

East Timor Questions & Answers

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Contents

1. What was U.S. policy toward Indonesia	3
2. What was East Timor before Indonesia invaded?	3
3. How did Indonesia become involved in East Timor?	3
4. What was the United States role regarding Indonesia's December 1975 invasion?	4
5. What was the effect of Indonesia's invasion?	4
6. How did the international community respond to the 1975 Indonesian invasion?	4
7. How have the Timorese resisted over the years?	5
8. What solidarity has there been outside East Timor, over the years?	5
9. How did the recent referendum come about and what were its results?	6
10. What are the likely motives of Indonesia and the militias now, after the referendum?	6
11. What is the role of the United Nations?	7
12. What are the likely motives of the United States now, after the referendum?	7
13. What could the United States do that would be positive in East Timor?	8
14. Will the United States do something positive in East Timor?	8

1. What was U.S. policy toward Indonesia

In the aftermath of World War II, U.S. policy toward the Asian colonies of the European powers followed a simple rule: where the nationalists in a territory were leftist (as in Vietnam), Washington would support the re-imposition of European colonial rule, while in those places where the nationalist movement was safely non-leftist (India, for example), Washington would support their independence as a way to remove them from the exclusive jurisdiction of a rival power. At first, Indonesian nationalists were not deemed sufficiently pliable, so U.S.-armed British troops (assisted by Japanese soldiers) went into action against the Indonesians to pave the way for the return of Dutch troops, also armed by the United States. In 1948, however, moderate Indonesian nationalists under Sukarno crushed a left-wing coup attempt, and Washington then decided that the Dutch should be encouraged to settle with Sukarno, accepting Indonesian independence.

It wasn't long, however, before the United States concluded that Sukarno was a dangerous neutralist, and under the Eisenhower administration Washington attempted to subvert Indonesia's fragile democratic government. These efforts—the largest U.S. covert operation since World War II—were unsuccessful, so the United States shifted its strategy to building up the Indonesian military as a counter-weight to the mass-based Indonesian Communist Party. In 1965, this approach bore fruit when a military coup, accompanied by the slaughter of somewhere between half a million and a million communists, suspected leftists, and ordinary peasants, deposed Sukarno and installed General Suharto in his place. Washington cheered the coup, rushed weapons to Jakarta, and even provided a list of Communist Party members to the army, which then rounded up and slaughtered them. According to a CIA study, “in terms of numbers killed” the 1965–66 massacres in Indonesia “rank as one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century.” The United States established close military, economic, and political ties with the Suharto regime.

2. What was East Timor before Indonesia invaded?

From the 17th century, the Netherlands and Portuguese fought over Timor, a small Southeast Asian island slightly larger than the state of Maryland located 1,000 miles south of the Philippines and about 400 miles northwest of Australia. Ultimately the two colonial powers divided the island, with the western half going to the Netherlands and becoming part of the Dutch East Indies and the eastern half going to Portugal. When the Dutch East Indies became independent following World War II, under the name Indonesia, west Timor was part of the new nation. East Timor, however, remained under Portuguese rule until the mid-1970s, when Portugal finally moved to dismantle its colonial empire. East Timor differs from Indonesia in terms of religion, language, and several hundred years of colonial history.

3. How did Indonesia become involved in East Timor?

As long as Portugal controlled East Timor, Indonesia did not consider attacking it, but once Lisbon declared its intention to withdraw, the Suharto regime saw an opportunity to add to its territory and resources. East Timor seemed like an easy target, given that in 1975 Indonesia had a population of 136 million compared to East Timor's 700,000 people. Indonesia first tried to block Timorese independence by backing a coup in the territory, but when this failed it launched a

full-scale invasion of East Timor in December 1975, using the pretext that it was maintaining order.

A standard propaganda line out of Jakarta—often repeated by the western media—is that the fighting in East Timor represents a “civil war.” In fact, there had been a very brief civil war before the Indonesians invaded. For the last 25 years, however, it has been as much a civil war as the Nazi conquests in Europe.

4. What was the United States role regarding Indonesia’s December 1975 invasion?

On the eve of the invasion, U.S. President Gerald Ford and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, were in Jakarta meeting with Suharto. Kissinger later claimed that East Timor wasn’t even discussed, but this claim has been exposed as a lie.

