

People's war: militias in East Timor and Indonesia¹

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Much of what has been written about East Timor's militias has focused on their relationship with the armed forces, and on the latter's legal responsibility for the 1999 violence. This preoccupation with culpability, while important and understandable under the circumstances, has obscured the much deeper historical origins of the violence and the militias, and has diverted attention from the notable similarities between East Timor's militias and those in Indonesia itself. Indeed, it has meant that basic questions about the historical origins of the militias, and the political conditions of their existence, have scarcely been asked. Where did the militias actually come from? Why did they act in the ways that they did? And what explains the marked similarities between the militia groups in East Timor and those in Indonesia? Existing explanations of East Timor's militias, and of the violence of 1999, generally fall into two categories, both of which ignore or elide these crucial historical questions. The first, commonly expressed by Indonesian officials, is that the militias formed spontaneously in response to pro-independence provocation in late 1998, and that their acts of violence were an expression of 'traditional' cultural patterns such as 'running amok'. The second view, more common among Western journalists and scholars, is that the militias were formed at a stroke by the Indonesian army in late 1998, and that the violence was carefully orchestrated by military commanders. The author's view is that both characterizations are in significant respects wrong, or at least misleading. This paper explains why, and provides an alternative explanation.

At about 5 pm on 30 August 1999, João Lopes Gomes was stabbed in the back and killed while loading ballot boxes on to a United Nations

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vehicle in the village of Atsabe. Mr Gomes was a local staff member of the UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), the body that oversaw the referendum in which the population voted overwhelmingly for independence after 24 years of contested Indonesian rule. His assailants were local men, sporting red and white bandanas, and armed with swords, home-made guns, and knives. At the time of the attack they were accompanied by armed Indonesian soldiers, including the sub-district military commander.

The murder of João Lopes Gomes was not an isolated occurrence. He was one of more than 1,000 people killed before and immediately after the 30 August ballot,² and his assailants belonged to one of the many so-called 'militia' groups responsible for killings and other acts of violence that reached a terrible climax in September.³ Nor were the militias of 1999 historically unique. Similar groups had existed in East Timor throughout the Indonesian occupation, and during the long period of Portuguese colonial rule that preceded it. Militia groups also have a very long history in Indonesia itself. Indeed, the militias of East Timor bore remarkable similarities to paramilitary groups that emerged in the final decade of President Suharto's New Order, especially in politically troubled areas like Aceh and West Papua.

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² As of November 1999, UNTAET (UN Transitional Authority in East Timor) and Interfet (International Force for East Timor) estimated that 1,093 people had been killed, while local non-governmental organizations put the figure closer to 1,500. See United Nations, 'Situation of human rights in East Timor', A/54/660, 10 December 1999, p. 8.

³ By the time an international military force arrived in East Timor in late September, some 70 per cent of all the buildings in the territory had been burned or destroyed, and an estimated 400,000 people had been forced to flee their homes. Two years later the remnants of those groups continued to threaten trouble from the Indonesian side of the border.

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My own view is that both characterizations are in significant respects wrong, or at least misleading. This paper explains why I think so, and provides what I believe is a more satisfactory explanation. The focus here is less on the immediate process through which militia groups were mobilized in 1999, a subject dealt with in some detail by others, and more on the historical and political context that facilitated their emergence and shaped their behaviour.⁴ It is a political history of East Timor's militias told against the background of similar groups in Indonesia. My hope is that, by constructing a rough genealogy of militias that links East Timor's experience with Indonesia's, it will be possible to discern significant historical continuities, and to identify the most influential origins of the contemporary form. I also hope that the evidence from East Timor and Indonesia might suggest some more general propositions about the historical and political conditions under which militias are likely to emerge, and to take the forms that they do.

Before turning to these questions, however, it may be helpful to offer a brief glimpse of the militias as they appeared in 1999. The description that follows pays special attention to certain defining characteristics of the militias – their relationship with state authorities, their weapons and 'repertoires of violence,' the composition of their membership, and certain variations in their behaviour – because I believe these provide a useful basis for tracing their historical origins.

⁴ On the process of militia mobilization in 1999, see Peter Bartu, 'The militia, the military, and the people of Bobonaro', and Helene van Klinken, 'Taking the risk, paying the price: East Timorese vote in Ermera', in Richard Tanter, Mark Selden, and Stephen Shalom, (ed.), *Bitter Flowers, Sweet Flowers: East Timor, Indonesia, and the World Community*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001, pp. 73–90 and 91–108. Also see Mark Harris, 'Heroes of Integration', MA dissertation, SOAS, 2001.

