

**FROM KINSHASA TO KANDAHAR: Canada and Fragile States in Historical Perspective**  
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## **FAILING FRAGILE STATES: Canada and East Timor**

*David Webster*<sup>1</sup>

Canada's approach to failed and fragile states has been linked to the wave of decolonization that swept Asia and Africa in the second half of the twentieth century, and its often chaotic aftermath. One decolonization that made small but still noticeable ripples in Ottawa was the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, normally referred to as East Timor. This small half-island state joined its fellow Portuguese colonies Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau in starting on the path to independence in 1974. After an internal conflict, it declared independence on 28 November 1975. Yet, just over a week later, on 7 December, Indonesian troops launched a full-scale invasion. The subsequent twenty-four years of military occupation cost some 200,000 lives out of a population of 680,000 people, a bloody toll that, along with the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia, knows few parallels in modern Southeast Asian history. In 1999, finally, a United Nations (UN) referendum saw the Timorese vote overwhelmingly for independence. Under an interim UN administration, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste regained its independence in 2002, using the same name and flying the same flag as the short-lived state of 1975. Amidst some post-independence troubles, it celebrated the tenth anniversary of regaining independence in 2012, a year also marked by its third free election and a peaceful transition of power. The government changed again

peacefully in 2015, when the prime minister stepped down in favour of a leading member of the major opposition party.

In 1975, East Timor was called an impossible state, too small and poor to do anything but fail. Similar rhetoric preceded East Timor's passage to independence in 1999, and continues into the twenty-first century. Constructivist political scientists have pointed out that rhetoric matters: the languages used to describe overseas conflicts often shape how Western publics view faraway lands and underpin government policy decisions about them. The argument of this chapter is that this rhetoric of state failure is derived from outside, not based on any reality on the ground. More importantly, the rhetoric of "failure" has helped to construct the very thing it warns against. If a state like East Timor is a "failed" state, the "failure" comes from outside.

It is worth taking into account some of what has been written to challenge the prevailing notion of "failed states." With regard to Haiti, *Globe and Mail* columnist Rick Salutin has suggested "that 'failed' could also be used the way 'disappeared' is now used in Latin America: as an *active* verb. Countries can 'fail' other countries, the way the police or army 'disappear' protesters." This does not suggest a simple failure to act; it means that at times the "international community"—meaning, usually, Western governments—works actively to *ensure* failure through intervention, economic pressure, or other means.<sup>2</sup> The constructed image of a state as "failed" can then be used to justify intervention, as it has been in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

It matters what rhetoric is used to frame debates on East Timor, and on the idea of "failed states" more generally, because the rhetoric itself is one of the most powerful factors in deciding which states are "failed," "fragile," "in danger," and so on. There is little reason to throw good money after bad in aid to a state that has been damned by the designation "failed." If a state is dubbed "fragile," then donors might prefer to send their aid through non-governmental organizations, even if this risks undermining the legitimacy and capacity of the local state as provider of social security. Although "paved with good intentions,"<sup>4</sup> this road may lead to unintended consequences that actually harm the prospects of states struggling to develop their capacity. Canada's problematic role in Haiti serves as example here. How a government is labelled matters, and helps shape the policies of Canada and other governments. This is especially problematic when labels

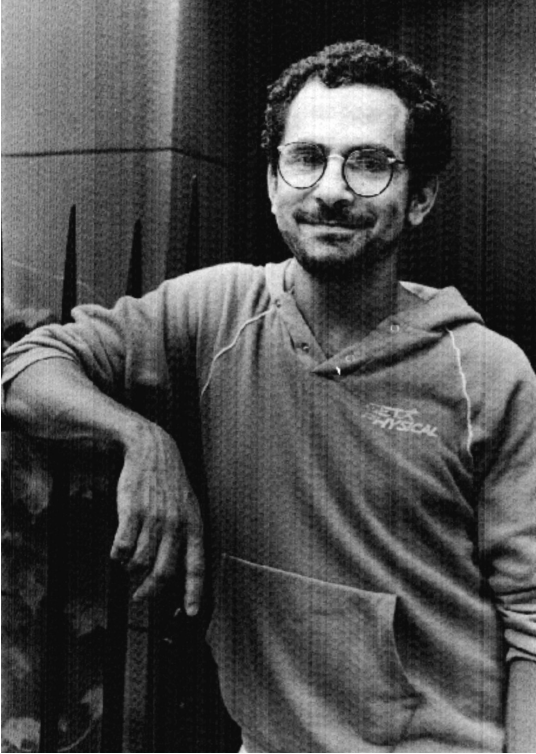


Figure 1: José Ramos-Horta at a solidarity movement gathering in New York City in the 1980s, prior to a meeting of the UN Decolonization Committee. Ramos-Horta was the leading Timorese diplomat and eventually won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 for his work with activist groups around the world to advance the cause of Timorese self-determination. (Credit: Elaine Brière)

like “failed” and “fragile” mislead, as they have done and continue to do in the case of East Timor.

