

**Thunder in the silent zone**  
*The Chega! and Per Memoriam reports in Indonesia*

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The title of this talk *Thunder in the Silent Zone* is a variation on the title Paul Monk gave his excellent book on China called *Thunder From The Silent Zone*. Monk in turn took the title from a poem written in 1934 by Lu Xun, one of modern China's most famous and independent-minded writers. Lu Xun's poem includes this verse:

*Ten thousand ashen faces stare mutely from the undergrowth.  
Who will give them a voice; pour out their sorrows to the Earth?  
My heart aches for the unending tribulation of my land;  
And in its very silence I hear the rumble of thunder.*

The challenge thrown out by Lu Xun is also apposite this evening. With the partial exception of East Timor, the CAVR and CTF reports have largely been received everywhere, including in Indonesia, in silence. This means, in effect, that the voices of the East Timorese victims recorded in these documents have not been heard. This is not unique to East Timorese victims. Indonesian victims of the Soeharto period, who suffered from the same people and policies, also 'stare mutely from the undergrowth' and have not been heard.

But, if you listen closely, a rumble of thunder is audible in the distance in Indonesia. It includes the CAVR and CTF reports, the voices of victims, of civil society, and even of some aging revisionists from the bad old days. It is my firm conviction, based on the wonderful Indonesians I have known and worked with for decades, that many more Indonesians will add their voices to this still muted chorus when they know what really happened, and that the distant rumble will grow louder than the silence and become, if you like, a perfect storm that will be good for victims, but also good for Indonesia.

There have been two official truth commission reports on East Timor's past. The first, called *Chega!* (enough, no more, cukup, jangan lagi) was produced by an East Timorese commission called CAVR (Portuguese for Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation). CAVR was set up in 2001 during the UN transitional administration at the request of the Timorese Resistance to promote peace and reconciliation within East Timor, particularly at the grassroots. Its report *Chega!*, which covers the whole period of conflict and war in East Timor, has been published in Indonesian and English by Gramedia in Jakarta and is available on the net <[www.chegareport.net](http://www.chegareport.net)>

The report of the second official commission of inquiry is called *Per Memoriam Ad Spem* (Through Memory to Hope). It was produced by a bi-lateral East Timor/Indonesian body called the Commission of Truth and Friendship (CTF). Unlike CAVR, CTF focussed only on 1999, did not set out to facilitate reconciliation between perpetrators of human rights violations and their victims, and did not name names. *Per Memoriam* has been published by CTF in Indonesian and English but given only limited circulation by the Foreign Affairs Ministries in Jakarta and Dili respectively. Both *Chega!* and *Per Memoriam* concluded that the Indonesian military was mainly responsible for the violence suffered by victims in East Timor and that, because of the widespread and systematic nature of the violence, it amounted to crimes against humanity and war crimes. *Chega!* also concluded that, though the Resistance had not committed crimes against humanity, it was responsible for serious violations of human rights and war crimes, though on a far smaller scale than the Indonesian military.

*Per Memoriam* was a big surprise in a number of ways. The acceptance of its findings by President SBY was the first time that the Indonesian state had acknowledged wrongdoing by state institutions against victims whom it regarded as its own citizens at the time. Second, CTF did not recommend amnesty for any Indonesian military officers; third, it recommended a number of measures similar to those advocated by CAVR such as the establishment of a follow-up institution, more research, and care for victims; and, fourth, its key message, expressed in its Latin title *Per Memoriam Ad Spem* (from memory to hope), was that Indonesia and its security agencies in particular would learn from 1999. CTF therefore issued a strong challenge to those who wanted to deny or forget and move on. It said that what happened should be remembered in Indonesia and learned from, time-honoured advice for all of us, whether individuals or nations. Memory is the mother of wisdom, said the Greek philosopher Aeschylus a long time ago. It follows, I would add, that amnesia is the mother of mistakes.

For this reason and because of its official status we expected *Per Memoriam* would enjoy ownership and traction in Indonesia. And given that *Chega!* had been published in Indonesian by Gramedia, the country's biggest publishing house, and that roughly 15 years had passed since the end of both the Soeharto era and the war in East Timor, we expected that *Chega!* too would have been snapped up particularly by Indonesian intellectuals (historians, researchers, lecturers in peace and conflict resolution studies, international law and international relations) and by advocates of reformasi, think tanks and so on.

So to our research project. Working with AJAR (Asia Justice and Rights) in Jakarta, an Indonesian colleague and I set out to see what impact these two reports had had on Indonesian understanding of the East Timor issue and on the process of change in post-Soeharto Indonesia. Our research questions were basically to ask who had seen the reports, what did they think of them, and what had they done with them.

