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The West Papua issue A view from Timor-Leste

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THE decision by the Australian government in early April to grant asylum to 15 indigenous West Papuans has led many to draw parallels with the East Timor case. Both in Indonesia and Australia, many are now saying that West Papua may travel the same road as East Timor and eventually separate from Jakarta, to be followed by other Indonesian provinces like Flores or Maluku.

However, very few understand what they are comparing with in the first place. Today, six years after separation from Indonesia, an independent East Timor seems to have been an unavoidable outcome. However, a closer analysis of East Timor's struggle for independence would reveal that it was not always the case and that an independent Timor-Leste was nothing preordained and inevitable. In this, there is merit in taking a lesson from the history of Goa.

The case of Goa

In 1961 the Indian army invaded the Portuguese territory of Goa, putting an end to nearly five centuries of Portuguese rule in that part of India. Despite the fact that many of the territory's population were Catholic, with strong cultural affinity towards Portugal, the Indian army found very little resistance from the locals. Within a few years Goa was successfully integrated into the Indian Union and to this day there has never been any demand for independence. Three main elements explained Goa's peaceful and successful integration.

The first was the impeccable conduct of the Indian army not only towards the local population but also to the captured European soldiers. New Delhi also adopted a farsighted policy of granting immediate autonomy to Goa within the Indian Union and introduced a series of legislation to preserve the local status quo. Non-Goanese were forbidden from purchasing land and occupying public office in Goa. Opportunities were also created for indigenous Goanese to climb to positions of power in India. The end result was that instead of being marginalized, the Goanese eventually emerged as elites in India, with many becoming preeminent figures in Indian society.

Like East Timor, Goa was colonized by the Portuguese for nearly five centuries and had a large Catholic population and a distinct culture. However, unlike Timor, it was peacefully integrated within a larger entity due to Nehru's farsighted policies. India's success in peacefully integrating a far larger and more *latinised* territory shows that the same could have been achieved in the case of East Timor.

Timor: Many missed opportunities

In contrast, the Suharto government adopted harsh policies to deal with the Timorese resistance that saw the death of 200,000 Timorese. The regular use of brute force to deal with native grievances, instead of finding political solutions, a large transmigration programme that led to the loss of native land to mainly Javanese settlers and an unwillingness to even negotiate with the Timorese became the catalysts for resistance and eventual separation.

Despite the atrocities in the early years of Indonesian rule between 1975 and 1980, Timor could still have been “saved” if there had been better leaders in Jakarta. After crushing the bulk of the Timorese resistance, Indonesia embarked on a massive programme of economic development that allowed many Timorese to benefit from the economic boom of the 1980s and 1990s. The crushing of the Timorese armed resistance and the resort to diplomatic resistance on the part of the Timorese led to a significant reduction in the levels of violence and an atmosphere of relative tranquility.

During this period, various Timorese leaders were willing to compromise with Jakarta. For instance Bishop Belo was until the early 1990s receptive to the idea of autonomy within Indonesia. As late as 1994, Ramos Horta proposed an autonomy solution for East Timor based on the Portuguese Atlantic territories of Azores and Madeira. Under this model, Timor would have independence in all areas except foreign policy and defence.

Unfortunately Indonesia was not a democracy like India and Suharto was no Nehru; bad policies led to the events of 1999 which culminated in the breakaway of East Timor. Had Suharto been more farsighted, Timor may never have been lost. It is not true that East Timorese were always against Indonesia. Indeed, in 1959, the Portuguese colonial authorities had to put down a nationwide rebellion that aimed at expelling the Portuguese and unifying the territory with Indonesia. My own grandfather, then a young Portuguese army officer, participated in the quelling of the rebellion that cost thousands of Timorese lives.

Today Indonesia is a democracy. It has already shown that it has enough imagination to solve its problems by the exemplary way in which it dealt with the Aceh question. As in the case of East Timor, there is nothing inevitable about West Papua, especially in a democratic Indonesia with a new and creative leadership that is willing to learn from its past. The courageous way in which President Yudhoyono handled the Aceh question, even to the unthinkable extent of inviting Timorese President Xanana Gusmao to advise him on the issue, shows that Indonesia is quite capable of replicating India’s success in Goa.

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