In 1996, the Nobel Peace Prize went to two Timorese leaders: Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo and José Ramos-Horta. The Nobel Prize was understood, both by the award committee and the Timorese activists, as a step against silencing and forgetting. But the prize came up against two long-standing narratives. One, which this paper will return to, was “civil war” rhetoric, the claim that without Indonesian military rule, the Timorese would immediately start fighting one another. The second was “lost cause” rhetoric, which claimed that Timorese independence was completely hopeless, and that therefore the cause should be given up. Taken to its logical, albeit misguided, conclusion, “lost cause” rhetoric argued that it was, in fact, *immoral* for outsiders to support Timorese independence, because it only preserved false hopes.

One example of “lost cause” rhetoric came from journalist Marcus Gee of the *Globe and Mail*, Canada’s national newspaper. The point is not to single out and criticize Gee; indeed, it should be noted that he was in fact a supporter of human rights, rather than an apologist for the Indonesian military regime. Nonetheless, in an article entitled “Nobel prize is no help to East Timor,” Gee wrote that Bishop Belo and Ramos-Horta were “by all accounts brave and honourable men. But they are linked to a lost cause: the independence of East Timor.” Independence was impossible for this “small place in a little-known part of the world, with no allies and an implacable opponent.”<sup>5</sup> When the Indonesian dictator Suharto fell from power in 1998, a window seemed to open for change on East Timor—Suharto had been among the major obstacles to an Indonesian policy shift on its troublesome colony. “But experts say the separatists are fooling themselves if they expect the new government in Jakarta to set the former Portuguese colony free in the near future,” Gee wrote.<sup>6</sup>

“Experts” in this context referred to one Australian scholar, but there were many observers in academia, the commentariat, and government who agreed. This expertise was wrong—as some voices, especially from Australian non-governmental circles, pointed out at the time regarding the academic “Jakarta lobby.”<sup>7</sup> “Expertise” was far from objective. Throughout the period of Indonesian rule over East Timor, researchers seeking to develop expertise on or portray Indonesia worked under constraints. They required research visas to visit Indonesia and do their work. Such visas lay in the gift of the Indonesian Academy of Sciences, which worked at arm’s length from the government but was hardly independent. In conflict areas, including East Timor, researchers required special travel permits (*surat jalan*) granted by Indonesian state or military agents. Academics who became too critical of Indonesia risked being blacklisted (*dicekal*) along with human rights activists. The same people cited as “experts,” in other words, were also dependent for their continued expertise claims partly on the Indonesian government. It is little wonder that they pulled their punches or offered compliant quotations to journalists seeking expert quotes to bolster their stories. The expert quoted by Marcus Gee, for instance, was part of an “Indonesia lobby” of Australian academics.

More directly, the received wisdom of experts became a factor justifying Western policies of inaction, or even complicity, in Indonesian military rule over East Timor, which these same experts generally agreed was

poorly treated, with little respect for human rights. It continued to exert a firm hold over much commentary even in the days leading up to the 1999 referendum, when hope for independence seemed real at last. Marcus Gee repeatedly preached the hopelessness of Timorese aspirations. Independence, he wrote two years later, would be “a leap in the dark. The independent nation of East Timor would be a flyspeck on the world map.” Unable to stand on its own, “East Timor would have to throw itself on the mercy of the international community.”<sup>8</sup>

This “lost cause” rhetoric was more than just a way of writing and talking about East Timor. It was also a factor in shaping policy. Indonesian rule over East Timor was never inevitable. Knowing this is not a matter of mere hindsight. East Timorese independence from Portugal was not only plausible in 1975 but in fact became a reality, albeit briefly. Indonesian rule quickly became well entrenched, but only as a result of the active diplomatic, economic, and military support lent to the Suharto regime by its patrons in the West. Policymakers from Ottawa to Tokyo to Canberra chose to portray Timorese independence as “hopeless,” and therefore proclaimed that it was folly to support it. Maybe. But *if* the cause was hopeless, that was largely because Indonesian rule was so deeply entrenched, thanks to overseas support for its government. The logic was circular. Once policymakers and press pundits adopted the “lost cause” thesis, they shaped their actions accordingly. Policy did not begin to shift until the Timorese demonstrated convincingly that their cause was far from lost. An assumption that the case for independence was hopeless encouraged rhetorical assertions that defined the limits of the possible—limits that were then reified and used to excuse lacklustre policy decisions. All too often, many Western policymakers said, in essence: “It won’t work, so we shouldn’t try.” The documents make it fairly clear that the concept of failure reinforced existing inclinations to side with pro-Western Indonesia against a Third World nationalist struggle. There was in this process little space for Timorese voices, which tended to be ignored even when heard.