In fact, Washington gave Suharto a green light to invade. Ninety percent of the weaponry used by the Indonesian forces in their invasion was from the United States (despite a U.S. law that bans the use of its military aid for offensive purposes) and the flow of arms, including counterinsurgency equipment, was secretly increased (a point that should be borne in mind in interpreting what is going on today).

The United States also lent diplomatic support to the invaders. In the United Nations, U.S. ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan successfully worked, as he boasted in his memoirs, to make sure that the international organization was ineffective in challenging Jakarta’s aggression. Under the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the self-proclaimed champion of human rights, there was a further increase in U.S. military aid to Indonesia. Since 1975, the United States has sold Jakarta over \$1 billion worth of military equipment.

5. What was the effect of Indonesia’s invasion?

The Indonesian invasion and subsequent ruthless pacification campaign led to the deaths—by massacre, forced starvation, and disease—of some 200,000 East Timorese, more than a quarter of the territory’s people, making it one of the greatest bloodlettings in modern history compared to total population. In addition, Indonesian forces have engaged in torture, rape, and forced relocation on a massive scale.

6. How did the international community respond to the 1975 Indonesian invasion?

On the one hand, the Indonesian aggression so clearly violated international law and the right of self-determination that the United Nations Security Council condemned the invasion, calling on Indonesia to withdraw its armed forces from East Timor, and the General Assembly rejected Indonesia’s annexation of East Timor as its 27th province, demanding that the people of East Timor be allowed to determine their own fate. With a single exception, Australia, no country has legally recognized Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor.

On the other hand, for many countries considerations of morality and decency were outweighed by the profits to be had from close economic ties with Indonesia and its huge population (“When I think of Indonesia—a country on the equator with 180 million people, a median age of 18, and a Muslim ban on alcohol—I feel like I know what heaven looks like,” gushed the president of Coca-Cola in 1992), by the prospects of selling arms to the Indonesian armed forces, and by the geopolitical advantages of allying with the largest nation in Southeast Asia, instead of one of the smallest. Washington’s support for Jakarta has already been noted. Australia has provided military aid to Indonesia and formally recognized Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor, hoping to divide up East Timor’s offshore oil resources. Britain recently was Indonesia’s largest arms supplier, and Japan its largest source of economic aid and foreign investment. Canada has provided Jakarta with both economic and military aid, while the Netherlands and Germany have also been major weapons suppliers.

7. How have the Timorese resisted over the years?

The people of East Timor have waged a truly inspiring and courageous struggle. They have undertaken guerrilla warfare against overwhelming odds, organized non-violent protests, and carried out passive resistance. Students, the Catholic church, and many others have been involved in the struggle in one way or another: whether taking up arms, providing food for guerrillas, participating in demonstrations, or hiding organizers. Remarkably, despite the horrendous repression, and despite Jakarta’s importation of large numbers of Indonesian settlers into the territory, the East Timorese have retained their passionate commitment to self-determination and freedom.

8. What solidarity has there been outside East Timor, over the years?

For a while, only a few lone voices spoke up. Arnold Kohen, for example, has been at the center of East Timor activism since the beginning. There were small groups in Australia and in England trying to draw attention to the issue. Through the 1980s, the numbers and activism increased. There was a considerable upsurge following the Dili massacre in 1991—when Indonesian troops attacked a peaceful funeral procession, slaughtering more than 270—the massacre was publicized by U.S. free-lance journalists Amy Goodman and Alan Nairn (who were nearly killed by Indonesian troops) and a British TV photojournalist who secretly filmed the atrocities. Church and human rights groups became active, and Charlie Scheiner formed the East Timor Action Network.

By the mid-1990s there were substantial organizations in many countries, and they were beginning to have an impact. The issue was finally being covered in the mainstream media, if not always accurately. Intensely lobbied by East Timor activists, the U.S. Congress was increasingly placing restrictions on U.S. military aid to Indonesia, often evaded, however, by the Administration. In 1996, Jose Ramos Horta, East Timor’s chief foreign representative, and Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, East Timor’s spiritual leader, were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, focusing further attention on the situation.