My colleague got the short straw. He got to do face-to-face interviews with 23 Indonesian professionals. They included government officials, an ex-general, academics, researchers and NGOs. I was lucky and got the long straw which meant I could travel around Indonesia, a wonderful experience. I conducted a number of focus groups with academics and media but mainly concentrated on giving talks and interacting with lecturers and students at Indonesian universities in nine cities from Banda Aceh to Kupang in the east.

We found that state and non-state actors contacted were generally not aware of, or familiar with, the *Chega!* and *Per Memoriam* reports. Respondents either did not have access to *Chega!* and *Per Memoriam* or they had not utilised the reports in their work despite the availability of the published reports in the public domain. Only a few interviewees had detailed knowledge of the two reports and were able to make informed comments on issues of mandate, data collection processes, findings and the politics associated with the two commissions.

Our exchanges also made it clear that generally speaking Indonesia's intellectual community has minimal evidence-based information on the Timor-Leste issue. Many said they could not recall hearing much about Timor-Leste at school and that after 1999 teachers only said that Timor-Leste used to be part of Indonesia but was now independent.

Our work also showed that, in the absence of any correctives or alternative narratives, the Soeharto era version of events remains current to some extent and continues to frame the issue from a defensive and nationalist point of view.

In question and answer exchanges, participants suggested that Indonesia's intervention was justified in order to safeguard the unity of Indonesia, to pre-empt communism, to prevent internal violence or because a majority of Timorese had asked Indonesia to intervene.

Respondents expressed sadness that a part of Indonesia had been lost, like a family member, and blamed former President Habibie for the loss. A more nuanced justification was that the intervention was

'necessary evil'. Others absolved Indonesia from blame by claiming that it could no longer afford to carry East Timor economically in the aftermath of the East Asia economic crisis, that countries like the US and Australia were equally or more to blame because they permitted and supported the intervention, that Fretilin had committed more violations than the Indonesian military or that the loss of Timor-Leste was due to a western-motivated grab for East Timorese resources.

In brief, the responses indicated that Indonesian professionals believed that the intervention was justified and, far from doing anything wrong, Indonesia was more victim than perpetrator. It is probably fair to conclude that if this is how sections of the educated class understand the Timor-Leste issue, the masses of Indonesia's general public will have only the faintest idea of the real story.

The exchanges also illustrate how entrenched is the Soeharto era version of the history, how effectively a government can control and direct a nation's memory and the magnitude of the challenge confronting those wanting to reclaim Indonesia's history.

Given this mindset, audiences were therefore sometimes shocked to hear authoritative evidence-based accounts based on the two reports of systematic and widespread human rights violations across 24 years committed principally by the Indonesian military and its auxiliaries. At the same time, participants were hospitable, open and appreciative, indicating that a shift in public understanding is possible if not underway.

I recall a conversation with an Unpad lecturer in Bandung. Chatting in the corridor before the lecture, he pointed to a photo exhibition on East Timor on the wall. 'Just think this was once part of Indonesia but now its gone', he lamented. He went on to say that what the military did was 'necessary evil'. When I asked why the 'evil' was 'necessary' he said: 'to keep Indonesia together'. Following the lecture he emailed me as follows: 'It was really nice working with you... discussing about what happened in East Timor and about human rights in general with you really opened a new perspective for me. Too bad it was a short one. I've given the material you left to the human rights lecturer. I hope we can meet and work again sometime in the future. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you ever need my help'.

Participants also questioned why there had been no justice or why mechanisms such as an international tribunal had not been established. Lecturers either undertook to include the two reports in their respective subjects or to cooperate in the development of course materials and teaching strategies in keeping with the accepted ethos of universities to foster a spirit of independent inquiry and critical thinking.

So why has the Timor-Leste issue been forgotten or ignored in Indonesia? We came up with the following six explanations.

First, there is a significant information gap. As mentioned, Indonesians did not get much information about the issue during the war. Information was suppressed and censored for most of the occupation. The public did not know what was going on and the few who did risked retaliation if they spoke out. I recall Yeni Damayanti's testimony to a CAVR public hearing in Dili. She said to her largely East Timorese audience: you are surely thinking where was I and other Indonesians during the war and why didn't we do more to stop it. The honest answer is, she said, that we didn't know. I felt the same way when I visited the Tuol Sleng torture centre used by the Khymer Rouge in Phnom Penh and today when I hear the horror stories of the sexual abuse of children in Victoria. The quarantining of Timor-Leste until 1989 and, to a lesser extent, beyond is a major reason for the minimal understanding and interest in Timor-Leste among Indonesian professionals. Younger Indonesians have a better grasp of events and personalities following 1998 but are hazy or blank about developments that happened 40 years ago when they were either not yet born or still very young.