East Timor's militias in 1999

The summer months of 1998 were extraordinary ones in East Timor. In Dili and in other towns, thousands of people took to the streets to demonstrate in favour of independence, and against the proposal for 'special autonomy' under Indonesian rule that was then being discussed in the context of UN-sponsored negotiations in New York. President Suharto's surprise resignation in May 1998, and the demand for reform that swept through Indonesia in the following months, had given supporters of independence for East Timor renewed hope and the courage to express their views openly for the first time in years.

In October 1998, as details of the 'special autonomy' proposal were being finalized, reports began to trickle out about the mobilization of militia groups dedicated to maintaining the tie with Indonesia. When President Habibie announced, in late January 1999, that the East Timorese would be given a chance to vote for or against 'special autonomy,' the trickle became a flood. More than a dozen militia groups – including *Aitarak* (Thorn), *Besi Merah Putih* (Red and White Iron), *Mahidi* (Live or Die for Integration) and many others – appeared in a matter of months.⁵ Though inflected with local meaning, the names of most groups alluded to continued 'integration' with Indonesia or to the red and white colours of the Indonesian flag.

It was soon evident that these groups were involved in a major campaign of terror and intimidation against supporters of independence. In February and March 1999, dozens of people were reported killed, some in a very gruesome way, and tens of thousands were forced to flee, after which their homes were burned to the ground. Many of those who fled their homes sought refuge in nearby churches or in the residences of prominent citizens. It was against these people, and in these places of refuge, that some of the most egregious acts of militia violence were committed in April 1999.⁶ And although the violence slowed somewhat with the arrival of UNAMET and other observers in May, it continued in some form throughout the summer.⁷

⁵ For an outline of the growth of the militias, and their activities, in late 1998 and early 1999, see Amnesty International, 'Paramilitary attacks jeopardize East Timor's future', London, 16 April 1999; and East Timor International Support Center (ETISC), *Indonesia's Death Squads: Getting Away With Murder*. Darwin, Occasional paper 2, May 1999.

⁶ These included mass killings at the church in Liquica, and at the home of Manuel Carrascalão in Dili, both in April. For more detailed accounts of these incidents, and an excellent overview of the political and human rights situation at the start of the

Indonesian authorities claimed at the time, and still do, that the militias had formed spontaneously in response to provocation by pro-independence activists, that the conflict was among East Timorese, and that the Indonesian security forces were doing their utmost to contain it.⁸ They also argued that the violence was the regrettable result of timeless cultural patterns common among Indonesian peoples. In early 2000, for example, the former security adviser to the Indonesian Task Force in East Timor,⁹ Major General Zacky Anwar Makarim, told journalists that the violence had been part of an Indonesian cultural pattern of 'running amok'.¹⁰

By contrast, most outside observers concluded that the militias were created and controlled by the Indonesian army, and that the violence they committed was part of a well-orchestrated plan. As I have argued in detail elsewhere, this latter characterization is much closer to the truth.¹¹ Indeed, virtually all of the evidence demonstrates that the militias were mobilized, trained, supplied, and backed by Indonesian authorities – not just military, but also police and civilian – and that the militia violence was coordinated, or at least condoned, at a very high level. The militias, it seems likely, received such support because they provided a perfect cover for official efforts to disrupt, or affect the outcome of, the vote while simultaneously perpetuating the illusion that the fighting was among East Timorese. In the context of the unprecedented levels of international scrutiny that characterized the referendum process, these were invaluable political advantages.

referendum process, see Amnesty International, 'East Timor: seize the moment', London, 21 June 1999.

⁷ From June to 14 September 1999, I served as a Political Affairs Officer at UNAMET headquarters in Dili. I returned to Dili in November 1999 to assist UNTAET in briefing international and domestic human rights investigations. This paper is based in part on information gathered in the course of that work.

⁸ This case has been forcefully expressed by the military commander for East Timor until mid-August 1999, Brig. Gen. Tono Suratman, *Merah Putih: Pengabdian & Tanggung Jawab di Timor Timur*. Jakarta: Lembaga Pengkajian Kebudayaan Nusantara, 2000.

⁹ The full name of the Task Force was the 'Indonesian Task Force for the Implementation of the Popular Consultation in East Timor'.

¹⁰ Shortly after testifying to the Indonesian Human Rights Commission, General Zacky told journalists: 'What happened there was part of the culture of people who ran amok, so that was an emotional outburst'. *The Jakarta Post*, 5 January 2000. General Zacky was also quoted as saying: 'There were murders and arson by militias and soldiers as individuals. It's part of the *amok* culture of Indonesian society. But it was not something done systematically'. *South China Morning Post*, 5 January 2000.

