

Paris, November 29, 2011.

Dear John,

You wrote me about ETAN's 20th anniversary and asked:

To mark the occasion, we want to put your reminiscences, testimonials and reflections on the activities and role of ETAN. We also welcome your reflections on the role solidarity over the past two decades and in the coming years. We hope you will contribute something. It can be as short or as long as you like.

This is a great opportunity to clarify what has long been running in my mind. I hope this is not too long since you only asked for a short contribution by December 10th.

For clarity, I tried to cut the letter in sections.

1. **East Timor and me.** The first time I read about East Timor was in 1979, in Lonely Planet's *South East Asia on a shoestring*. I think Tony Wheeler just wrote that, after an independence movement, it had been invaded by Indonesia in 1975 and one didn't know much about it since then. I didn't pay much attention especially as I was not travelling in Indonesia, but somehow it recorded in my mind.

In 1986, while in London I was in a second hand bookshop and bumped into a copy of *The War against East Timor* by Carmel Budiardjo and Liem Soei Liong. I thought this was a great way to learn more about this and bought the book. It was a total shock.

Trying to analyse it now, I think there were several factors to this shock. The unknown genocide, first, especially as what the Khmer Rouge had done in Cambodia was very well-known by then. But besides the killings, the mixture of wanton and cold-blooded violence from the Indonesian troops. Naked brutality.

Another thing which shocked me to the bones was how the whole world was turning away from this horror, in a very active way. A fascinating aspect of this issue has always been how Suharto had the genius to put all important world players on his side: the Western camp of course, but also the Soviet one, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Vatican to an extent and the Non-Aligned movement, while defending completely different interests at home. Even, to an extent, Portuguese politicians of the Carnation Revolution!

The East Timorese being "abandoned" struck a strong chord, probably reminiscent of the Shoah even though, as a Jew who lost 3 family members in that period, I never felt a peculiar urge to involve myself in any Jewish cause. Discussing with other Jews in the East Timor solidarity movement later, I discovered the same kind of empathy.

Another aspect for me (which may be a little strange to explain in North America) was this: culturally, up to this point, I was more concerned by atrocities committed by communist regimes than by regimes from the other camp. This reaction was triggered, I think, by a rejection of the one-sidedness of the French communists and communist sympathisers, who were intellectually dominating in that period and some of whom were my school friends. Now I had a direct example of atrocities committed on the other side of this bipolar world. Not the first (South America), but one which resonated because of my interest in South East Asia.

Another revelation was that colonialism was not limited to Western countries. Even if they supported the occupation, it could not be construed as colonialism by proxy, because Indonesia controlled the territory by itself and had its own motivations. I was to discover that this idea met enormous resistance or even outrage from former Western colonies, to the delight of Suharto's government which could successfully argue to have liberated the East Timorese from Portuguese colonialism (and perhaps believed it sincerely).

To summarise, reading Carmel and Liem's book triggered both a political awakening and an empathy with a people which suffered enormously, and in silence.

There was another aspect in this work which was very important to me: its rigour. I am a mathematician by profession. In my work, rigour and truth are the two touchstones. Of course, in social sciences one cannot really speak of scientific rigour, but Carmel and Liem's research was as close to it as I could conceive. Every claim was documented. No rhetoric, no propaganda. The facts spoke for themselves. Quoting protagonists who were not sympathetic to the independence struggle: Indonesian generals or politicians, but also the Catholic Church, played an important rôle in this effect. Even if the authors' sympathy was obviously with the East Timorese, the rigour extended to supporting the struggle for self-determination, not independence. This style of research, argumentation and advocacy was to become characteristic of the East Timor solidarity movement for me later.

Yet I didn't do anything at the time, in 1986. The book of Carmel and Liem ended with the failed negotiations of 1983 and the restart of the war, but this was three years old already and I had no idea what had happened since. More importantly, no idea where to find the information in France.

2. The solidarity struggle. It was not until 1988 that I became serious about it. I planned my third trip to Indonesia and intended to

try and enter East Timor. This was one year before the territory was opened up to outsiders; then, it was still firmly shut (an expression from the 1979 Lonely Planet guidebook). In Kupang I met another French traveller, Olivier Duffau, who was there exactly for the same reason. We got on well, exchanged the little information each of us had and set out for Dili, only to be turned back in Soe, half way to Atambua. One year later, with some other people we came across, among whom António Dias and Carlos Semedo, we founded Agir pour Timor.

Frankly, Agir pour Timor was not a big player in the solidarity movement. We had some important actions, like a press conference with José Ramos Horta and Danielle Mitterrand which was planned (by total coincidence!) two days after the massacre of Nov. 12, 1991. This kind of action, like also demonstrating in front of the CGI meetings (World Bank) or when Suharto visited Paris in 1992 a few days after Xanana Gusmão was captured, was mainly symbolic because it did not lead to any change of policy from the French government. Horta failed to persuade Danielle Mitterrand to hop in a plane and go to Dili, one thing she had done before for Western Sahara and was to do later for Kurdistan. If she had done it, this could have made a difference.