Second, as in Australia, the Indonesian establishment continues to downplay or suppress the issue. According to the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), East Timor is not included in the new 2013

school curriculum. This means that this chapter will be a blank for current and future generations. It also means teachers will not need to inform themselves about the issue or be able to enlighten a student who brings it up. I remember hearing Jetro, a grade 6 Indonesian student, tell us a few years ago (before East Timor was dropped from the curriculum) how he had read in his school book that East Timor chose to integrate with Indonesia, but when he told his mum that she said no, that's not right Jetro, Indonesia colonised East Timor. He told us he wants to know which is true and asked his teacher but his teacher did not know.

Whether this indicated plain ignorance or a lack of confidence on the part of the teacher in the Soeharto era narrative on Timor, I am hopeful that under the Joko Widodo government, this omission will be remedied on both Timor and other major aspects of Indonesia's past through the establishment of an independent truth commission and changes to the education curriculum. The think tank CSIS told us at our meeting with them that they were interested in spearheading a review of how Indonesia's past is presented in the education system.

Third, the past is no longer a live political issue in relations between Timor-Leste and Indonesia. Unlike Indonesia, Timor-Leste does not want the issue forgotten but since independence following the UN transitional period, successive governments in Dili have focused on fostering pragmatic economic and political relations with Indonesia and have opposed talk of justice or an international tribunal. While the chain of cause and effect is debatable, Timor-Leste's focus on looking to the future has served well Indonesia's interest in ignoring the past. Indonesia was able to ban the public screening of the *Balibo* movie on the grounds that it might upset East Timor. Both states concur that the only issues from the past to be addressed are those identified in *Per Memoriam* and agree that these are residual and secondary to the main game of good relations. In addition, the Indonesian government dismisses *Chega!* as the document of a foreign country that is none of Indonesia's business. A foreign ministry official told us: 'It (*Chega!*) belongs to Timor-Leste. So we don't have anything to do with it..... it is an internal document of Timor-Leste'.

Fourth, contemporary Indonesian media coverage of Timor-Leste is minimal and this contributes significantly to keeping Indonesian public interest in Timor-Leste at a low level. Though it might be expected that the Indonesian public, including the many thousands of civilians and military who served there over 24 years, would have a keen interest in developments in their former colony, media disinterest in Timor is not unique to Indonesia; coverage of Timor in most countries, including Australia, is minimal. Where exceptions have occurred in Indonesia, e.g. publications by Tempo of investigative reports on events or personalities related to the Timor issue, these reports have not utilised or referred to *Chega!* and *Per Memoriam* confirming our finding that professionals either do not have the reports or are wary of using them. Prabowo Subianto's extensive involvement in Timor-Leste was barely mentioned during the 2014 presidential campaign.

Fifth, Timor-Leste is no longer a significant stand-alone item on the agendas of many of Indonesia's excellent human rights organizations. These organizations are well aware that the issue of justice in Timor-Leste is unresolved but for practical reasons related to a combination of resource constraints, workload and perhaps the continuing political sensitivity of the Timor-Leste issue, they are not active or maintain only a watching brief on the issue.

I recently attended a seminar on human rights in North Korea held in Jakarta and organised by bodies like LIPI, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, KomnasHAM and others – an excellent initiative on behalf of victims in North Korea. No mention was made, however, of East Timor during the conference proceedings, even by a women's representative whose organisation is very familiar with the shocking chapter in *Chega!* on sexual violence in East Timor. Instead the speaker highlighted crimes against Indonesian women in 1998, by Japan during World War II, even violence against women practised in the distant past when princesses were traded in ancient Indonesian kingdoms. Maybe it was just an oversight.... but the omission left me wondering.

Having said that, however, some excellent work is being done in parts of Indonesian civil society to reclaim Indonesia's history (including the East Timor chapter) and to implement recommendations in *Chega!* and *Per Memoriam*. Most recently the latter included locating some 14 East Timorese who were taken to Indonesia during the war and assisting them, now adults, to return to East Timor to re-unite with families most of them had not seen since they were kids. The organisers say that while they were in Timor they were asked by many Timorese families to help them find their missing sons and daughters in Indonesia. When he welcomed the returnees, East Timor's Prime Minister, Rui de Araujo, revealed that his sister was taken when she was 7. While governments fiddle around, tying themselves up in diplomatic niceties at the expense of victims, Indonesian citizens, driven by compassion, are taking the initiative and sticking their necks out to help victims.

