

Geoffrey Robinson. *If You Leave Us Here We Will Die: How Genocide was Stopped in East Timor*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. 340 pp.

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On August 30, 1999, the people of East Timor voted for independence from the Republic of Indonesia, and then withstood three weeks of horrific violence before an armed international intervention force was dispatched to Timor to restore peace. The tiny size of East Timor should not conceal the momentous nature of these events in modern history. What happened in East Timor in those terrible weeks ought to shape our understanding of the nature of international relations. The events in Timor showed not only the ease with which militaristic bureaucracies can cultivate capacities for mass violence, or merely the difficulty of using such violence successfully to coerce compliance in oppressed populations. They also showed that, given the right conditions, the great powers of the world are capable, despite many tragic examples to the contrary, of acting in a principled and effective manner to prevent or halt genocide.

This is the main thesis of Geoffrey Robinson's powerful book. His narrative operates on two levels. First, it is a personal testimony to the appalling atrocities that took place, some of which Robinson personally witnessed as an officer working for the United Nations Assistance Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), which organized the independence ballot. Second, it operates as an academic text that seeks to provide an analysis of the violence and the international response to it. As an academic text, the book makes two main contributions. It contributes to the field of genocide studies by showing how the repeated experience of military mobilization creates propensities for mass violence and genocide in particular populations, which can then be manipulated to serve the interests of elites. It contributes to the field of international relations by showing the conditions under which great powers respond to the threat of such violence.

As a personal testimony of horrific events, the book works brilliantly. Its central chapters deliver an eyewitness account of the months and weeks leading up to the ballot and its aftermath, and tell a story that is both disturbing and fascinating. The building sense of tension and dread felt by both the UNAMET officials and the East Timorese population is beautifully conveyed, as both entered the ballot process facing the certainty of violence from Indonesian-sponsored militias and the uncertainty of any kind of international assistance. The final rescue of thousands of refugees from the UN compound by international forces, following worldwide outrage at the actions of Indonesian forces, makes the story, as Robinson remarks at the outset, one that is ultimately "strangely uplifting." As such, it contrasts starkly with the bleak images and moral bankruptcy of the international interventions to which we have become accustomed over the past ten years, particularly the invasion of Iraq.

In his introduction, Robinson reflects on his peculiar position as both historian of, and participant in, the events he describes. He comments, "some might say that it has interfered with my capacity for objectivity. That may well be the case" (p. 5). To my mind, the humanity inherent in his personal testimony carries over to and well serves his academic analysis throughout the book, as does the concern he shows and the care

he takes in explaining patterns of actions by Indonesians and Timorese alike, without degenerating into reification or stereotyped condemnations or justifications. For example, Robinson wants to understand how some Timorese—primarily unemployed youths—were able to be transformed into instruments of the Indonesian army through the militia system that appeared in the year of the referendum. In explaining that phenomenon, he expresses an explicit concern to avoid using the crude cultural stereotyping employed by the Indonesians, who referred to the militias as a manifestation of angry pro-integration Timorese “running amok.”¹ But he also evinces a less explicit, but no less significant, concern to avoid letting the Timorese militias off the hook. Some militia members were certainly forced to join against their wills, but others just as certainly joined voluntarily and eagerly. How was it possible that significant numbers of young Timorese men appeared poised on the brink of implementing a policy of genocide against their own people, on behalf of the Indonesians?

Robinson explains this conundrum through a fascinating reevaluation of Timorese history. He shows how the formation of armed militias and their use against different segments of the Timorese population have been a repeated feature of external intervention in East Timor, including by the Portuguese and Japanese, as well as by the Indonesians. Multiple iterations of such mobilizations in different historical contexts have produced in East Timor an evolving repertoire of violent practices that are available for manipulation by contending elite groups. Furthermore, the history of the Indonesians’ own experience in dealing with armed insurgency from the 1940s onwards intermeshed with Timorese experience to produce a chillingly effective relationship between the Indonesian armed forces and the Timorese militias.

Robinson’s innovative explanation of the nature of the militia movement in East Timor explains a number of distinctive features of the violence. He documents how the Indonesian armed forces were able to take both a relatively hands-off stance and yet seem to maintain close control over the militias, such that the violence could be, apparently, turned on and off at will as international pressure ebbed and flowed. He further explains how apparently locally constituted and separate militias operated in quite similar ways across the country.

In making those arguments, Robinson is careful to distinguish his identification of a repertoire of particular tropes or rituals of violence from claims of cultural determinism. This is important, not only because it refutes the self-serving claims of Indonesian military officers that the violence was the result of a savage Timorese culture, but because it shows, as Arendt has explained, the banality of mass atrocity and its susceptibility to bureaucratic manipulation.² The violence that occurred in Timor took on a contextually specific form, but this does not make such levels of violence unique to this context. This perspective is important for the normative position that pervades Robinson’s writing as both an analyst and as a witness to the events about which he writes. Calls for humanitarian intervention, ultimately, are more powerful if we accept that we are all vulnerable to humanitarian crises.

¹Major General Zacky Anwar Makarim, quoted by the *Jakarta Post*, January 5, 2000, and cited in Robinson, p. 12.

²Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

Robinson also hints at the ways in which the 1990s iteration of the militia movement reflected specifically contemporary realities, and this is one area of the book where further intellectual development might have added to the account. Unlike the clandestine resistance movement, which was dominated by the growing numbers of educated Timorese who had studied at Indonesian universities, and been influenced by Indonesian nationalism, the militia movement attracted its frontline members from the displaced poor. The young men of the militias represented an underclass for whom Indonesian rule offered little. Because this group lacked land for farming, qualifications for public-service jobs, or the hope for any employment, its members' association with the Indonesian military in a casual, paramilitary role was one of only a few opportunities for earning money or acquiring status. Consequently, as Robinson notes, even some former Falintil (Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste, the Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor) guerrillas joined militia groups after surrendering to the Indonesians. The rather pathetic reliance of this otherwise disenfranchised group on Indonesian patronage represented a key motivation for pro-integration sentiment. For the educated middle classes, by contrast, independence represented the opportunity to rid themselves of an Indonesian elite that was not only violent and abusive, but also failed to promote Timorese into any positions of responsibility, or to share the spoils of extractive industries and plantation agriculture.

That dichotomy is important, since it speaks to a question that Robinson addresses less thoroughly in his account. He gives a detailed and harrowing account of how the violence was organized, and provides a rigorous and convincing explanation of how it was possible that some Timorese groups responded in the way that they did to Indonesian military strategies. He says much less on the question of *why* the violence happened: whose interests did it ultimately serve?

As Robinson comments, this remains a puzzle. "What precisely," Robinson asks, "did they expect to gain through a scorched-earth policy, conducted under the noses of the United Nations and the media, and in open defiance of Indonesia's stated commitment to its international obligations?" (p. 172). Robinson puts forward three possibilities: revenge, undermining the credibility of the ballot, or laying the groundwork for a future partition of East Timor. However, he does not explain what the specific interest of the Indonesian military, or other sections of the Indonesian elite, may have been in these outcomes. What, for instance, did the Indonesian military stand to gain from a partitioned East Timor? How could it possibly hope to benefit from an East Timor returned to Indonesian rule following such a clear rejection of it by the population? Is revenge adequate to explain the patterns of violence that Robinson documents? Understanding these interests requires analysis of the rapidly changing political economy of the Indonesian military and its relationship to political elites in the aftermath of *reformasi* and the fall of Suharto.

This is a task Robinson does not attempt, mainly, perhaps, because it would make his project unwieldy in scope, but also, perhaps, because he is more interested in the question of culpability than in the question of motive. Research into this aspect of the issue would shed light, however, on issues such as the extent to which Jakarta was fully apprised of, or in control of, the situation in Dili, and the relative interests of different levels and sections of the military and civilian administrations. From

Robinson's vantage point on the ground, as he makes clear, the exact identity of those pulling the strings with respect to the campaign of violence, and the level at which they sat in the Indonesian military or administration hierarchy, was not obvious. The failure of the democratizing Indonesian polity to make any kind of serious investigation into the events in East Timor means, as Robinson documents, that clear evidence of who was involved, and when, has never been brought to light.

Robinson's second set of analytic concerns is to show how, in particular circumstances, international unity behind a policy of armed humanitarian intervention is possible. Robinson writes movingly about the confrontation of a team of visiting international diplomats by a young Timorese woman, who told the delegates, "If you leave us here we will die" (p. 198). Robinson describes the deep impact of this bald statement on the visiting diplomats, and comments, "as far as I was concerned at the time, the tide of fortune had turned with those words" (ibid.). In fact, as Robinson acknowledges, the logic of the international intervention was far more complex than this, and his account of how the shadows of Rwanda and Srebrenica affected the thinking of UN officials is compelling, as is his discussion of how the Timorese, in the end, benefited from a network of international institutions that, after years of lobbying without result, was finally able to mobilize international public pressure in favor of intervention. Once again, he focuses on the "how" rather than the "in whose interests" in his explanation. A cynic might suggest that a more detailed examination of, for example, the interests of Australia, might situate the intervention on more morally ambiguous ground. Australia had long enjoyed the benefits of East Timor's occupation by Indonesia in the form of a deal with Indonesia that awarded Australia sole mining rights over disputed oil-rich areas in the Timor Sea. The sovereignty of these areas remains in question, and newly independent East Timor fought a determined but thus far unsuccessful battle to get Australia to agree on a maritime boundary that corresponds with what many observers regard as one supported by international law. Once the Timorese had voted to reject autonomy, making some kind of independent East Timor inevitable, Australia had a powerful interest in moving quickly to exert its own influence in the new nation, laying the groundwork for what Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer once controversially described as an expectation of Timorese flexibility and submission in light of "all we've done for East Timor."³

Overall, however, Robinson shows clearly both the cynicism of great power politics and its occasional vulnerability to international public outcry. In reading his account from the perspective of 2011 and with knowledge of more recent events, the reader wonders whether the international response that was forthcoming with respect to East Timor represents hope for a more humanitarian future, or was an anomaly, a humanitarian moment that is now sadly past.

³ Alexander Downer, recorded and broadcast in 2004 by Australian Broadcasting Corporation; see *Four Corners: Rich Man, Poor Man*, transcript, available online at www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2004/s1105310.htm, accessed November 4, 2011.