

Still waiting for justice in East Timor

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The people of Indonesia will go to the polls to elect a new president on July 8. The current president, former general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, will face competition from two tickets in which both vice-presidential candidates — Prabowo Subianto and Wiranto — are former generals. All three were prominent leaders in the Indonesian military (TNI) who played critical roles in the bloody 24-year military occupation of East Timor.

All three men have been linked to gross human rights abuses and war crimes in East Timor stretching back to the TNI invasion in December 1975. Yudhoyono was a participant in the planning and implementation of Operation Seroja (the code name for the invasion) and commanded the Dili-based 744 Battalion. Subianto also served in East Timor as part of the early occupation force. He was part of Tim Nanggala X, a special forces unit that was later integrated into the infamous Kopassus, which Subianto was to command in the 1990s. Kopassus was involved in the repression and disappearance of Indonesian pro-democracy activists and students during the reign of the dictator Suharto and was instrumental in the creation of the pro-integration militia terror groups active in East Timor in 1999.

Wiranto, who served in East Timor in 1981, was defence minister and the head of TNI when the Habibie government announced in early 1999 that it would conduct a referendum on autonomy — in effect giving East Timorese the choice of being an autonomous region within Indonesia or “separating”. The announcement angered sections of the military that had long personal and business ties in East Timor. Wiranto was complicit in supporting subordinate officers directly involved in funding, arming and organising the pro-integration militia. Yudhoyono was TNI chief of territorial affairs in 1999 and reported directly to Wiranto.

None of these former TNI figures — along with other senior and junior officers who served in East Timor in 1999 — have been brought to justice for the human rights abuses they committed, especially the terror campaign that uprooted more than 650,000 East Timorese, destroyed over 70% of the country’s infrastructure and claimed the lives of more than 1000 people.

Some of the worst TNI/militia war crimes occurred several months before the August 30 referendum. Two of these incidents took place in April 1999 and contributed to speeding up the negotiations that led to the tripartite agreement (involving the United Nations, Portugal and Indonesia) signed on May 5, 1999, which outlined the general terms on how the referendum would be conducted. One was a massacre in the seaside town of Liquica on April 6, approximately 50 kilometres west of the capital Dili, while the other took place in Dili on April 17. At Liquica, some 60 people were killed when a joint force of pro-militia gangs, TNI and Indonesian police terrorised and attacked East Timorese seeking sanctuary in the town’s church.

On April 17 a large militia rally was organised in Dili by infamous militia leader and criminal Eurico Guterres (who also stood in the recent Indonesian parliamentary elections). It was the first sizeable pro-integration militia rally in the capital and was intended to spread fear and break the resolve of the East Timorese masses. In the week leading up to the rally, “death lists” of East Timorese civil servants suspected to be pro-independence activists and community leaders were circulated through the city. Militia thugs killed at least a further 19 people that day. Many of these were displaced

persons sheltering in the home of prominent East Timorese leader Manuel Carrascalao. One of Carrascalao's sons was among those murdered.

A statement released by the United States-based East Timor and Indonesia Action Network (ETAN) on the tenth anniversary of the Liquica massacre notes: "Those responsible for the many crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide committed during Indonesia's illegal occupation of East Timor between 1975 and 1999 must be held accountable.

"The victims of the Liquiça massacre and their families should not have to wait another decade for justice. Calls for justice are not calls for revenge. Only through credible trials and respect for the rule of law will victims find closure ...

"The events of 1999 and the preceding years of illegal occupation continue to affect the East Timorese, who continue to suffer from largely unhealed mass trauma. This is one of the underlying causes of the 2006 crisis in Dili. The failure to hold accountable those responsible for organizing and implementing the violence in Liquica and throughout the occupation has created a culture of impunity. Perpetrators believe they will not be held accountable for their crimes and victims often feel that they must take justice into their own hands. These attitudes contributed to the attacks on the President and Prime Minister early last year.

"In Indonesia, impunity for past human rights crimes undermines the rule of law and democratic progress. Instead of facing trial, key figures in East Timor's oppression are running for prominent political offices."

The victims and survivors of TNI persecution and war crimes have also been frustrated by the reluctance of the East Timorese political elite to heed their calls for justice. Although they promised to attend community commemorations in Liquica to mark the tenth anniversary, President Jose Ramos-Horta, Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao and UN mission chief Atul Khare all failed to appear.

While initially outspoken in demanding an international war crimes tribunal, the East Timorese political elite have chosen a pragmatic "business first" approach. "We have consciously rejected the notion of pushing for an international tribunal for East Timor because, A, it is not practical, B, it would wreck our relationship with Indonesia, and, C, we are serious about supporting Indonesia's own transition towards democracy", Horta told reporters in New York in January 2006. "In today's Indonesia or in the foreseeable future, there will be no leader strong enough who can bring to court and prison senior military officers who were involved in violence in the past ... They are still too powerful."

P.S.

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<http://directaction.org.au/issue12/...>