¹¹ See Geoffrey Robinson, 'The fruitless search for a smoking gun: tracing the origins of violence in East Timor', in Freek Colombijn and Thomas Lindblad, (ed.), *Roots of Violence in Indonesia*. Leiden: KITLV Press, forthcoming.

At the same time, the claim that the militias were ‘army-backed’ arguably overstates the extent to which they, and the violence, were masterminded by high-ranking military officers. Because whatever else it may demonstrate, the evidence does not point unequivocally to any individual or group above the district level in planning or committing such acts. Moreover, while the link with the military may help to explain the timing of the militia mobilization, it does not tell us anything about the historically contingent availability of militia groups, or about the form that they assumed. Thus, the claim that the militias were ‘army-backed’ tends to obscure rather than elucidate important aspects of their origins, composition, and behaviour. Especially noteworthy in this regard were the militias’ weaponry, their ‘repertoires of violence’, their memberships, and certain geographical variations in their activities. Each of these is discussed briefly below.

There were certain unmistakable similarities in the technology used by all militias. A few militiamen had access to advanced weapons of the sort used by the TNI and the police¹² but on the whole they carried an assortment of machetes, knives, spears, swords, rocks, and so-called ‘home made’ firearms (*senjata rakitan*). The latter, fashioned from two or more tubes of steel attached to a wooden grip, were fired by holding a match or cigarette lighter to a fuse on top of the weapon at the base of the steel tubes. To the untrained eye, they resembled 17th or 18th century flint-lock firearms, and by all accounts they were just as unreliable. Nevertheless, they could inflict serious wounds and they had a terrifying effect. The same was true of the other ‘traditional’ weapons used by the militia groups.

Like their weaponry, the militias’ style and repertoire of action was virtually the same everywhere in the territory. When not on patrol, most engaged in military-style drilling and marching in formation with real or mock weapons. A small handful wore Indonesian military uniforms, or parts of one, but most wore ‘civilian’ clothing – red and white bandanas around their neck or head, and often a T-shirt bearing the name of their unit and a pro-integration slogan of some sort. The most common elements of their repertoire included house-burning, public beatings and death threats, the brandishing and firing of weapons and, towards women, the threat and reality of rape.¹³ Targeted killing and

¹² A small number were seen with M-16s, SKSs, S-1s, and hand grenades, while a somewhat larger number carried Portuguese-era Mauser and G-3 rifles.

¹³ TNI soldiers were also directly implicated in rape and sexual slavery. For further details see United Nations, ‘Situation of human rights in East Timor’, 10 December 1999, pp. 9–11.

corpse display were also part of the repertoire. The bodies of victims were often mutilated in some way – decapitated or disembowelled – and then left in full public view. When militias staged an attack, they did not act with the cool precision of professional hit-men. Rather, they created the impression of men in a state of frenzy, shouting and slashing the air with their weapons. In other words, they behaved as one imagines a man ‘running amok’.

These patterns raise intriguing questions. Were the use of ‘traditional’ weapons and the distinctive repertoire of violence parts of a clever Indonesian army plan to prove that the militias had formed spontaneously, and that they were rooted in Timorese custom? Or were there deeper historical processes at work?

Similar questions arise in relation to the men who joined the militias. Although they tended to be treated in the media as little more than Indonesian puppets – or unfortunate victims of Indonesian coercion – militia leaders and members were a varied group, and became involved for many different reasons. A considerable number, of course, joined under duress. Many who refused to join reported that their homes were burned and their families threatened or killed. Others were not East Timorese at all but Indonesian army soldiers, many of them from West Timor and neighbouring islands, dressed up as local militias.

But in addition to those who were coerced or who were masquerading, a fair number of Timorese joined a militia group more or less willingly. They seem to have included men who had fought on the Indonesian side at some stage since 1975, who had relatives who had been killed by the pro-independence party, Fretilin, or who had done well under Indonesian rule. They also included young men from villages or neighbourhoods in which local power brokers were pro-Indonesian. Others were induced to join by promises of food and money, or by the possibility of wielding a gun and exercising raw power over others. Finally, militia members seem to have been recruited directly from criminal gangs involved in gambling rings, protection rackets, and so on. Clearly, then, militias were not mere puppets of the TNI but people acting and choosing their own course on the basis of historical experience, political context, and personal desire.