Even before East Timor declared independence in 1975, Canadian diplomats were working in quiet opposition. Their main concern was Indonesia, a pro-Western outpost in a region where communism was on the rise, strategically located, and a potentially lucrative trade partner, made all the more important because it was home to the world’s largest Muslim population. The Trudeau government highlighted Suharto’s Indonesia as “a

nascent power among the non-Communist nations because of its position and population, and the development potential of its natural resources.”<sup>9</sup> When Ottawa contemplated specific bilateral partners in Asia, it identified Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the five countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—a neutral but implicitly pro-Western group in Southeast Asia. As Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau acknowledged, the decision meant devoting special attention to Indonesia, ASEAN’s largest member by far. Canadian aid to Indonesia from 1950 to 1965 had accounted for less than one percent of total Canadian bilateral aid to Asia, but in 1970 the first Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) review of priorities picked Indonesia as the only “country of concentration” outside the Commonwealth and former French empire.<sup>10</sup> Aid was designed to help transform Indonesia from “aid recipient to trading partner.”<sup>11</sup> Canada and Indonesia, meanwhile, worked well together on the International Commission of Control and Supervision in Vietnam in 1973, and enjoyed harmonious relations on North-South issues in general.

Along with development aid, Canadian investment in Indonesia began to rise. Toronto-based Inco’s nickel mine in Sulawesi became the second-largest source of foreign investment in Indonesia, placing Canada fourth among foreign investors. At the Inco mine site, Foreign Investment Board chairman Mohammad Sadli, with his eyes “round as saucers,” told Canada’s ambassador W. T. Delworth that “Indonesia has never seen so much money.”<sup>12</sup> Between entering Indonesia in 1968 and the end of the century, Inco invested US \$2,074 million in the mine and associated operations.<sup>13</sup> When Suharto made his first official visit to Ottawa in 1975, the Canadian government teamed up with the major chartered banks to offer an innovative \$200 million line of credit as “the centrepiece of the visit.” Trade quickly soared from \$30 million to \$300 million a year.<sup>14</sup>

Yet Indonesia’s economy was soon teetering over a debt crisis brought about by over-borrowing by the state oil company, Pertamina. Consequently, the Toronto Dominion Bank cancelled its line of credit to Indonesia soon after agreeing to be part of the \$200 million Canadian loan package. The Canadian government, however, maintained its faith in Suharto and also the government-backed credit that his government could draw upon.<sup>15</sup> The TD Bank’s analysts had decided that Indonesia was not a good credit risk. Despite that, Ottawa decided for political reasons to maintain support. There could be few examples that fit today’s definition

of “fragile state” better than the Suharto regime, challenged by soaring dissent, without democratic avenues to channel protests, dependent on an oil boom, and at risk of defaulting on its foreign debt. The Indonesian debt crisis, brought on by Pertamina’s reckless moves, placed the regime in real danger, just a decade after massacres in Indonesia saw the army topple the country’s first president, an event that had entailed casualties of up to one million people. Was this a stable state? The case was at least debatable. Yet state fragility was in the eye of the beholder. Indonesia, as an important Cold War ally and potential trade partner, could not be considered as fragile—whatever the rational calculations of economists said. Policymakers in Ottawa maintained their idealistic faith in Jakarta, and helped provide the tools that allowed the Suharto regime to survive.

By the time the decolonization of Portuguese Timor appeared on the Western political agenda in 1975, Western policymakers were inclined to accept Indonesian strategic concerns. Canadian observers hoped that the Timorese could be persuaded to accept the Indonesian declaration of Timorese “integration” into Indonesia. Covert Indonesian efforts to annex East Timor were acceptable, so long as the *appearance* of self-determination was respected. If that meant an invasion, Canada would maintain “some sympathy for Indonesia’s dilemma.”<sup>16</sup> Canadian diplomats accepted at face value Indonesian arguments that an independent East Timor would not be a viable state—in other words, that it could only “fail” if allowed to be independent. The inevitability of failure was especially prominent in Australian government documents. One worried about “a poor, uneducated, probably unstable, independent East Timor on our doorstep.”<sup>17</sup> Canadian officials often looked to Australia for the lead on how to act with regard to East Timor, so Australian views mattered. So, too, did those of neighbouring New Zealand, from which Canadian diplomats obtained much of their information about developments in East Timor in the early years. New Zealand ambassador to Indonesia Roger Peren visited in 1978 and reported that the Indonesian annexation was “plainly irreversible.” The “irreversible” doctrine became official New Zealand policy from 1978 to 1995, influencing Canada’s embrace of the same belief.<sup>18</sup>

Even while putting forward this case of inevitable failure due to East Timor’s too-small size and low level of economic development, Indonesian diplomats argued that East Timor might be not only viable, but viable enough to pose a threat to regional peace and security. It could become,



in the words of one Indonesian source, “another Cuba,” threatening Indonesia from close by in the same way that the US government argued that Communist Cuba under Fidel Castro’s leadership threatened the United States.<sup>19</sup> East Timor was allegedly especially threatening in 1975, when South Vietnam’s pro-American regime was toppled by Communist-led Vietnamese nationalists and Communist governments came to power in Cambodia and Laos, Vietnam’s Southeast Asian neighbours. Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was among those who accepted Indonesian arguments, saying an independent East Timor would be “an unviable state and a potential threat to the area.”<sup>20</sup>

