

Crisis in East Timor

Olle Tornquist

Indonesian army let loose the dogs of war in East Timor but could not call them off. The UN failed to intervene in time. But beyond these, a lasting solution to the problem can only come through strengthening the democratic movements both in Indonesia and in East Timor.

WHEN president B J Habibie announced his second option for East Timor in January this year, the National Council of East Timorese Resistance (CNRT), bravely, and the United Nations, finally, took the opportunity to make decisive advances. All parties which have not recognised Indonesia's annexation of East Timor, including scholars, agreed that it was an opportunity not to be missed – despite the obvious limitations in the deal in the May 5 agreement (primarily regarding full military/security authority resting with the Indonesian military (TNI) and police) and the high risks involved.

The crisis in East Timor is a repercussion of the ongoing crisis in Indonesia, which in some respects went from bad to worse following the relatively free but not entirely just and very shallow elections in June.

The armed forces get 38 non-elected members in the house of representatives (DPR), while 34 per cent of the delegates in the people's consultative assembly (MPR), which shall appoint the new president, are not elected but appointed in a way that makes the armed forces and money politics decisive.

During the elections, moreover, many basic issues and interests were swept under the carpet, including grievances in several provinces and in East Timor, and not allowed to be voiced and represented within the new political framework. Hence, they were bound to appear outside that relatively orderly framework.

Also, the most genuine and propelling democratic forces – the students and the long established pro-democratic movement of NGOs et al – were marginalised by neo-traditional elite politics.

Consequently, a political vacuum de-

veloped between the elections of DPR members and the MPR election of the new president. This lack of political leadership has boosted the role of the military, with all major parties involved needing its support and votes. Meanwhile all the major parties are depending on and are affected by money politics. Although Habibie has been badly hurt by the Bank Bali scandal, his Team Sukses may still have enough money to buy the necessary votes in the MPR.

Altogether, this has given the armed forces, and the police, increasingly more space to undermine the East Timor agreement, of which they were very sceptical in the first place.

The logic was to create semi-civilian counterparts to the CNRT in negotiations; to further develop and empower the militias to promote the pro-autonomy side in the referendum by creating fear among the immigrants of what would happen if East Timor became independent, and among the East-Timorese of terror in the future in case they didn't accept Indonesian dominance; and to display to protesting people in other Indonesian provinces what kind of problems and horrors they are likely to face in case they continue with their demands.

This logic meant that if the referendum was lost, a mini-civil war would be started in order to, firstly, further eliminate, if possible, the Falantil; and, secondly, not lose face but be able to say 'we invaded East Timor in 1975 to save the country from a civil war and when we leave there will again be a civil war'.

The CNRT kept its promise to keep a low profile and not allow itself to be provoked. It consistently stressed reconciliation but found it difficult to simulta-

neously shape a back up in case things would go wrong.

At the same time, the UN proceeded with the referendum, though to my knowledge without any serious back up. And to my knowledge both those parties felt that not going ahead with the referendum would amount to giving in to the militias' intimidations and passing a unique opportunity.

In my own analysis at the time, a high turnout and more than two-thirds victory for the independence side would mean least risk of violence. The pro-Indonesian side would realise that they had lost and after some face-saving, including in terms of a mini-civil war, the unrest would peter out as the central army leadership would abandon most of their local thugs.

However, for the second time since the crisis in Indonesia became obvious in mid-1996, I was wrong. (The first time being in April 1998 when I said that the Soeharto regime was likely to remain at least for a few months because the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank had given up much of the pressure. Instead, on May 4 Soeharto implemented even harsher measures than prescribed by the IMF and thus generated the riots and demonstrations that brought him down.) I was wrong this time, because the central armed forces leadership lost the control I thought it was capable of upholding.

So, while people bravely resisted intimidation and terror, and the armed forces respected the very electoral operation – just like during the Indonesian elections – the local militias of the armed forces began to follow their own logic. And even after having proven its point (that some kind of civil war would follow if East Timor would go for independence), the central armed forces command was unable to do much about it. Apparently a monster had been created that now ran wild.

In this situation the CNRT could not do much more than refrain from being provoked and thus eliminated, which must have been difficult enough.

The UN was rather helpless. Of course, immediate UN strengthening of its local representatives in order to maintain its presence would have been in full accordance with the May agreement (Article 7), but that was not done. Most people would of course like the UN to do much more than that, but it was simply not realistic.

This was particularly unrealistic in the Asian framework where powerful states are very eager to preserve their powers against any form of intervention, where the only successful intervention against state terror and murder, the Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia, was resisted by

the west itself, and where there is not even the poor African capacity of sending in local troops from neighbouring countries, as in the case of Sierra Leone.

If there had been an armed intervention anyway, the risks of making things even worse would have been very high. First, the unity between the local militia and the local police and army forces would have been further cemented, also strengthened by full scale support from Jakarta – we would have got a combination of a civil war and Indonesian struggle against foreign intervention. Second, this support from Jakarta would then also have included the entire political elite, mass media and so on. Finally, this in turn might well have totally derailed the already weak process of democratisation in Indonesia (not to talk of its economic recovery).

