



East Timorese Independence: Getting from Here to There by Donald K. Emmerson

The crucial question regarding independence for East Timor is no longer whether. It is how.

In 1975-76 Indonesian President Suharto ordered the invasion of East Timor and declared it his country's 27th province. From then on, he refused to alter the territory's status or allow the East Timorese to do so, for example, in a referendum. On 27 January 1999, less than a year after replacing Suharto as president of Indonesia, B. J. Habibie dramatically altered his predecessor's course.

In theory East Timor had always faced three possible futures: integration or autonomy inside Indonesia or independence outside it. If Suharto had suppressed any future save integration, Habibie dropped that alternative in favor of a choice between the two paths Suharto had refused to entertain: autonomy or independence. But Habibie continues to rule out a referendum. The result is a "take-it-or-we-leave" approach in which the "it" is autonomy, whose rejection by the East Timorese would cause Habibie to advise the People's Consultative Assembly, when it meets later this year, to cancel the territory's provincial status. As Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas put it on 11 March, "If [the East Timorese] want autonomy, fine. If they want independence, fine."

As an end to Suharto's stonewalling, Habibie's flexibility is welcome. But it has created a volatile puzzle: Without a referendum, how will anyone know what the East Timorese want?

Three possible answers come to mind: a referendum in all but name that would allow the people of East Timor to vote directly for autonomy or independence; an election of East Timorese delegates who would then meet and make that choice; and, most controversially, an interpretation of the East Timorese vote in Indonesia-wide parliamentary elections (still scheduled to be held on 7 June throughout Indonesia, including East Timor) as amounting to a valid decision between these choices.

No one I know seriously believes that under free and fair conditions either the first or the second method will yield a victory for autonomy over independence. But East Timorese who favor independence are themselves divided over how it should be achieved. Those who want a referendum worry that an election would be easier for Jakarta, or factions within the Indonesian military, to manipulate on behalf of autonomy. They worry that Indonesians might lavishly fund the campaigns of pro-autonomy delegates, or try to exacerbate enmity between delegates in hopes of escalating already rising violence, possibly to the point where the election would have to be called off, prolonging the juridical status quo.

Other East Timorese acknowledge the rationality of Habibie's aversion to a referendum: that giving the people of one province the freedom to vote themselves out of Indonesia creates a precedent that other Indonesians might wish to follow. Anti-Jakarta students in Aceh, the self-consciously Islamic province at the extreme western end of the archipelago, have already demonstrated on behalf of a referendum there.

For East Timor to elect representatives to a council that then decides to petition Jakarta for independence threatens Indonesia's integrity less, runs this second argument, because in the other 26 provinces a reasonably democratic election on 7 June will already have elected provincial legislators representing national parties opposed to secession. Many expect these newly elected provincial legislatures to be granted substantial autonomy. Once voted into place, such bodies are unlikely to countenance the special election of a rival council with the authority to make or break center-provincial relations. (In any event, secession remains illegal under Indonesia's unitary form of rule.)

Most controversial of all is the third option: interpreting the result of the national election on 7 June in East Timor as a mandate for autonomy or independence. This outcome is unlikely, not least because there is no distinctively (authentically) East Timorese political party among the 48 that have been accredited by Jakarta as able to contest the 7 June poll.

Nor have these contenders necessarily made clear their views on East Timor. Megawati Sukarnoputri of the Struggle for Indonesian Democracy Party (PDI-P) has shifted from opposing to tolerating independence, but she could shift back again. Recently, given a chance to clarify her position, she called the issue of independence for East Timor "delicate" – stoking doubts about where she really stands. Her rival Amien Rais, who heads the National Mandate Party (PAN), is willing to let the territory go. But because he is also self-consciously Muslim, he may prove less popular than she among East Timorese voters, who are mainly Catholics. There is also a rising chance that the East Timorese themselves may boycott the 7 June poll, or choose "none of the above" by returning their ballots unmarked.

Following decades of intransigence, Habibie's January reversal of Indonesian policy seems to have pointed East Timor toward independence. The trick now is to select and follow the best route to that destination. That trick will require striking a careful and sustainable balance between the need for a locally legitimate and internationally convincing expression of Timorese opinion on the one hand, and the need for Indonesian cooperation, or at least nonobstruction, on the other.

In the critical weeks and months to come, one may hope that the urgency of striking this balance will focus and motivate the Indonesians, the East Timorese, the UN, Portugal, Australia, the U.S., and Japan alike. For all of them are likely to share, for better or worse, responsibility for the result.

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