Added to both those arguments—lack of viability leading to failure, and alleged viability as a threat—was the argument that Timorese peoples were so divided that only outside rule would prevent a civil war among them. It was an argument much like the one offered by Dutch colonial rulers in the early twentieth century against Indonesian independence, now echoed by the rulers of independent Indonesia.<sup>21</sup> East Timor was too small to be viable, Suharto told his hosts on a mid-1975 visit to Ottawa. Canadian officials looked to Australian counterparts for guidance and learned that they would acquiesce in an Indonesian takeover.<sup>22</sup> This coincided with Canada’s own active interest in the region; as one briefing paper noted, “stability in the Southeast Asian region is of significance for Canada.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the invasion was not a “surprise,” as recalled by Derek Burney, who directed the Pacific Affairs Bureau in External Affairs.<sup>24</sup> Canadian officials, like their Australian and American counterparts, knew it was coming and chose not to deter it when speaking to Indonesian counterparts.

Shortly after Indonesian troops launched a full-scale invasion of East Timor on 7 December 1975, the United Nations General Assembly issued the first of several resolutions calling for Timorese self-determination. Canada’s delegation, ordered by Ottawa not to support any criticism of Indonesia, abstained in company with most of its Western allies. The following year, External Affairs Minister Allan MacEachen promised to be guided by ASEAN views.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, Canada continued to abstain until 1980, and then began voting with Indonesia against Timorese self-determination. Canadian aid to Indonesia the year after the invasion reached a record level of \$37 million, third among Canadian aid recipients.

Canada's UN vote was guided by the "lost cause" claim. Officials at the Department of External Affairs argued against "taking up every lost cause in the world" and against UN resolutions that preserved "false hopes and a false issue."<sup>26</sup> A major part of the reason why no progress on East Timor appeared possible was that the Western alliance was collectively lending support to the Indonesian occupation; in other words, it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. From 1980 onward, Canada's UN mission sided with Indonesia, voting against resolutions affirming East Timor's right to self-determination. Human rights advocacy was not absent, but it was deflected toward less controversial causes. Canadian officials, like those in the Carter administration in the United States, concentrated their human rights talk on the release of political prisoners, an issue that did not directly challenge the legitimacy of the regime.<sup>27</sup> Advocating prisoner releases allowed a focus on the "abuses" of an authoritarian regime; support for human rights in East Timor would have required a more fundamental critique of the basis of Indonesia's military-dominated government and wrecked Canadian hopes for increased trade in an emerging Asian market. Visiting Jakarta in 1983, Prime Minister Trudeau admitted that the East Timor issue "raised the problem of self-determination of peoples," but insisted that his government had "decided that stability of the region should be the foremost concern and thus had supported Indon[esia]."<sup>28</sup> There was no question, for the Trudeau government, that the need for "stability" outweighed any temptation to advocate for human rights.

In 1983, the Australian newspaper *The Age* reported that Indonesian forces had used incendiary devices in bombing runs over East Timor. Australian officials denied the story. Yet Timorese leaders and human rights groups continued to insist that the Indonesian armed forces had used bombs in this way, and had even used napalm—specifically, a version known as "opalm" purchased from the Soviet Union. In a rare display of unwitting superpower cooperation, they dropped the Soviet opalm from American-supplied aircraft. To this day, the Indonesian government denies the use of napalm. Recently declassified Australian documents, however, confirm the use of napalm and the Australian government's knowledge.<sup>29</sup> Canadian documents add to the evidence, confirming the use of opalm and demonstrating that the Department of External Affairs was aware of this atrocity. Canada's embassy in Jakarta confirmed "that bombing runs with napalm and cluster bombs began on September 23."<sup>30</sup> The

high commission in Canberra confirmed with Australian counterparts that the chemical dropped was opalm, “a more virulent form of napalm.”<sup>31</sup> Canadian diplomats chose not to act on the information and withheld it from members of the Canadian Parliament in a subsequent briefing note on East Timor. Instead, the note blamed internal Timorese divisions for provoking an Indonesian intervention and argued against any Canadian support for Timorese self-determination at the UN on the grounds that Indonesian rule was “unchangeable.”<sup>32</sup>

Timorese independence activists raised insistent cries that the cause was not, after all, completely hopeless. They could change the dynamic, they insisted, if the international community ceased backing Indonesia. The key and vital achievement of Timorese diplomats and the international solidarity networks formed to support them was to disrupt the “lost cause” thesis. It is useful to consider this process using the model of transnational advocacy networks, which emerge and gel through the use of “common languages.” As Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink argue, when campaigners in one country are blocked by their own government, they can often succeed by making common cause with civil society allies overseas. A “boomerang” effect sees these overseas groups place pressure on their own governments and on international organizations, which in turn can pressure the home government.<sup>33</sup>