Finally, there were variations in the geographical distribution of militia violence, at least before the ballot. The worst areas were unquestionably the western border districts of Bobonaro, Liquica, Covalima, with the central districts of Dili, Ermera, and Ainaro occasionally reaching similar levels of insecurity. By contrast the eastern-most districts of

Manatuto, Baucau, Lospalos, Viqueque, and Manufahi, together with the enclave of Oecusse, were relatively calm, and the militias far less active. The reasons for this pattern were a source of considerable speculation by UNAMET and other observers, but most analyses – even by those who saw the pattern as part of a TNI master plan – ultimately returned to the conclusion that there were ‘historical factors’ that resulted in stronger support for Indonesia in the western districts. Exactly what those historical factors were, however, remained somewhat vague, and so deserve attention here.

This, then, is how the militias look on the basis of the contemporary evidence. There are strong indications of official support for the militias, and the political logic of that support seems clear enough. At the same time, there are aspects of the militias’ repertoire, membership, and patterns of behaviour that are not fully explained by the contemporary political logic, and which beg questions about their deeper origins.

It seems possible, as I have argued elsewhere, that these features of the militias were not simply the product of a TNI master plan but also the result of a process of historical learning, and rekindled memory, through which a range of technologies and techniques of violence spread, with or without any official oversight or co-ordination.¹⁴ In this view, a certain script or historical memory – encompassing a shared repertoire of violence – might already have been in the minds of many East Timorese, ready to be enacted when the occasion arose, or when the signal was given. As East Timor’s supreme militia commander, João Tavares, insisted in late 1999, the militias hardly needed army training in violence. After 24 years of war and counter-insurgency, he noted, virtually everyone in the territory already knew how to handle a gun.¹⁵ Yet, if the militias, their styles and their repertoires, were the product of such a shared historical memory, we still need to ask to what did that memory refer, how was it rekindled, and with what effect. It is to these tasks that we can now turn.

¹⁴ See Robinson, ‘The fruitless search for a smoking gun: tracing the origins of violence in East Timor’. Freek Colombijn offers a similar sort of explanation for the public lynching of petty criminals in Indonesia. ‘Lynching,’ he writes, ‘is spontaneous and not organised, but once it has started, people know what to do, even if they have never participated in mob justice before.’ Personal communication, 11 January 2001.

¹⁵ ‘Seluruh orang TimTim itu tahu memegang senjata kok. . .’, *Kompas*, 29 December 1999.

Historical antecedents and cultural models in East Timor

Credit for creating East Timor's militias is commonly attributed to General Prabowo Subianto, the high-flying Indonesian army officer and presidential son-in-law who served several tours of duty in East Timor, starting in the late 1970s.¹⁶ While it is undoubtedly true that Prabowo encouraged the growth of paramilitary forces in East Timor, the idea that they were the brainchild of a single military officer oversimplifies a complicated story. It also distracts attention from the deeper political and historical logic behind the mobilization of militia forces in East Timor and elsewhere. Indeed, as I shall attempt to show, a plausible case can be made that the origins of the modern militias lie, at least in part, in East Timor's pre-colonial and colonial past.

Modern militias in East Timor are in some ways reminiscent of the irregular troops raised by local rulers throughout South East Asia both before and during the colonial period. Recruited through a relationship of personal obligation to a lord, these troops were not full-time professional armies but, like the modern militias, ordinary citizens called up temporarily, and for a specific purpose. In Timor such forces were typically formed on the basis of loyalty to a lord, or *liurai*.¹⁷ Large forces could be formed through the alliance of a number of *liurai*, each of whom would mobilize his own followers.¹⁸ In the early 18th century, it was estimated that the *liurai* of the eastern half of Timor alone could muster as many as 40,000 troops in this way,¹⁹ and the practice continued at least until the late 19th century.²⁰

¹⁶ The editors of the *Tapol* bulletin wrote, for example, that during his repeated tours of duty in East Timor, Prabowo 'created his own infrastructure of Timorese, mostly former Apodeti members, for the purpose of using Timorese to fight Timorese', *Tapol*, 134, April 1996, p. 11.

¹⁷ In the late 19th century there were 49 such *liurai* in Portuguese Timor. Service as a warrior formed part of a subject's tribute to a lord. As Katharine Davidson writes: 'Apart from paying tribute the duties of subjects also included providing labour for the *liurai*'s fields and plantations, providing guards for his person, and warriors to fight wars.' Katharine Davidson, 'The Portuguese colonisation of Timor: the final stage, 1850–1912', PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 1994, p. 123.

¹⁸ When forming such alliances, *liurai* usually took part in a blood-drinking ceremony. One such blood oath was sworn in 1719 by several *liurai* who resolved to fight the Portuguese. See Jill Jolliffe, *East Timor, Nationalism and Colonialism*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978, p. 35. The English naturalist, H. O. Forbes, provided a detailed description of such a blood-oath in the late 19th century. H. O. Forbes, 'On some tribes of the Island of Timor', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 13, 1884, p. 426.

