



Operation Komodo

Timor Leste

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Operation Komodo was the first of three strategic-level operations conducted by the Indonesian Government against East Timor. Named after the giant, slow-moving lizard found in the Indonesian archipelago, it was designed to ensure East Timor's annexation via a covert process of slow but methodical destabilization. It was followed by Operation Flamboyan (armed, covert action) and Operation Seroja (the invasion of East Timor).

Operation Komodo began in October 1974, immediately after secret meetings with the Portuguese government in Lisbon earlier that month. The operation's most visible aspects were its hostile radio broadcasts to East Timor from Kupang in West Timor. These broadcasts originated from a Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI) station in Kupang, which provided regional services as well as relays of Jakarta broadcasts. They were usually in Tetum, and drew on Indonesia's intelligence collection network inside East Timor in order to provide hostile commentary on daily events. Indonesia's destabilisation campaign also relied on the leaders of APODETI, the Timorese Popular Democratic Association, whose goal was to integrate East Timor as an autonomous province of Indonesia. A senior APODETI figure went to Jakarta in October 1974 to meet the chief of the Indonesian armed forces. Indonesia then claimed that hundreds of East Timorese were fleeing to West Timor, that communists had infiltrated and funded FRETILIN, and that communist newspapers and Marxism were spreading in East Timor. Meanwhile, an Indonesian Special Forces team deployed to Atambua in West Timor in order to train APODETI fighters, known as partisans. Australian intelligence, which was monitoring the situation in East Timor on a daily basis, remarked that it had 'no evidence that would give any credence to these claims' and that 'Apodeti has so far attracted little support'.

On 21 January 1975, FRETILIN and UDT, the two East Timorese parties that did have popular support, formed a coalition and agreed that East Timor

should become independent. Both parties would form a transitional government. Operation Komodo then focused on fomenting conflict between these parties. In April 1975 Major General Ali Murtopo invited FRETILIN and UDT representatives to Jakarta. Although they arrived in Jakarta at the same time, Murtopo met the two delegations separately, thus stoking the flames of mutual distrust. The parties' mutual suspicion proved to be too strong and their political inexperience meant that they had no mechanisms to deal with their differences. On 27 May 1975 UDT formally withdrew from its coalition with FRETILIN.

The Indonesian destabilization campaign continued. In early August 1975, Major General Ali Murtopo assured UDT's leaders that Indonesia would respect East Timor's right of self-determination if UDT moved against the extreme elements in FRETILIN. The UDT members led a preemptive coup against FRETILIN on their return from Jakarta, capturing the police headquarters, the armoury, the port, the airport and the radio and telephone facilities in Dili. They detained hundreds of FRETILIN activists. FRETILIN fought back, defeating UDT, APODETI and other forces in short order. Between 1,500 and 3,000 people are estimated to have been killed during the internal armed conflict, which, although chaotic and violent, was essentially over by 30 August.

Thus, Indonesia had fomented a civil war via Operation Komodo, but the wrong side (from its perspective) won. Indonesia therefore abandoned slow destabilization and commenced a program of armed, covert action known as Operation Flamboyan.