The “boomerang” effect certainly operated in East Timor. Over time, Timorese and foreign supporters evolved common languages centred on human rights. They were able to disrupt Indonesia’s overseas support, leading to increasing international pressure. During the 1990s, East Timor emerged as a world issue, tied up with global debates over the meaning and extent of human rights. Indonesia’s government, in common with Malaysia, China, Singapore, and other authoritarian regimes, asserted an “Asian values” thesis that saw human rights as Western-derived, arguing for less emphasis on individual rights and more acceptance of undemocratic governments. Asian human rights groups rejected the thesis, joining battle on rhetorical terrain about the meaning and applicability of human rights. Timorese diplomats were prominent among these non-state networks, advancing a language of universal human rights to bolster their claim to the right to self-determination.<sup>34</sup>

In Canada, East Timor initially received little attention—there were none of the missionary links, diasporas, or hopes for trade that shaped

Canadian relations with other Asian countries. This began to change, however, with the launch of Amnesty International's 1985 global campaign for human rights in East Timor. Timorese non-state diplomats increasingly stressed the language of human rights, partly under the influence of the Timorese Catholic Church. In the 1980s, Canadian churches funded the creation of two organizations centred on raising public awareness of East Timor: the Indonesia East Timor Programme in Ontario, and the East Timor Alert Network (ETAN) in British Columbia. There was also an active Nova Scotia East Timor Group, which in the late 1980s merged into a single national ETAN group. ETAN would in time become a national network, supported by core funding from the Catholic, Anglican, United, and Presbyterian churches. The Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace (CCODP) joined with others in the church-sponsored Asia Partnership for Human Development to call for international pressure for human rights in East Timor. Canadian Catholic bishops' calls for a more human-centred development in northern Canada aligned well with critiques of Indonesian state-led "development" (*pembangunan*) from Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo and others in East Timor.

ETAN was increasingly effective in raising awareness, especially with the arrival in Canada of Timorese students-turned-refugees. Abé Barreto Soares and Bella Galhos subsequently became important representatives for the Timorese diplomatic network. After lobbying from Canadian activists and exiled Timorese bishop Martinho da Costa Lopes, Canadian Catholic bishops became more willing to speak out in support of East Timor, asking the Canadian government to promote peace talks and ban arms sales to Indonesia. ETAN was also able to gain the backing of the Canadian labour movement, especially for its arms embargo campaign. All of this made it increasingly difficult for Canadian government representatives to carry on business as usual with their Indonesian counterparts. "We continue to seem to be prepared to have our NGO community dictate our actions," Canada's ambassador Lawrence Dickinson complained in the mid-1990s, adding that there were no concessions made to lobbyists on Vietnam and other countries.<sup>35</sup> Indonesian foreign minister Ali Alatas similarly claimed that "Canadian NGOs are the most ferociously anti-Indonesian in the world."<sup>36</sup> Transnational activist networks became a powerful weapon for the Timorese resistance forces.

But Indonesia still had much to offer those other, less romantic non-state actors: transnational corporations. The 1990s saw the peak of admiration for Asian “miracle economies” grouped in a menagerie of tigers, dragons, and flying geese. Indonesia was more valuable than ever. Canadian and American governments enthusiastically backed the Suharto regime in Indonesia as a “little tiger” in economics, a reliable voice in international politics, and a stabilizing factor in chaotic Southeast Asia. True, it was no respecter of human rights, but the fashionable thinking of the day was that “soft authoritarian” governments were delivering an “economic miracle” in eastern Asia and that growth would eventually bring about democratization.<sup>37</sup> External Affairs acknowledged that severe human rights abuses had occurred between 1975 and 1980 but argued that the situation was improving rapidly. “Like most other nations,” wrote Conservative Foreign Minister Joe Clark, “Canada believes that the situation has become irreversible.” Given that belief, the goal was to build “an environment conducive to the awareness and promotion of human rights.”<sup>38</sup> Once more, the rhetoric of hopelessness was deployed to justify a policy of complicity on East Timor.