¹⁹ Charles A. Boxer, cited in Jolliffe, *East Timor*, p. 29.

²⁰ In 1884, Forbes wrote: 'On the eve of war . . . messengers are sent to every corner of the kingdom and country to summon . . . every man who owes allegiance to their rajah'. Forbes, 'On some tribes of the Island of Timor', p. 413.

The weapons used by Timorese warriors, and their methods in battle, also appear to foreshadow those used by the modern militia. In battle, Timorese men typically carried swords (*catana*), spears (*assegai*), rocks and flint-lock guns, almost exactly the same array of weapons used in 1999.²¹ The use of swords and spears in this earlier period is perhaps unremarkable, but in view of the modern militia's use of 'home-made guns' that looked like 17th or 18th century flint-lock weapons, the historical use of precisely these kinds of firearms is noteworthy. It is also notable that by the late 19th century, old guns had been fully integrated into the ritual life of Timor.²² Is it possible that in their choice of weaponry, modern Timorese militias were continuing a centuries-old tradition?

The same question may be asked with respect to the practice of head-taking and display, a common feature of battle and of customary law as early as the 18th century that reappeared as a militia tactic in modern times. A Dutch account of a battle in 1749 describes, for example, how the Timorese allies of the Dutch 'carried off in triumph approximately a thousand heads and at least as many again in the course of the next two days'.²³ Head-taking was also a common feature of warfare in the late 19th and early 20th century. In 1896 Timorese rebels reportedly cut off the heads of several Portuguese government soldiers, and placed them in a tree in the centre of the rebel village;²⁴ and in 1912 a government report on a military campaign in Maubisse noted that, after the battle 'the warriors were all adorned with captured heads'.²⁵ Severed heads were evidently also displayed on poles or stakes as a warning to thieves and other criminals. Forbes wrote in 1884, for example, that 'if the theft consisted of a living animal the head of the animal was struck off and affixed near that of the robber's, on a stake'.²⁶ Stories of decapitation continued to circulate in

²¹ Timorese warriors are reported carrying muskets as early as 1656, at the time of a Dutch military expedition. Jolliffe, *East Timor*, p. 35. Even when not preparing for battle, Forbes wrote, a Timorese man 'has always a knife or short sword of some description, and is rarely without a gun, flintlock or percussion'. Forbes, 'On some tribes', p. 409.

²² On the ritual importance of guns, Forbes wrote: 'A spot is always railed off for the *lulik* spear and gun, before which the head of the house makes a propitiary offering to speed his particular undertakings'. Forbes, 'On some tribes', p. 410.

²³ Cited in Jolliffe, *East Timor*, p. 30.

²⁴ Katharine Davidson, 'The Portuguese colonisation of Timor', p. 197.

²⁵ Cited in Davidson, p. 255. Reporting on the anti-colonial uprising of 1912, the *Melbourne Argus* claimed that Timorese warriors had killed two Portuguese officers and several soldiers and stuck their heads on poles. Jolliffe, *East Timor*, p. 38.

²⁶ Forbes, 'On some tribes', p. 422.

East Timor through the 1960s and 1970s, and there is eyewitness and photographic evidence of head-taking from the early years of the Indonesian occupation.²⁷

Notwithstanding the evident importance of the gun, and of head-taking and display, Timorese historically also used other tactics commonly employed by the militias in 1999, such as bombarding enemies with a hail of rocks, and burning down their houses.²⁸ Accounts from the 17th through to the late 19th century also indicate that Timorese preferred the frenzied, 'amok' style of attack employed with such frightening effect by East Timor's modern militias in 1999 (and used in the attack on Mr Gomes described at the start of this paper). The commander of a Dutch contingent defeated by a Timorese (Topass) force in 1653 provided the following account:

After sending down a shower of *assegais* [spears] on us [the enemy] assaulted us like lightning, stabbing some of us in the back. . . . The enemy, seeing that some of our men were incapable of properly handling a rifle, were goaded into unheard audacity, furiously flinging themselves at them with no more fear than if the rifles had been mere hemp-poles.²⁹

Similarly, reporting on a battle in 1896, a Portuguese army captain described how Timorese forces under his command 'pillaged, burned and killed all they encountered'. And in a passage that might have been a description of the events of September 1999, he wrote: 'it was a vision of hell with cries of anguish mixed with the shouts of the victors against the backdrop of burning bamboo. . . . In the morning the central square

²⁷ Cardoso, for example, relates a story from his youth in the final years of Portuguese rule, of a woman who decapitated her husband to repay an ancient debt. Luis Cardoso, *The Crossing. A Story of East Timor*. London: Granta Books, 2000, p. 48. Photographs of severed heads, and testimonies of head-taking, dating from the post-1975 period, have been reproduced in a number of publications about the Indonesian invasion and occupation. See, for example, Michele Turner *Telling East Timor: Personal Testimonies 1942–1992*. Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1992.

