

Clinton Fernandes. *The Independence of East Timor: Multi-dimensional Perspectives – Occupation, Resistance, and International Political Activism*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2011. 261 pp.

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A nice side effect of East Timor's successful bid for independence in 1999 was the surge of energy within East Timor solidarity groups around the world. As when multi-racial elections were finally held in South Africa in 1994, or when El Salvadorans signed their peace agreement at Chapultepec Castle in 1992, the feel-good factor after years of campaigning was palpable. This book is inspired by the afterglow of East Timor's independence. It celebrates the lives of many of the American, Australian, and other activists who supported the twenty-four-year campaign for an independent East Timor. The book also contains a good historical account of the armed struggle, and of the international diplomatic effort, but the dozens, perhaps hundreds of individuals and their organizations who supported the Timorese in the West are its rhetorical heart. Without the "structure of legitimacy" they created, Fernandes argues (p. 50), "East Timor might well have gone the way of the West Papuans or the South Moluccans." On the cover is a portrait of the late Australian medical doctor Andrew McNaughtan, who committed to the cause after his first visit to Timor in 1994. The book is co-dedicated to him. Perhaps the most influential solidarity hero in the book is the New York journalist Arnold Kohen, whose persistent publicity did much to turn the tide of opinion in the US Congress. Others, like the Chilean ex-diplomat Juan Federer, kept a much lower profile than did Kohen. Surprisingly, often their activism was ignited by a romance with a Timorese person. By their nonviolent confrontation with a cruel military regime, the long-suffering East Timorese inspired the best in people all over the world. The East Timorese seduced Clinton Fernandes, too; he abandoned a career with Australian military intelligence to vent more freely his outrage at Australian complicity in East Timor's troubles.

Many of these activists have themselves written books. Among the most remarkable was a biography of the Nobel Peace Prize winner Bishop Belo (a Catholic) by Kohen (a Jew).¹ The most endearingly chaotic yet ultimately deeply spiritual is the self-published memoir of Australian human rights activist Pat Walsh, a moving force behind the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (CAVR, Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor Leste).² The non-self-congratulatory forms of the memoir, the novel, the biography, or even the angry *j'accuse*³ might be a better monument to these individuals' activism than a book such as this one. The engaged scholar who wishes to write the history of solidarity activism faces many complications. Fernandes never discusses them explicitly, but alludes to them in the last two sentences of his book's introduction: "You can't write what you know. You have to write in a certain way, and some people will understand" (p. 2). This seems to

¹ Arnold S. Kohen, *From the Place of The Dead: The Epic Struggles of Bishop Belo of East Timor* (New York, NY: St. Martin Press, 1999).

² Pat Walsh, *At the Scene of the Crime: Essays, Reflections, and Poetry on East Timor, 1999–2010* (Melbourne: Mosaic Press, 2011).

³ Joseph Nevins, *A Not-So Distant Horror: Making and Accounting for Mass Violence in East Timor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

refer to the Australian military secrets he knows but is not allowed to expose, but perhaps also to the over-sensitive egos of some activists. At some point, such circumspection closes doors to new beginnings. As it is, this book reads like the last hurrah for a story that has become fairly familiar over the years. It contributes new details—such as the fact that difficult communications among the guerrillas in 1993 briefly led to them having both Konis Santana and Taur Matan Ruak as supreme commanders (pp. 107–8)—but no new argument.

New beginnings in writing the history of East Timor might start with this question: Why did the ex-guerrilla fighters demonstrate such appalling misjudgments after winning their independence? The elite-sponsored communal violence that plunged the little country into chaos in 2006 echoed the bloody internecine strife among the resistance groups in the mountains of East Timor in the early years. Xanana Gusmão has not fared as badly as former El Salvador guerrilla commander Joaquin Villalobos, who lost post-conflict elections because he abandoned the struggle for rights and cuddled up to former enemies. But by failing to honor the dead with justice, in the many concrete ways recommended by the 2005 CAVR report *Chega!*, Gusmão and his government have failed to shine as Nelson Mandela did. The reasons for these failings might have long histories, as Doug Kammen and Hans Hägerdal are showing.⁴ This sober light needs to shine on the history of the anticolonial struggle, too. Nearly a third of the civilian killings reported to the CAVR were attributed to resistance groups and pro-independence forces.⁵

Another fruitful question could be: How much sovereignty did the struggle for independence actually achieve? East Timor is permanently part of the Indonesian archipelago. More ties connect it to the region than to Portugal or Australia; these ties range from the straight-out imperial to the benignly humanitarian. A regular Kupang–Dili boat service in the 1950s brought horse traders to Dili and football players to Kupang. During the Indonesian occupation, Indonesian soldiers and religious do-gooders took home thousands of East Timorese children, and they became Indonesians.⁶ Horror at the Santa Cruz massacre of 1991 inspired an Indonesian pro-independence movement for East Timor that helped bring about the complete delegitimation of the armed forces after 1998. Most East Timorese who study at foreign universities today are in Indonesia.

Difficult questions for further work aside, the book is a solid and worthwhile record of the remarkable struggle the East Timorese waged for their tiny nation, against the greatest odds. The solidarity that they inspired in the nations of their enemies must be the clearest proof that freedom is a universal dream.

⁴ See Douglas Kammen, "Subordinating Timor: Central Authority and the Origins of Communal Identities in East Timor," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 166 (2010): 244–69; and Hans Hägerdal, "Rebellions or Factionalism? Timorese Forms of Resistance in an Early Colonial Context, 1650–1769," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 163 (2007): 1–33.

⁵ Gerry van Klinken, "Brother Killing Brother: The East Timorese Resistance Movement also Committed Crimes," *Inside Indonesia* 87 (2006): 32–33.

⁶ Helene van Klinken, *Making Them Indonesians: Child Transfers out of East Timor* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2012).