announced that the people of East Timor would be given the opportunity to vote on whether to accept a "Special Autonomy" offer and remain a part of Indonesia or to separate from Indonesia. On 5 May 1999, Indonesia, Portugal and the United Nations signed an agreement at UN headquarters in New York. The 5 May Agreement, as it came to be known, provided for a "direct, secret and universal ballot" that asked the East Timorese people to accept or reject Special Autonomy for East Timor within the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.

The ballot attracted an unprecedented level of international scrutiny. UN staff began arriving soon after the 5 May Agreement, establishing the United Nations Advance Mission in East Timor (UNAMET). UNAMET electoral staff and police and military liaison officers established a presence in

all 13 districts of East Timor. The UN's presence involved personnel from over seventy countries comprising approximately 500 UN volunteers, 271 administrative and support staff, 275 police, fifty military liaison officers, twenty-eight professional staff, sixteen security officers, fifteen political officers and nine public information officers. There were also approximately 600 journalists and 100 official Portuguese and Indonesian observers. Nearly 2,300 international observers also converged on East Timor, to say nothing of the 1,700 Indonesian and East Timorese nongovernmental observers.

The ballot was held on 30 August 1999. The ballot paper read: "Do you accept the proposed special autonomy for East Timor within the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia?" or "Do you reject the proposed special autonomy for East Timor, leading to East Timor's separation from Indonesia?" 98.6 per cent of registered voters turned out to vote. Despite the climate of fear, the campaign of intimidation, the presence of dubious voters from West Timor, and the fact that many voters did not believe their votes were secret, 78.5% of registered voters opted for independence from Indonesia. The results were announced on Saturday 4 September 1999.

#### Further reading:

Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste. *Chega! The Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste*. Dili, 2005.

Federer, Juan. *The UN in East Timor: building Timor Leste, a fragile state*. Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2005.

Kohen, Arnold. *From the Place of the Dead: The Epic Struggles of Bishop Belo of East Timor*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1999.