9. How did the recent referendum come about and what were its results?

Mass demonstrations in Indonesia, financial crisis, and massive corruption combined in 1998 to force Suharto from office. His successor, B. J. Habibie agreed to call elections for Indonesia and to hold a referendum on the future of East Timor. The Indonesian election was won by Megawati Sukarno-putri, the main opposition leader, but even if she is allowed to become president in November it is doubtful that she will move to dismantle the national security apparatus, which dominates the state.

In the negotiations over the terms of the referendum on the future of East Timor, the international community essentially accepted Indonesia's ground rules. The referendum would be run by Indonesia, the occupying power. The UN was permitted to send a few hundred unarmed monitors, but they had no means of stopping the paramilitary forces ("militias") that had been organized by the Indonesian army and were carrying out large-scale terror under its direction and with its direct involvement, particularly by its special forces (Kopassus), trained by the United States and Australia, and noted for their extreme violence and brutality. Rather than pressing for a more substantial UN presence, the Clinton administration actually delayed the dispatch of the monitors. The referendum was postponed several times by the UN because of the ongoing terror, which was clearly intended by the army to intimidate the population into voting for incorporation within Indonesia. On August 30, 1999, in an astonishing display of courage, virtually the entire population of East Timor went to the polls, about four out of five voting for independence.

Having failed to cow the Timorese people into accepting Indonesian rule, the army and its militias then proceeded to unleash a ferocious attack on the civilian population, displacing hundreds of thousands, killing an unknown number, but certainly thousands, burning, and looting.

10. What are the likely motives of Indonesia and the militias now, after the referendum?

For the Indonesian army the motives are probably to demonstrate to people within Indonesia who may raise their heads that the cost will be extremely severe. The army demonstrated this same point during the massacres of 1965–66 when Suharto came to power, intimidating the country for years, and many times subsequently—and always with enthusiastic support from the United States and the West generally. There are now secessionist movements in several parts of Indonesia (though, while the East Timorese independence movement is commonly called "separatist," that makes as much sense as calling the French resistance to the Nazi occupation "separatist"), and the army presumably fears that independence for East Timor may encourage other breakaway movements.

Other motives probably include undermining civilian authority in Jakarta and placing the military in the dominant position in the post-Suharto succession. Pure revenge is also a likely motive: the East Timorese have resisted with enormous courage and integrity for 25 years and so they are being punished by massacre and destruction. It is also worth bearing in mind that the military, and the Suharto family, have taken over most of the resources of East Timor, and do not want to relinquish them. And in the background is the important question of the oil wealth of the Timor Gap, and who will control it.

11. What is the role of the United Nations?

It is a little misleading to speak of the role of the UN. The UN is nearly powerless as an abstract entity or even as a representative of the world's nations. It can act, instead, only insofar as it is given authorization by the great powers, which means primarily the United States.

The UN has no standing peacekeeping force and thus is dependent on finding countries willing to contribute troops for any particular mission. The organization suffers as well from an extreme shortage of funds because of the continual U.S. refusal to pay its dues. Any peacekeepers sent to East Timor will probably not be a UN force because the U.S. Congress has required that there be a 15-day delay before the U.S. government can approve any UN peacekeeping operation and has forbidden Washington from paying its authorized share of the costs of any such operation.

U.S. influence is greatest in the Security Council, but some organs of the UN, such as the General Assembly or bodies dealing with economic and social issues have had a Third World majority ever since the era of decolonization. Accordingly, U.S. policy has been to undermine and marginalize the UN. The United Nations should have an important role in world affairs, but U.S. policy, and the policies of other leading states, severely limits the international organization. From the point of view of U.S. policymakers, however, there is one crucial role played by the UN: it serves as a convenient scapegoat when something goes wrong. For example, the current catastrophe in East Timor is directly attributable to the refusal of the United States and other Western powers to deter the atrocities there over a period of a quarter century, yet the UN will probably take the blame.

12. What are the likely motives of the United States now, after the referendum?

U.S. motives now are the same as always: to pursue those policies that will enhance the power and economic returns of U.S. corporate and political elites with as few dangers of disrupting existing relations of power as possible, and especially as few disturbing effects in the form of enlarging public awareness and dissidence.