The end of the Cold War removed the strategic reasons to back Indonesia, right or wrong. Hoping to position Canada as a leading voice for global human rights, Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney made passionate declarations at the 1991 summit meetings of the Commonwealth and La Francophonie that Canada would “no longer subsidize repression and the stifling of democracy.”<sup>39</sup> Less than a month after Mulroney uttered those words in Zimbabwe, East Timor provided the first test case. Indonesian soldiers opened fire on a pro-independence march in Dili, East Timor’s capital, on 12 November 1991, with film footage of the killings broadcast around the world. The massacre received extensive coverage on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s nightly television newsmagazine *The Journal*. Reaction to the killing produced a global upsurge in activism and reinforced the solidarity movement, with a host of new ETAN groups forming in Canada. The Canadian ambassador in Jakarta, Ingrid Hall, was ordered to inform her hosts of the rising public concern.<sup>40</sup>

The Mulroney government also froze three major aid projects worth a collective \$30 million. Foreign minister Barbara McDougall added an unofficial ban on any arms export permits.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, existing aid

and export promotion efforts continued unhampered. The Mulroney government's response was intended to express disapproval through a careful targeting of sanctions in such a way that core trade and investment ties would not be harmed. Indonesia remained a Canadian trade priority, with two-way trade up reaching \$563 million in 1992, a 47 percent increase on the previous year.<sup>42</sup> Indonesian officials exempted Ottawa from the angry reprisals that it directed at the Netherlands when the Dutch government linked aid to human rights. In Canada, though, rumours that frozen aid would be restored were never fulfilled, apparently for fear of public reaction.<sup>43</sup> The aid freeze remained in place until the fall of the Conservative government in 1993.

Concerned with high unemployment at home and a big government deficit, Jean Chrétien's Liberal government redoubled the emphasis on trade with Indonesia, hailing it as one of the Asian "miracle" economies. It permitted the resumption of new aid to Indonesia and began to authorize arms sales once again, part of a larger strategy to kick-start the Canadian economy by boosting exports. By 1994, Canadian investment in Indonesia stood at \$3 billion and rising; more than fifty companies reported exports to Indonesia in excess of \$50 million. "Indonesia offers the best fit for Canadian economic interests I have seen," Canada's ambassador Lawrence Dickinson declared.<sup>44</sup>

Ottawa's aid arm, CIDA, meanwhile funded two CCODP projects strengthening the Dili diocese's ability to reach and involve more lay people: a radio station and a peace and justice commission. Ottawa was looking for ways to involve Canada in East Timor without raising thorny human rights issues that could affect trade prospects. Visiting Jakarta that year for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, Chrétien argued that increased trade would give Canada more leverage to promote human rights. As in the 1970s, rights advocacy tended to be diverted into safe channels. Chrétien's foreign ministers, André Ouellet and Lloyd Axworthy, refused to ban arms sales to Indonesia or to take a lead on the East Timor file. Axworthy, an exponent of "human security" and niche diplomacy, diverted rights advocacy into a closed-door "bilateral human rights dialogue," and pointed to that as evidence of Canadian quiet diplomacy for human rights. This gave him an answer to critics who argued that human security doctrine required stronger action on East Timor: Canada

Figure 2: A protester is arrested at the 1997 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Protesters were attempting to perform a “citizen’s arrest” of Indonesian President Suharto, a campaign organized by the East Timor Alert Network of Canada. (Credit: Elaine Brière)



was active on that front using the “niche” opportunity of a bilateral dialogue on human rights.<sup>45</sup>

Canadian rights groups hotly contested government assertions that trade advanced rights. The clash of views was best symbolized by the 1997 APEC summit, held at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. When ETAN posted pictures of Suharto captioned “Wanted: For Crimes Against Humanity,” enraged Indonesian officials made the group an issue in bilateral relations. Suharto threatened to boycott the APEC summit, a vital symbol of the Chrétien government’s Asia trade strategy. Axworthy pleaded with Indonesian Foreign Minister Alatas, saying “we did not want ETAN to win a victory and they would claim victory if [the] President did not come.”<sup>46</sup> Once again the government claim, grounded in the rhetoric of “hopelessness,” clashed with NGO demands for a positive policy of support for Timorese self-determination. Under heavy pressure from

Jakarta, Canadian authorities agreed to ensure that Suharto would not be confronted by protesters. Keeping this promise required the use of pepper spray to clear away protestors and to allow the APEC motorcade to pass through campus undisturbed by signs of dissent.<sup>47</sup> No longer was Canada the wealthy donor and Indonesia the supplicant. Instead, Canadian wheat exporters looked to companies controlled by Suharto's business cronies as leading customers, and Canada was prepared to ignore human rights and its own traditions of political protest as a cost of doing business.

That changed when a financial crisis swept through Asia in 1998, toppling Suharto from the Indonesian presidency he had occupied since the mid-1960s. When the new president, B. J. Habibie, agreed to let Timorese voters choose autonomy or independence, Timorese leader Xanana Gusmão wrote to Lloyd Axworthy to argue that Canada, as a new Security Council member, was “in a unique position to play a lead role during the upcoming transition in East Timor, which I believe is *inevitable* [emphasis added].”<sup>48</sup> Inevitability, it seemed, had changed sides. Even if officials in Ottawa did not necessarily agree with Xanana that Timorese independence was inevitable, neither did they cling any longer to their earlier belief that it was impossible. Once Axworthy and his officials freed themselves of the “lost cause” thesis, they became able to make valuable, creative contributions. But it took the debunking of the rhetoric of hopelessness to open the window to any action.