Sixth, the politicisation of the past may be deterring some researchers from venturing where angels fear to tread. The landscape of Indonesia's past – including some of its prominent features like Soeharto himself, Papua, 65 and East Timor, to name only some - is contested territory and involves some big egos and vested interests, individual and organisational. The ground war in East Timor is well and truly over and lost but, though low-key, the struggle for hearts and minds is continuing. *Chega!*, *Per Memoriam* and other reports, including indictments issued by the Serious Crimes court in Timor-Leste, are being contested – de facto, if not directly – by former military in memoirs that purport to tell the untold story and to *meluruskan sejarah Indonesia*, straighten out Indonesia's history.

We interviewed the author of one of these memoirs in his office above a former military bank that he now chairs in central Jakarta. He blamed the military's failure in East Timor on poor equipment, poor training and lack of sensitivity to the Timorese, including violence but he preferred to describe that as *kekerasan* (violence), not *pelanggaran HAM* i.e. human rights violations. He said *Per Memoriam* was too abstract to use in the contemporary training of military and police and that *Chega!* would not be used because it was biased, though he admitted not having read it.

This contest over history extends to contest over the guilt or innocence of individuals in the Indonesian military. On the one hand, as mentioned above, the two reports found that the Indonesian military was guilty of crimes against humanity and war crimes in East Timor. *Chega!* goes further than *Per Memoriam* and names those officers responsible but even *Per Memoriam*, though it stopped at institutional responsibility, declined to recommend amnesty for any of military it dealt with because 'none of those who appeared in its hearings process met the conditions enumerated'.

On the other side of the argument, however, those indicted for serious crimes in 1999 can claim they were wrongfully accused because Indonesia's Ad Hoc Human Rights court exonerated all Indonesian military from guilt. The officer I referred to above was indicted by the Dili serious crimes court but this has obviously not affected his post-military standing or career. Notwithstanding this indictment or provisions in Australia's visa application forms on human rights, he has also been allowed visit Australia including to participate in a conference on Interfet held by Australian military historians in Melbourne last September and attended by Governor General Peter Cosgrove.

My point is, however, that this arm wrestling over the historical record may be scaring researchers and others off and is possibly another factor contributing to the silent zone in which the Timor-Leste issue sits. Indonesian researchers may also be wary of offending nationalist sensitivities by being seen to take sides on a touchy issue. In this climate, some may have decided the past is a dangerous country and it's better not to go there for the time being.

All of the above means that it is too early to talk about reconciliation in any meaningful sense between East Timor and Indonesia which is why we headed this event *towards* reconciliation. The term reconciliation is often used loosely, even glibly, to describe any improvements in relations. But where offences in the form of human rights violations have occurred, reconciliation involves a process based on

certain conditions, one of which is establishing the truth. There can be no true or lasting reconciliation without truth. Establishing the truth has clearly not happened yet in Indonesia on Timor-Leste or other related other past issues. CTF, to its credit, recognised this by acknowledging that its mission was to further friendship rather than reconciliation. Its report, an earlier one by KomnasHAM and civil society initiatives are steps towards reconciliation. It is hoped that Indonesia's intellectuals will use their freedom and resources to add their weight to this effort.

Bearing this mind, let me conclude on a positive note. At the beginning of this talk I referred to aging Indonesian revisionists who have had second thoughts about East Timor. They include a former Indonesian ambassador to Australia who defended the Soeharto regime during his term in Canberra but told me that he now thinks Indonesia should never have gone in there. Another is Jusuf Wanandi who has written on East Timor as follows: 'Whatever happened in 1974 and after, whatever mistakes we made in those early months, the real tragedy was what followed. Instead of giving the people of East Timor rights and a decent life when we 'liberated' them from 'Portuguese colonialism', we made them our colonial subjects for over 20 years and imposed on them so much misery and abuse.'

It is hoped that Indonesian scholars and anyone here interested in mining this rich, largely untouched, deposit of Indonesian history and politics to, in the immortal words of Joe Hockey, 'get out and have a go'. As the Indonesian commentator Saleh Hussein has observed: 'Truth (in Indonesia), which used to be centrally produced, is now in the hands of everyone'. The Indonesian people, then and now, are not responsible for what the military did in East Timor, but like contemporary Australians in relation to our indigenous past, the opportunity – and arguably, the duty – now exists to confront what happened and to ensure it never happens again. What happened in 65 was not confronted. It happened again. It's time for Indonesian intellectuals to get on the right side of history and add to the rumble – for the sake of the victims, and for the good of Indonesia and its important contribution to the world.

[www.chegareport.net](http://www.chegareport.net)

[www.patwalsh.net](http://www.patwalsh.net)

For interview following the talk, see *Indonesia at Melbourne*, blog jointly sponsored by the Centre for Indonesian Law, Islam and Society, the Asia Institute and the Melbourne University Indonesia Forum.