

Dalhousie and the sell-out of East Timor

BY BROOKS KIND

There are two very good reasons why Dalhousie students should be concerned about repression in East Timor.

The first is that as residents and citizens of Canada, they live in a country that has abetted — through military, diplomatic and financial support — Indonesia's illegal and brutal occupation of this defenceless country. About a third of the Timorese have perished under the occupation, making it the worst case of mass slaughter, relative to population, since the Holocaust. In Western democracies like Canada and the U.S., a government is susceptible to the influence of public pressure, and limited in the extent to which it can use force to control dissent. Political acquiescence in the face of criminal government policies amounts to a tacit endorsement of them. This is particularly true for those in the privileged and highly-educated percentage of the population — i.e. in the university community — who possess the skills, access to information, and resources that would enable them to research, expose and articulately oppose such policies. Consequently, by failing to dissent from our government's participation in the assault on East Timor, we must be prepared to accept some measure of responsibility for it.

The second reason why East Timor's fate should not be ignored at Dalhousie is that this university's cosy (and remunerative) relations with the Suharto regime in Indonesia have been maintained over the past dozen years through a persistent refusal of administrators and faculty to take a principled stand on human rights in East Timor. Before turning to this subject, however, a short history of Canada's complicity in Indonesian atrocities is perhaps in order.

By the time Indonesia invaded East Timor on December 7, 1975, Canada already had extensive trading and investment interests in Indonesia. These were largely developed after the U.S. instigated and supported a military coup in 1965, a "boiling bloodbath" (Time Magazine) that within a few years had destroyed Indonesia's populist PKI party, left up to a million people dead, and installed one of the world's most ruthless mass murderers in power. After gaining office, Suharto and his loyal thugs continued to oblige their backers in Washington, crushing dissident elements with Gestapo-style assassination, torture and terror, and, as planned, opening Indonesia's rich resources, repressed labour pool and huge markets to Western multinationals. By such civilized means Indonesia was transformed, overnight, into an investor's paradise.

As in the U.S., France, and the U.K., Canadian politicians and business executives were quick to capitalize on this favorable change of climate, offering huge subsidies to Indonesia — euphemistically called "aid" — for the privilege of plunder and exploitation in the Archipelago. Thus when Suharto invaded East Timor — half of a small island on the southern edge of the Indonesian chain that had just received its independence from Portugal — and began his

campaign of extermination, he was already a favoured trading partner. Canadian politicians were faced with the choice between corporate profits, which would have been jeopardized by condemning the invasion and massacres, and their legal and moral commitment to uphold international law, fundamental human rights and democracy. They responded to the challenge in a way that might have been expected from a country that had just distinguished itself as the leading per capita military exporter in the world during the decade of American aggression in Indochina. They backed Suharto all the way.

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At first, Canada abstained from U.N. resolutions calling on Indonesia to respect international law and withdraw from East Timor, but by the early eighties began voting with Indonesia against East Timor's right to self-determination and even lobbying to have the issue removed from the U.N. agenda. Canadian military sales to Indonesia continued unchecked as the atrocities reached truly genocidal proportions, and foreign aid continued to increase, eventually levelling off at \$40—70 million annually. For 1995 alone, External Affairs granted \$362 million in military export permits to Canadian manufacturers for sales to Indonesia, in contravention of Canada's Export Controls Policy. This policy restricts arms sales to nations where there is no danger that the weapons may be used against the civilian population. In short, with the exception of a few token wrist taps after the massacre in Dili in 1991 when the media couldn't maintain their vigilant blackout of the story, successive Canadian governments from 1975 to today, while loudly proclaiming their commitment to international law and human rights, have quietly supported the destruction of a people in their deference to corporate prerogatives.

Let us now turn to Dalhousie's contribution to this edifying display of Canadian values.