The United States has a long history of cozying up to ruthless dictators, being indifferent to if not enthusiastic about their atrocities, and disengaging only when Washington concludes that the dictator has provoked so much instability and dissidence that U.S. interests are threatened. Thus, President Jimmy Carter backed the Shah of Iran until it seemed as if the army would fall apart in trying to suppress mass demonstrations; President Reagan embraced Marcos in the Philippines until splits in the armed forces and huge numbers of people in the streets put U.S. interests at risk. So in Indonesia, the United States supported Suharto until a popular explosion seemed to imperil U.S. economic and geopolitical interests.

The United States supported Indonesian policy in East Timor—with weapons, training, and diplomatic support—as long as doing so seemed to further U.S. interests. As long as East Timor could be kept off the front page, Washington was happy to give Jakarta a free hand. But news of the latest atrocities could not be suppressed. Some courageous journalists and independent observers, some UN workers who refused to abandon the Timorese, and networks of activists have all spread the word. This has raised the costs to the U.S. government of continuing to tolerate

Indonesian terrorism in East Timor. Washington still hopes, however, to protect its economic stake in Indonesia and maintain close ties with that country's military.

13. What could the United States do that would be positive in East Timor?

The United States and its major allies have tremendous leverage over the Indonesian government. Indonesia doesn't have much of a military industry, and relies heavily on its suppliers: the United States, Britain, Australia, and others. Indonesian troops receive training and participate in joint exercises with U.S. troops, the most recent just a week before the August 30, 1999 referendum. Indonesia's economy is also totally dependent on financial aid from the United States and other rich nations and from the International Monetary Fund whose policies are controlled by these same rich nations. Without funds from these sources, Indonesia will find foreign investment drying up and domestic capital flight as well. In short, Indonesia cannot act without the approval of Washington and the leading Western nations.

The same sort of pressure that seems in the past few days to have forced Jakarta to accept international peacekeeping troops could have been used—and could still be used—to compel the Indonesians to call off the slaughter and destruction in East Timor, something that would have a far more critical and immediate effect on the lives of East Timorese than the dispatch of peacekeepers. Peacekeepers, if they get there in time, can play a useful role in facilitating the distribution of humanitarian aid and in restraining any of the militias that refuse an Indonesian order to disband.

Of course, the same pressure that got Jakarta to buckle today could have been employed immediately to stop the atrocities. It could have been used six months ago to force Indonesia to disband the militias and call off its terror forces. And it could have been used at any point over the past quarter century to get Indonesia to withdraw from East Timor. And it could have been used in December 1975 to forestall the Indonesia invasion in the first place.

14. Will the United States do something positive in East Timor?

The United States government does not act out of humanitarian concern. U.S. political and economic elites pursue their own interests and are willing to tolerate—and even welcome—incredible brutality in the furtherance of those interests.

Sometimes, however, U.S. elites can be pressured into following a positive course of action if the social costs of their not doing so can be significantly raised. The U.S. government didn't wind down the Vietnam War because a burst of humanitarianism entered the calculation of policymakers. Rather, it ended the war because the resistance of the Vietnamese and the social disruptions at home made the costs of continuing the war too high.

The U.S. government will do something positive—more accurately, it will stop doing something horribly negative—with regard to East Timor only if public pressure raises the social costs of continuing to abet the massacre.

The strategy, then, for those who wish to change U.S. policy on East Timor is the same as for those who want to change U.S. policy more generally. U.S. elites respond not to moral persuasion but, instead, to a calculus of interests. When one wants to influence their choices, therefore, it

is necessary to create conditions that change the calculus they confront. The only way to do that is to raise consciousness of true conditions and organize dissent that threatens things they hold dear. If pursuing or permitting genocidal activity in Timor strengthens elite positions and enriches their coffers, and if there is no offsetting cost to the behavior, it will continue. If popular activism threatens business as usual, if it threatens to grow, and not only address Timor, but the basic institutions behind events like these—that is a real and dangerous cost that elites very well understand.

So what does a morally concerned person do? Try to become knowledgeable, try to educate others, try to facilitate efforts to make dissent visible—whether financially, via donations to worthy projects and institutions, or with one’s time and labors given to organizing. It is the same answer for Timor as for Kosovo as for the Gulf War as for Nicaragua as for Vietnam. It is the same answer for foreign policy pursuits as it is for trying to win strikes against corporations, reverse NAFTA, and preserve affirmative action (or win it in the first place). To impact elites it is necessary to raise social costs so high that elites have no choice but to relent.

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