With the “lost cause” rhetoric disrupted, there was one other challenger: civil war rhetoric—in other words, the rhetoric of a “failed state,” or a state certain to fail. Indonesian government publications and officials argued that there had been a civil war in East Timor in 1975, stopped only by Indonesian intervention. True, there had been a civil war, but it lasted for only a few weeks before order was restored and the pattern since then had been of increasing unity among Timorese groups. Suharto's roving ambassador on East Timor, Francisco Lopes da Cruz, travelled the world with one message: if Indonesian troops left, there was certain to be another civil war.

Without denying the existence of internal divisions within East Timor, it should be pointed out that civil war rhetoric was essentially an Indonesian state strategy to prevent East Timor's independence by arguing that an independent East Timor would instantly “fail” in the absence of the stabilizing Indonesian armed forces. This is an argument that has been



used by many colonial rulers—not least, the former Dutch colonial rulers of Indonesia, who had once argued that Indonesia’s great diversity meant that it would dissolve into chaos without the stabilizing Dutch presence. This civil war rhetoric, like the rhetoric of the “lost cause,” was debunked as Timorese parties gradually came together in a series of resistance coalitions and demonstrations of Timorese unity, aimed almost exclusively at swaying the opinions of international observers.

Portuguese-Indonesian negotiations at the UN produced an agreement for a referendum on Timorese autonomy within Indonesia or independence early in 1999. Indonesian officials had predicted an internal conflict among the Timorese. When this failed to materialize, figures in the Indonesian military set about creating one by encouraging, funding, and arming pro-Indonesia militia groups and giving them a licence to terrorize pro-independence Timorese.<sup>49</sup> Despite these efforts, over 98 percent of Timorese voters turned out for the referendum on 30 August 1999, and 78.5 percent chose the independence option. The Indonesian military response was to unleash a wave of violence by the militias, which put East Timor on front pages and top-of-evening newscasts around the world. No longer convinced that self-determination was hopeless, Canadian diplomats worked hard to pressure Indonesia to invite an international peacekeeping force. That pressure, added to similar pressure from other governments and international organizations, forced President Habibie to surrender and invite peacekeepers in; the UN then supervised a transition period leading to Timorese independence in 2002. The cause so long portrayed as hopeless had succeeded after all.

There was nothing uniquely Canadian about supporting Indonesian military rule in East Timor: it was also the policy of the United States, Australia, Japan, Britain, France, Germany, and other allies. But the rhetorical justifications offered by Canadian policymakers may have leaned more on the rhetoric of hopelessness; where American officials could couch their policy in *realpolitik*, Canadian officials perhaps needed to claim they *wanted* to do the right thing—but it was impossible.

Self-defensive rhetoric could become self-congratulatory, too. Again, Marcus Gee’s commentaries in the *Globe and Mail* serve as examples. As Indonesian troops finally departed in 1999, Gee offered a contribution to a new, emerging narrative: that “we” in the West, who “tend to romanticize those who struggle for national liberation,” were “the midwives of East

Timorese independence” who had “rushed in to restore order, the sword of righteousness in our hands.” The disconnect from the *very* recent past was startling. “We intervened in defence of human rights,” he wrote.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps. But if so, it was only after more than two decades of quieter intervention on the other side. The new narrative construct tells of a twenty-four-year-long “fit of absence of mind,” followed by a righteous rescue mission, and it plays a part in denying calls for an international tribunal on mass atrocities in East Timor, for any duty to make amends or reparations, for any acknowledgement of past actions. Instead, Western governments are shrouded in the glory of a brief moment in 1999, and all previous complicity is consigned to the realm of forgetting.

This is very bad history, and it teaches some unfortunate lessons. We now have a new false assumption, that East Timor is one of the fragile states that threaten global stability. The language of the “failed state” is bandied about, creating once again a sense of hopelessness. To read the occasional media mention of East Timor, it would be easy to get a picture of a nation in crisis, an Asian Somalia with few prospects. This is often tied to a political crisis, including a mutiny by demobilized soldiers in 2006, but the language of “failed state” began earlier: it is not simply the result of the 2006 crisis. It started even before the restoration of independence. Richard Woolcott, who as Australian ambassador to Indonesia in 1975 played an important role in shaping Australian acquiescence in the invasion of East Timor, greeted the arrival of Australian peacekeepers in 1999 with dismay, saying he feared “an obligation to support with substantial aid a broken back, mini-state within the Indonesian archipelago.”<sup>51</sup> More on the same lines followed in the first years of independence.<sup>52</sup> The 2013 Failed States Index ranks independent Timor-Leste as “in danger,” at number thirty-two. Using new categories, it gets an “alert” status and ranks thirty-first in the rebranded 2014 Fragile States Index.<sup>53</sup> This grouping is part of a zone of instability that includes almost the entire—and undifferentiated—developing world. Even in rebranding away from the term “failed states” to “fragile states,” the index makers maintain the implication that some states—all in the Global South—are “fragile,” while others are not, an implication easily avoided by using the more neutral term, State Stability Index.<sup>54</sup> The country has risen as high as eighteenth on the Failed States Index (in 2010, a year of improvements in the eyes of most observers).<sup>55</sup>

