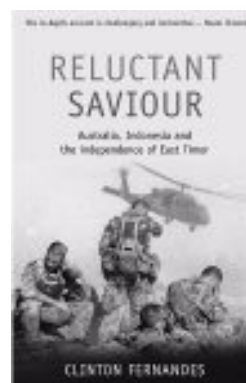


Reluctant Saviour: Australia, Indonesia and the Independence of East Timor

Clinton Fernandes

Reviewed by Dr Brian Ridge



This book, despite its ringing endorsement by Noam Chomsky as ‘... challenging and instructive,’ is a quite skewed and narrow-minded explanation of events that led to independence for East Timor. In its sketchy analytical frame of Indonesia, it uses the unfortunate and now woefully outdated frame of class warfare, all coloured with frequent references to ‘worker and peasant movements,’ or to ‘landless peasants’, and the ‘repression of peasants and workers’; and then proceeds to mount a series of tantalising conspiracy theories that run the risk of effectively devaluing the eventual move towards early independence for East Timor.

All this semblance of analysis is clouded by that other demon—capitalism—and there is a steady series of claims tying in successive Labor and Coalition federal governments as being ‘committed to the same systemic interest—that of Australian capitalism’. Fernandes sees the Jakarta lobby running in tandem with the Washington lobby in crafting key components of Canberra’s foreign policy. This account is surprisingly benign about the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), although is necessarily critical of the subsequent bloody destruction of the party and its associated organisations.

Given the book’s fairly restricted view of the world and its general ahistorical approach, it takes little or no account of the 1974 context surrounding the collapse of the Salazar regime in Portugal, and the impact of the sudden Portuguese retreat from East Timor in 1975—after Portugal had let it fester and smoulder in a stagnant backwater for centuries. But in the unholy haste to leave in 1975, the local Portuguese military had promptly turned much of its weaponry over to East Timorese activists. Not unnaturally, Indonesia was bound to be a little concerned, as were others in the region, especially as the regional version of the Cold War was still being played out. After all, it was only about seven months earlier in 1975 that Moscow’s proxy had prevailed in Vietnam, and Cambodia too was entering its darkest phase of ‘liberation’ under the Khmer Rouge. In a remarkable way, none of this features in Fernandes’ backdrop to East Timor’s path to independence, nor in his assessment of players and their roles.

In its middle chapters, the book sweeps through the growing discontent in East Timor and the huge pressures facing Jakarta as it struggled with the economic meltdown of the late 1990s. This ferment, which produced heavy political pressure for Indonesia generally, was critical for the eventual rapid series of events that led to East Timor’s independence, including the Nobel Peace Prize for Jose Ramos-Horta and Bishop Belo,

followed by the independence referendum and 1999 peacekeeping force, and later interim UN administration.

All this had an effective and brutal backdrop in the 1991 Dili massacre. There was also an inexorably growing lobby in the Indonesian political elite to let East Timor go as an independent state—but this was not initially, or perhaps ever, a majority view. The rapid rise of militias in East Timor, most of which had Indonesian military links, did not help keep East Timor off the political horizon, although it is an error to assume that the Indonesian military is a smooth-running, single and unified force, and this misguided view is often at the heart of the author’s heavy condemnation of all things to do with the Indonesian military. The initial Australian-led peacekeeping force, INTERFET, had to work rapidly, and while not acknowledged by the author, its work was often made easier by senior Australian commanders having had prior personal contact with some of their Indonesian counterparts. Given the book’s focus, of necessity, there is little account taken of what might have happened if INTERFET had had to sustain high-level combat for any length of time.

Overall, this book is not solely about independence in East Timor, but is in many ways far more focused on Indonesian politics, with particular venom directed at the military and how it ‘has continued to increase its repression of peasants and workers’. This in turn means that a major subplot for this volume is a highly critical appraisal of defence links between Australia and Indonesia, with required frequent references to the Jakarta lobby in Australian diplomacy and academia.

But one very unfortunate feature is the author’s criticism of the current East Timor leadership and its backing of closer relationships with Jakarta. As well, there is heavy complaint concerning the now independent government of East Timor’s support for the war on terror. Fernandes sees Jose Ramos-Horta, East Timor’s first foreign minister, as ‘hitching his country’s fortunes to the whims of the US foreign-policy establishment’. Naturally, this is painted as a ‘new’ government exhibiting an inability to function in a truly independent way—an odd commentary after all the rhetoric about independence and self-determination. It is almost as if Fernandes sees such self-determination as authentic only if subsequent government decisions run precisely in the same direction as his own preferences. ♦

Clinton Fernandes, ‘Reluctant Saviour: Australia, Indonesia and the Independence of East Timor’, Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 2004, Paperback, 138pp., RRP \$22.00.