What did make the difference was the emergence of ETAN/US in the solidarity movement in December 1991. We all know, and it was immediately obvious at the time, that the Santa Cruz massacre was a watershed moment in the solidarity struggle. I think Indonesia, which believed it had effectively won and succeeded in suppressing the issue, was taken by surprise and started by underestimating the importance of the media coverage of this massacre. It did not realise that this coverage brought new blood to the solidarity movement, people who were not “burned out” by years of slowly losing the battle.

When I visited the US a few months earlier in July 1991, I met a lone activist in Washington, who had been recommended by Carmel. The name of his movement was telling of the current atmosphere: *East Timor research project*. He showed me a handful of articles on East Timor published in various newspapers, and it took me until after our encounter to realise the implication (that he had been instrumental there). So they were working. But quietly and cautiously. I remember him exploding when I asked why not more visibility: “You don’t understand the climate here. This is not Europe! If you are called a radical, you are finished”, these were his approximate words. It was a bit chilling.

The importance of ETAN/US was that you immediately meant business. You went for visibility in a big way, with the aim to create a wide

movement with chapters across the country. Most importantly, you didn't content yourselves to do some agitation, but went straight to the point: stopping US arms sales to Indonesia. You did this very professionally, by lobbying MPs and senators and, to my utter surprise, it worked! The first success was obtained right in 1992, if I remember well: stop the funding for the US training assistance programme to Indonesian troops. This also must have been a surprise for Indonesia, and quite possibly was also underestimated, because the programme was after all something minor and the Suharto government rested on its perceived power and clout to reverse this small setback.

It was the beginning of a series of increasing setbacks which would lead to the decisive step, 7 years later: Bill Clinton letting down the Habibie government at the height of the scorched earth campaign of September 1999, which triggered Indonesia's withdrawal from East Timor.

You might feel that I mention your action out of politeness and discard the rest of the solidarity movement too easily. But I feel that the real lever for getting Indonesia to give up East Timor had always been the United States. Because it was Indonesia's most important ally and, at the time, the most powerful country in the world. Other solidarity actions were also important but they didn't have the central importance of yours.

Still, here is my remembrance of some stepping stones until independence. One was the emergence of a solidarity movement in South East Asia, with the two APCET conferences. The first one, in 1994, raised the profile even more than the Santa Cruz massacre, thanks to how the heavy-handed approach of Indonesia backfired. (Here our Filipino friends had a fantastic sense of publicity, calling the Philippines the 28th province of Indonesia!) A second stepping stone was, of course, the 1996 Peace Nobel Prize to Belo and Horta. (In France it was announced like this on the TV news: "This year, the Peace Nobel Prize has been attributed to two unknown individuals.") A third one was the emergence of ETISC in Ireland, and the way it succeeded in putting the Irish government in full backing of East Timor's self-determination. A fourth one was the development of solidarity in the UK, besides TAPOL — but thanks to its ground-work as well as John Pilger's coverage —, with very important events (in my opinion) like the Ploughshares movement against the sale of Hawks by British Aerospace. A fifth one was the emergence of a solidarity movement in South Africa, which succeeded in convincing Nelson Mandela that the non-aligned propaganda from Suharto was rubbish (see the beginning of my letter). As a result, Mandela insisted in visiting Xanana in prison when he went to

Indonesia in 1997 and called for his release: this must have been a strong psychological setback for the Indonesian government. The sixth one was the emergence of a pro-democracy movement in Indonesia, including an East Timor solidarity movement as a strong component: it played an important rôle in the fall of Suharto in 1998, even if the decisive factor was the financial crisis. The last one was of course Habibie's decision to put on a "popular consultation" on autonomy or independence. For this consultation, a very important project of the solidarity movement was the observers project: I think it was initiated by ETAN. (France could only send 3 observers to East Timor.)

I hope I didn't forget any important step. We could all feel the momentum building up.

To finish with this part until the referendum, I would like to add a few things on the solidarity movement itself. I had never been part of such a movement before and have not been since then, except some short-lived solidarity activity with democracy issues in Indonesia. So I cannot make valid comparisons. But what struck me was the sense of unity and togetherness. We had a solidarity meeting in Europe every year, gathering the European solidarity groups and occasional non-European guests like the Japanese. From 1992 onwards, ETAN/US started attending. These meetings were to exchange information and then discuss strategy. They always included one or two East Timorese representatives. So I didn't witness any differences or chapels, as I heard there were in other international solidarity movements. Working for and in coordination with the East Timorese was also the obvious practice. And, even if there were serious divisions among the East Timorese themselves, going back to the 1975 civil war, we were lucky never to have to take sides. This was certainly thanks to Xanana's strenuous efforts to put these divisions behind the resistance movement, and also to the sense of responsibilities of the exiles who met with us.

Also, comments about rigour from the beginning of my letter apply to the solidarity movement as they applied to *The war against East Timor*. There was no rhetoric, all was focused on "What can we do which will help the East Timorese"?

All this unity led to the *International Federation for East Timor*, whose members were most of the solidarity groups worldwide.