Yet Timor-Leste is a country with a vibrant and non-violent party system, with higher voting rates than Canada. It has ratified more human rights covenants than either the United States or Canada, and its lively, engaged civil society is better able to influence public debates than its Canadian counterpart. It has seen two peaceful handovers of power from one prime minister to another, with no violent changes of power at all. Without romanticizing prospects or minimizing setbacks, this is a country that can point to substantial accomplishments in a decade of independence, and whose non-governmental organizations are effectively holding the government to account. It is no simple “failed state” today.

In spite of this, Canadian governments, for more than twenty years, were captives of the “lost cause” argument. Since Timorese self-determination was impossible, they did not advocate it until 1998, by which time Timorese advocacy had shown that self-determination was in fact entirely possible. Canada was not silent because no one in Ottawa *cared* about human rights. Rather, the “lost cause” thesis made strong rights advocacy appear pointless, even counter-productive. It had the power to convince officials that the most humane approach was to convince the Timorese to abandon their independence campaigns and acquiesce to Indonesian rule in exchange for a lighter ruling hand. Timorese activists never accepted this defeatist rhetoric and, together with their supporters in transnational advocacy networks, proved able to debunk the argument. By forming themselves into a single independence coalition, they were also able to undermine the “civil war” narrative. Once freed from these false constructs, the Canadian government was able to frame constructive policies for goal-oriented rights promotion for a short time around 1999. False constructs, however, once again dominate the Canadian government’s outlook on East Timor. The insidious idea of East Timor as a state on the road to “failure” feeds a sense of hopelessness and becomes another self-fulfilling prophecy. It absolves governments like Canada’s—which has ended bilateral aid to East Timor despite promises to remain for the long term—from any role in reinforcing the new nation. It permits Australia, for example, to reject Timorese calls to negotiate a sea border in the oil-rich Timor Sea, with the claim being advanced that Timorese are less able to manage oil resources than Australians since their government lacks capacity.<sup>56</sup>

The Timorese are trying to regain some control over the rhetorical terrain. Many observers blur the two concepts of “failed” and “fragile” states.

If some states have “failed,” others may be *fragile*, yet far from the point of failure. A fragile state, after all, can recover. The notion of “fragility” has the potential to restore some agency to the countries often consigned to the conceptual grab bag of “failed states.” This is part of the reason East Timor has taken the lead in forming the g7+, a group of nineteen self-declared fragile and conflict-affected states who seek to regain a collective voice and help set the aid and peacebuilding agenda, while rejecting any suggestion that they have “failed.”<sup>57</sup> In the words of South Sudan’s finance minister at the 2011 g7+ meeting: “the only way you can drive is from the driver’s seat, not from the back seat, and this is what we want to tell our friends.”<sup>58</sup>

In spite of the evidence of substantial progress and the lack of violent conflict within Timor-Leste, the “failed state” accusation continues to be levelled. Timorese non-state diplomats struggled against the claim that they were fighting for a “lost cause” throughout the final quarter of the twentieth century. In the first years of the twenty-first century, they were confronted with a similar “failed state” claim and forced to battle it on the same rhetorical terrain. An article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2014 lamented that Timor-Leste “has struggled in almost every facet of economic and political management.”<sup>59</sup> Former UN mission chief Ian Martin and Timorese cabinet minister Agio Pereira are among those who have pointed out the flaws in the “failure” claim, with Martin saying Timor-Leste was not “failed” but young, and Pereira mustering statistics and references to Timor-Leste’s rise to “medium human development” on the UN Development Programme’s Human Development Index.<sup>60</sup> On the HDI, Timor-Leste ranks alongside Honduras and is fourth in the world in its index improvement in the 2000–13 period.<sup>61</sup>

In acknowledging his country’s challenges, Timorese researcher Guteriano Neves offers a thoughtful deconstruction of the “failed state” claim in an article published on the Timorese presidency’s semi-official blog. (The publication of critical analysis of government policy by that same government is, incidentally, another sign of vibrant political debate.) “Viewing these challenges as the product of social and political dynamic and using these challenges as the basis to claim that Timor-Leste is a failed state is ahistorical, missing the context, and it is an oversimplification of the issue,” he writes.<sup>62</sup> Canadians analyzing Timor-Leste might benefit from listening to local voices, rather than labelling Timor-Leste as “failed” in the same way they once labelled it a “lost cause.”

## Notes

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- 4 Nikolas Berry-Shaw and Dru Oja Jay, *Paved with Good Intentions: Canada’s Development NGOs from Idealism to Imperialism* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2012).
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