²⁸ Forbes wrote: 'They often carry besides a buffalo-hide shield to ward off stones, which are employed as missiles against each other'. Forbes, 'On some tribes', p. 409. Davidson provides several accounts of battles in the late 19th and early 20th century, all of which mention the burning of houses. See Davidson, 'The Portuguese colonisation of Timor', pp. 171, 195, 196, 201, and 267.

²⁹ Arnold de Vlaming van Oudshoorn, cited in Jolliffe, *East Timor*, p. 27. Forbes's late 19th century description leaves a similar impression: 'It is carried on mostly by the offensive army pillaging and ravaging all they can lay their hands on, robbing every undefended dwelling, ruthlessly decapitating helpless men, women, and children, and even infants'. Forbes, 'On some tribes', p. 423.

was strewn with more than one hundred bodies, stripped, decapitated and horribly mutilated.’³⁰

A quick look at the historical evidence, then, suggests what appear to be important historical antecedents, even models, for the organization, weaponry, and repertoire of East Timor’s modern militias. We cannot know for sure, but the existence of such antecedents and models – or the rekindled memory of them – may well have influenced the character and the behaviour of the militias of 1999. At the same time, a closer look reveals that the similarities between the old and new forms do not reflect a simple, uninterrupted continuation of an immutable Timorese ‘tradition’. Even in the historical period, it is clear that the very existence of the militias, as well as their weaponry and behaviour, were shaped by the presence, and indeed the sponsorship, of Portuguese, Dutch, and other outside powers.

The fact is that the ‘indigenous militias’ of Timor – known in Portuguese as *moradores* and *arraias* – were deliberately mobilized by Portuguese authorities to provide security for the colonial community, and to suppress opposition.³¹ In 1912, for example, the Portuguese successfully crushed the most serious rebellion of the colonial period – led by the *liurai* of Manufahi – by enlisting the forces of several *liurai* who had sworn vassalage to the government.³² This was only the best known instance of a more general pattern in which *liurai* were induced or compelled to support the Portuguese, or on occasion the Dutch, and were then employed to raise troops to fight against others less loyal.³³ The Portuguese authorities were still employing this strategy at the outbreak of the Second World War. Australian soldiers who were there in 1942, gave the following description of the Portuguese response to an uprising:

³⁰ Cited in Davidson, ‘The Portuguese colonisation of Timor’, p. 196.

³¹ Both groups, the *moradores* and the *arraias*, were indigenous militias raised through loyal *liurai* to fight on behalf of the Portuguese. However, the *moradores* were a somewhat more permanent formation. Though officially designated as ‘second line troops’, in fact they formed ‘the strongest first line of defence for the colonial community and its outlying *postos*.’ Davidson, ‘The Portuguese colonisation of Timor’, p. 136.

³² As Davidson writes: ‘The actual defeat of Manufahi’s warriors was effected not just by Portuguese use of superior military technology but also by the enormous force of indigenous auxiliaries who had swelled the government ranks.’ Davidson, ‘The Portuguese colonisation of Timor’, p. 20. For a detailed account of the 1911–12 rebellion, see Davidson, chapter 8.

³³ Davidson recounts dozens of instances of this pattern from the late 19th and early 20th century. See Davidson, pp. 60, 143, 145, 147, 155, 156, 165, 171, 182, 184–185, 195, 200, 205, 256, 259. Dutch accounts of an 18th century battle in the area refer to ‘our Timorese’. See, Jolliffe, *East Timor*, p. 30.

Their army was collected; it consisted of two companies. . . . The troops were Timorese, and the non-commissioned officers and officers were Portuguese. . . . At the same time the natives in the surrounding areas were ordered to arm themselves and prepare for war.³⁴

The end of the war did not bring an end to the Portuguese practice of mobilizing militias. Despite important changes in colonial policy in the 1950s and 1960s, the authorities were careful to maintain native forces under the command of loyal *liurai*. Dunn claims, for example, that the people of Uatolari were mobilized to quell the 1959 uprising in the eastern part of the territory.³⁵ In addition to such *ad hoc* mobilization, until the final years of Portuguese rule, all Timorese men were required to do 30 days of military service. As late as 1975, moreover, some *liurai* still had control of 'private armies'.³⁶

The political and military logic behind the Portuguese reliance on indigenous troops is perhaps worth spelling out briefly. First, as Davidson has shown, the norms that shaped colonial policy in Timor were basically those of military officers that prevailed throughout Portugal's colonial domains; and these called, as a matter of course, for the use of native forces in maintaining security and order.³⁷ Second, like most non-settler colonial powers, Portugal simply did not have the financial or human resources to field a full army of European (or African) troops. Indeed, in the late 19th century the government could seldom afford to deploy more than 200 regular soldiers in Timor, and even these were often of a very poor quality.³⁸ In 1910, even as Portugal conducted 'pacification' campaigns in its various colonies, there were only some 13,000

³⁴ Cited in Jolliffe, *East Timor*, p. 45.