I would like to also comment on the information bulletins, which were remarkable. There was a great variety of them and each important solidarity group seemed to have its bulletin. In English, *TAPOL* played a special rôle because it covered not only East Timor but also political developments in Indonesia – for me, a key part of understanding the developments in East Timor itself. Another important British

bulletin was CIIR's *Timor Link*; I think ETAN Canada also had its bulletin, and of course ETAN/US soon had its own, *Estafeta*. There was also a wide variety of Australian bulletins, that I don't know so well. In French, there were 3 important bulletins: ASTO's *Timor Informations*, Jean-Pierre Catry's *La paix est possible au Timor oriental* (published in Portugal), our own bulletin *Agir pour Timor*. Also the Belgian group's *Timor Clips* and a short-lived East Timorese bulletin, *Nakroma*, which was published in French from Lisbon in the 80es with the help of António Dias (only two issues).

What struck me about these bulletins, besides their now familiar rigour, was the variety of information one could extract from them. Often I saw one bit of information in a single one, not to be found anywhere else. On the one hand it is frustrating for tallying purposes (but to what risks was this information taken out of East Timor?) On the other hand, there is such a richness in all these bulletins that I feel a scanning project (for us and for the East Timorese) would be worthwhile, and perhaps not too expensive.

As early as 1991, when email and internet communication started becoming important (another development Indonesia missed completely, unlike other oppressive regimes like China), a mailing list was created: `reg.easttimor` (now `east.timor`), which was the primary source of information and exchange for all of us. It was later followed by the list `etimor.private`, where selected activists could exchange ideas and restricted information. I just browsed through the part leading to the referendum in my archive: it was an extraordinary set of exchanges for setting up strategy (and also a very tense period).

3. Why did we win? I wrote earlier that we felt the momentum building. Why did it happen, and how did it lead to a successful act of self-determination?

Beyond all I wrote before about unity and rigour, I think a key element was the non-violent nature of the struggle. This development was rather unlikely. It was certainly not there in the beginning of the independence movement, either in facts (the 1975 civil war) or in spirit: after the invasion, Fretilin adopted a classical revolutionary policy in its military resistance and administration of the areas it controlled. Only after the disaster of 1978/79, when Falintil remnants started regrouping, did a non-violent element progressively emerge – almost totally on the initiative of the new commander-in-chief, Xanana Gusmão.

By the end of the 1980es, the nature of internal resistance had completely changed. Falintil had dramatically weakened, mostly because it was difficult to provide food to a large number of combatants in the

rugged terrain, and also because the Indonesian army had become very efficient at combing the territory. While armed resistance remained symbolically essential,¹ Fretilin's, then CNRM's, strategy was then to develop clandestine networks of civilian resistance.

So in my view, the emergence of non-violent resistance happened out of an organic necessity. It later became a weapon in the struggle, but is still very different from the Gandhian concept where non-violence is consciously used as a weapon right from the beginning.

Of course the Catholic Church was also a factor in this non-violent struggle. But we should not forget that there always was a difficult relationship, close to rivalry, between the Church and the resistance movement. Here too, like so many things in East Timor, convergence between the two entities happened out of pressure and necessity.

Let me now look at the landscape outside of East Timor. Here too, the situation evolved dramatically from the 60es and 70es when Third World activists in the West enthousiastically supported revolutionary movements (sometimes turning a blind eye to their own "shortcomings"), and the 80es/90es when the political culture had changed. "Armed resistance" became a bad word – even if the UN Charter recognises this right! Hostile Western propoganda, for example in Australia, concentrated on the violent aspect of the resistance.

On the contrary, the solidarity movement focused on human rights. The developments inside East Timor made this advocacy much easier than in other self determination struggles.

Of course, this does not explain everything. Some armed resistance movements have won against all odds, in Eritrea for example. On the contrary, some non violent movements seem to be in a dead end, as in Tibet or (until recently) in Burma. But I do feel this aspect helped the solidarity movement a lot.

It is also interesting to reflect on the rôle of the media. So many times have I been, have we been, frustrated by their reluctance to acknowledge East Timor. Silence was perceived as one of the key elements which helped Indonesia. It certainly was. On the other hand, I remember in the early 1990es when the Bosnian conflict was constantly under the spotlight in Europe. I felt the unfairness compared with East Timor, but on the other hand I could see that this huge media coverage did not change a bit to the war. It did not prevent Srebrenica to happen.

¹António Dias once told me: "War is important in the Timorese imaginary world".

The time when media coverage was key was in September 1999, and there, the fact that East Timor was mostly unknown from the general public played in our favour. I think the outrage of public opinion was stronger because of this effect of surprise. And this was important to weigh on politicians like the US president of the moment.

What is public opinion? Does it exist independently? Or is it a creation and a manipulation of the big media? These questions would take us too far. (They are not quite the same as those of Chomsky in *Manufacturing consent*.)

I had started to also write about the period after the referendum, especially on impunity. But there is no way I can finish in time. Hopefully I will soon.

Best regards,

Bruno