Since 1984, Dalhousie has been involved with the government of Indonesia in a number of projects, in the implementation of which it has received millions of dollars of Canadian International Development Association (CIDA/IDRC) funding. Much of the "aid" through these agencies is intended to grease the wheels of

trade and investment, and might be more accurately described as business-driven, taxpayer-subsidized political bribery. It could be argued that the real "development" that takes place as a result is the development of better conditions for Canadian transnationals to further exploit Indonesia's resources.

Since the inception of these projects, some of the worst atrocities in East Timor have been committed, yet Dalhousie (like TUNS which is also at the CIDA/IDRC trough) has been silent. To my knowledge there has never been a public denunciation of human rights violations in East Timor or of Suharto's war crimes; rather the issue has been downplayed or ignored as far as possible. For example, the Dal president who presided over the implementation of the university's first Indonesia project, Andrew MacKay, either disregarded letters from concerned members of the university community (such as Dr. Ross Shotton and Dr. Peter Stokoe) or had his vice-president send a terse and pathetic response worthy of any foreign affairs bureaucrat. Several articles raising these issues that appeared in the pages of this journal a few years ago elicited no response at all. When faculty member Dr. Bill Owen asked Dr. Robert Fournier, associate vice-president of research and international relations for the Lester Pearson Institute, why Dalhousie did not openly state its opposition to the Indonesian government's claim that Timor is Indonesia's 27th province, Dr. Fournier advised him to "get a constituency" before he would consider the issue. The current president, Thomas Traves, has received at least four letters and many pages of petitions asking that if the university is going to collaborate with such a government, it should at least go on record stating that it does not recognize the illegal annexation of East Timor. Traves has not replied to a single letter or petition.

This reticence is easily understood. Bill MacDonald, last year's acting head of the Pearson Institute, explained to Dr. Owen that if Dal were to take a principled stand on human rights or the political status of East Timor, its own Indonesia enterprise might very well share the fate of a similar CIDA/IDRC-funded project at Guelph University. Guelph was unceremoniously expelled from Indonesia after a senate-commissioned review of its involvement with the Suharto regime turned out to be highly critical both of Indonesia for its terrible human rights record at home and in East Timor, and of the university for its close bilateral relations with the Indonesian government. In addressing the issue of legitimation, the review's authors, Clovis Demers and Meyer Brownstone (former head of OXFAM Canada) advised that: "One overriding condition should be met if the University is to remain in Indonesia...that the University clearly and publicly reiterate its values in unequivocally deploring the Indonesian regime's excesses, that it actively negotiate its disassociation from the Indonesian government and its dealings with the Canadian government and that this become known in the field."

As Guelph's expulsion from Indonesia illustrates, for a university to meet this "overriding condition," or even consider it, is to risk losing all connections with Indonesia — and the millions of dollars associated with these connections. Not only have Dal administrators and faculty been unwilling to take this risk, but they have even gone so far as to sign a thesis and publish newsletters with maps that include East Timor as a province of Indonesia in their zeal to show Suharto that they will not only not condemn his crimes, but will publicly endorse them.

It probably does not hurt Dal's relations with Indonesia that the chancellor, Sir Graham Day, is a member and former chair of British Aerospace, which has sold millions of dollars worth of Hawk fighter planes to Indonesia to facilitate the slaughters.

It is obvious that such policies of our government and universities do not reflect the concerns and values of the general public.

It is by following the institutions' cues that the mainstream media have opted to suppress the story of East Timor. Indeed, the case of the West's betrayal of the people of East Timor can stand as a paradigm of the terrible human costs of our political acquiescence and apathy, since Indonesia's war would have ground to a halt long ago — in fact, would probably never have been undertaken — without the complicity of our governments.

As long as cash-strapped Canadian universities like Dalhousie are willing to line up with the Canadian government's pro-Indonesia policy and to lend the Suharto dictatorship the credibility of being closely associated with a respected Western institution that turns a blind eye to its atrocities, they too play a role in the sell-out of East Timor. Whether the university community is comfortable with this role is a question it cannot conscientiously refrain from asking — and acting on.

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