³⁵ James Dunn, *Timor: A People Betrayed*, Sydney: ABC Books, 1996, p. 29.

³⁶ Jolliffe, *East Timor*, pp. 41 and 135. The final decades of Portuguese rule were also marked by the presence of the 'Portuguese Youth Movement', a quasi-military organization not altogether different from the youth groups of the Indonesian period. Cardoso also mentions the existence at this time of a 'rural Catholic militia' in the village of Atsabe – a major centre of militia activity in 1999, and the site of the murder of UNAMET staff member mentioned at the start of this paper. See Cardoso, *The Crossing*, pp. 71 and 59.

³⁷ See Davidson, 'The Portuguese colonisation of Timor', pp. 22, 31–32, 51.

³⁸ A government directive of 1870 refers explicitly to the economic motive for using native auxiliaries: 'It would, therefore, be better to supply the loyal kings [*liurai*] with powder and shot and let them pursue the war freely in their own manner. . . . Organisation of expeditions from Portugal or other colonies would involve expenses the Public Treasury cannot afford.' Cited in Davidson, p. 150.

soldiers in the entire colonial army, and of these fewer than 4,000 were Europeans.³⁹ Third, local troops invariably knew the terrain, and tolerated the climate, food, and diseases better than any foreign troops could.⁴⁰ And finally, the policy of mobilizing some Timorese against others served a useful – if not always intended – political purpose of minimizing the likelihood of concerted anti-Portuguese action.⁴¹

The many advantages of the local troops were summarized in a report by the Governor of Macau and Timor in 1870:

In war they have always been our most powerful auxiliaries . . . in peace they do garrison service without any payment . . . because most of the European soldiers are always in hospital. . . . They have been helping us in all branches of the service and save for the State hundreds of men and a good sum of florins, and believe me Your Excellency, if it were not for this corps, we could not manage without at least five hundred regular soldiers in Dili.⁴²

For similar reasons – resource considerations and the need for local knowledge – the Japanese forces that occupied the territory from 1942 to 1945 also relied on local auxiliaries, using the followers of ‘loyal’ *liurai* against those of disloyal ones. So too did the Australian commandos who fought the Japanese in Timor during the war, although historians and war veterans have tended to portray the practice as heroic comradeship rather than the use of native militias.⁴³ It may be relevant that the mobilization of native forces by Japanese and Australian forces took place in the context of war, where military authorities and norms prevailed, just as they had done through centuries of Portuguese colonial rule, and as they would after the Indonesian invasion of 1975.

³⁹ Davidson, p. 207.

⁴⁰ The advantages of local troops were summarized by the Governor of Timor in 1897, at the end of a three-year pacification campaign in which they had been extensively used: ‘Here war is different, we don’t form squares . . . we advance on foot, under fire in single file along trails impossible to describe . . . we climb mountain escarpments, sometimes crawling, sometimes dragging ourselves up by shrub and bushes under enemy fire. . . . Yet with irregular forces armed only with breech loaders we have conquered the land.’ Report of Governor Celestino da Silva, 21 October 1897, cited in Davidson, p. 208.

⁴¹ The strategy was not without its dangers, as the Portuguese discovered in 1897 when a group of *moradores* from Motael, angered by a perceived insult to their *liurai*, killed the Governor. See Davidson, pp. 166–69.

⁴² Report by Captain Antonio Joaquim Garcia, Governor of the Province of Macao and Timor, 1870. Cited in Davidson, p. 137.

⁴³ The reality that East Timorese were mobilized by both sides during the war is captured in a photograph of a young Timorese *criado* or ‘guide’ taken in December 1945 and published in Dunn’s *Timor*, p. 128. The boy is dressed in Australian kit and is carrying a rifle. The caption notes, however, that the boy ‘had earlier been speared by pro-Japanese Timorese’.