The UN, as already mentioned, could well have referred to Article 7 in the May agreement and immediately sent in more personnel to uphold its presence. Here the UN itself failed and cannot blame the member states. Initially the UN pulled out. This is extremely serious, not just for the East Timorese but also for the UN itself. Apparently it was primarily thanks to the brave staff at its Dili headquarters, who refused to leave, that the UN retained some presence in East Timor – while it should have been quite the other way around, with volunteers, diplomats et al moving in.

The only thing remaining, then, was economic and other diplomatic measures. But the process was slow. The major actors were apparently afraid of losing out in Indonesia, including economically – even if the official arguments mainly referred to the risk of derailing the process of democratisation, a risk which may be disputed and which I shall return to.

However, there was enough pressure on the Indonesian regime to cause a major split within its government. We do not know if Habibie wanted to allow foreign intervention, but he himself, many of his ministers and vital parts of the parliament clearly first resisted defence minister and chief of the armed forces Wiranto's demand for marshal law in East Timor, and then they rapidly had to give it up and allow Wiranto to go ahead.

To my understanding the then rumours about a coup were, thus, baseless. Why would that have been necessary? The military already dominated. Rather, they needed civilians. The rumours were best suited to scare the west, and the democratic opposition, from putting 'too much pressure on the regime'.

There is one positive consequence of the crisis: by now it should be fully clear for

the entire world, and many Indonesians, how political violence works: First, the state-cum-military worsening of various local conflicts and promotion of thugs/militias in clamping down on people; second, giving the military/police itself an opportunity to intervene.

But there is another compulsion. When first having created this climate of death – which make people fight each other and fear each other – the state and military must then also put itself in command of this fear and death and even be able to claim that it is the only force that can save the nation and save people against their own evil.

In the case of East Timor, however, it had gone too far. Wiranto, never approved by East Timor veterans in the field, lost control. At that point, his entire career as well as the prestige of the armed forces as a whole rested with their capacity to regain control of the wild beasts in East Timor, including sections of Lt Gen (ret) Prabowo Subianto's old security forces and the Dili governor who says he will continue to fight and that he ignores Habibie's acceptance of the results from the referendum since "he is just the president, he has never been in the field".

It took just a few days to prove that Wiranto and the central armed forces were not capable of doing this. And by now accepting an international peace-keeping mission they have, to my understanding, got a new lease on life that rests with their ability to co-operate and forcefully contribute to the tasks of the mission on East Timor.

But an additional question is, of course, if this kind of stability in Indonesia, and this kind of 'law and order' and 'stability' in East Timor, are acceptable to Timorese and Indonesian democrats, and to the international community?

It is essential to remember that sanctions against authoritarian rulers may indeed backlash and not be very successful, as they did and were during the crisis in late 1997 and early 1998. They could generate a conservative nationalist movement – in case international concern is not coordinated with the democratic opposition. There is much to learn from the case of South Africa and realise the importance of supporting Indonesian and East Timor democrats in their struggle for human rights and democracy.

For instance, even Megawati, who is eager to retain the support of the military and did not want East Timor to become independent, has recently accused Habibie and his administration of double standards, a democratic referendum combined with "undercover methods...including

allowing the spread of violence". She has promised to respect all international agreements and said that if and on becoming president she would "help East Timor develop as a peaceful nation and become a 'brother' to Indonesia". Moreover, she has appealed to especially the armed forces and police to not undermine this. Also, the National Commission of Human Rights urged the government to lift the state of emergency and invite a UN peace-keeping force to restore order.

It is essential to remember that it is not 'only' a question of putting an end to the open violence and terror in East Timor. We do not know how many, but probably some hundred of thousands of people have fled up in the mountains where there is a lack of food and water. And many have taken refuge elsewhere, including in militia-armed forces controlled camps in West Timor. Before an armed peace-keeping force is able to enter, it is urgent that international humanitarian relief can come in.

The UN must immediately extend its own representation in East Timor, not pull out of it, so that they can monitor the situation, pave the way for humanitarian relief, and enable Xanana Gusmao and Bishop Belo to return and take the lead in a process of reconciliation.

Finally it is essential to return to the argument that the point of departure for international concern must be to support Indonesian and East Timor democrats in their struggle for human rights and democracy.

This is not just to prevent a nationalistic backlash and more military powers. This is primarily because foreign intervention, even with the best of intentions and armed or not, simply does not make sense if there are no local roots and propelling forces to guide and take the fundamental decisions.

The fate of East Timor depends on Indonesia and the fate of both East Timor and Indonesia depends on the ability of the Indonesian democratic movement to counter authoritarian nationalism through a renaissance of the original nationalist project and especially its ideals of freedom and justice. And the bottomline, then, is that the forces of violence cannot be allowed to first run wild and then domesticate the situation.

There cannot be democracy and not even stability in Indonesia before the forces of violence are dealt with, domestically as well as in East Timor. Truth and reconciliation is a must. This goes beyond the current crisis. This include even the massacres in the mid-1960s. But first East Timor.