To sum up, there would appear to be some basis for the claim that the militias that emerged in East Timor in 1999 reflected, or were drawing upon, uniquely Timorese historical models and traditions. At the same time, the evidence that Timor's militias were consciously cultivated and used by a succession of state powers – especially the Portuguese but also the Japanese and the Australian – suggests that the parallels constituted something more than a simple transmission of an unchanging 'tradition'. Without the encouragement of a succession of state authorities – which were in turn rooted in a common political logic of scarce resources, a need for local knowledge, and the dominance of military norms – it seems doubtful that the militias would have existed, or would have adopted and maintained the traditions that they did.

Some of the regional variations in militia activity observed in 1999 – especially the concentration of violence in the western districts – may also have had deeper historical roots. In the latter half of the 19th century, for example, the Portuguese regarded the kingdoms in the border region as unruly, disobedient, and lawless, and made them the focus of repeated pacification campaigns.⁴⁴ In popular memory, moreover, the western regions have historically been populated by criminals and other marginal characters, including migrants and martial arts adepts. In a memoir that recalls the final decades of the colonial period, Cardoso writes of the frontier region as 'that land of cattle rustlers who would take refuge on either side of the border, depending on the monsoons and who was after them at the time'.⁴⁵ The people of Bobonaro – one of the main centres of militia violence in 1999 – had an especially poor reputation, he notes: its residents were known by the pejorative term 'horse eaters', reflecting the area's reputation as a haven for horse thieves. It seems possible that the rebellious and frontier-like quality of life in these regions – or at least the memory of it – had a lasting influence.

If outside powers helped to forge the tradition or culture on which East Timor's modern militias were, in part, founded – and if that experience also helps to explain regional political variations – it stands to reason that the Indonesian occupation after 1975 also played a part. In order to understand the role that the occupation played, however, we need first to know something about the historical roots of militias in Indonesia itself.

⁴⁴ On the West's reputation for lawlessness, see Davidson, pp. 74, 101, 170, and 181.

⁴⁵ Cardoso, *The Crossing*, p. 8.

Indonesian militia models to 1965

The militia phenomenon in Indonesia, as in East Timor, appears to echo historical models and cultural practices dating back to colonial times, and even earlier. The political logic of the mobilization of militias, and their relationships with state authorities, also seem to be similar in both places.

One probable source of the modern Indonesian militia is the *jago*, the 'notorious rural criminal' of late colonial Java.⁴⁶ Possessing, or at least claiming, extraordinary physical and spiritual prowess, the *jago* exuded political, spiritual, and sexual potency.⁴⁷ Modern-day militia members do not always attain such heights of potency, but the aspiration is generally there. An equally important similarity lies in the relationship of the *jago* to those in authority. As Schulte Nordholt and van Till have shown, the late 19th century *jago* of Java occupied an odd marginal space in the shadow of a modernizing colonial bureaucracy. Neither a Robin Hood or simply a tool of the state, the *jago* was both a criminal and an essential bulwark to the colonial system of law and order.⁴⁸ It was perhaps not a coincidence that, like the criminals and marginal figures in East Timor's border regions, the *jago* were especially known for cattle rustling.

Also ancestors of the modern Indonesian militia are the *lasykar*, the home-grown bands of freedom fighters that emerged, more or less spontaneously, at the time of Indonesia's struggle for independence from the Dutch (1945–49). Like the *jago*, the *lasykar* drew upon traditions of invulnerability and spiritual prowess, and evoked a sense of sexual potency. Just as importantly, as Cribb has demonstrated, *lasykar* thrived in the environment of political uncertainty that characterized the Indonesian National Revolution, and they occupied a position at the margins

⁴⁶ The description is from Henk Schulte Nordholt and Margaret van Till, 'Colonial criminals in Java, 1870–1910', in V. Rafael (ed.), *Figures in Criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Colonial Vietnam*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1999, p. 49.

⁴⁷ Schulte Nordholt and van Till have argued that power in ancient Java should be understood in such terms, and that this idea is also useful in understanding the *jago*. Schulte Nordholt and van Till, 'Colonial criminals in Java', p. 48.

⁴⁸ 'Although officially the *jago* was perceived as playing only a marginal role in colonial society, in actual practice he was vital to the perpetuation of colonial rule in rural Java. . . . Colonial state formation and criminality mutually constituted and reinforced each other, and once criminality emerged the colonial state could not, and often did not want to, control its own creation.' Schulte Nordholt and van Till, 'Colonial criminals in Java', p. 68.

of political power and criminality.⁴⁹ The fact was that *lasykar* could as easily be criminal gangsters as righteous revolutionaries. Indeed, they could be both – a hybrid Cribb has called ‘gangster revolutionaries’.⁵⁰ The *lasykar* shared with the *jago* a distinctive *modus operandi* of terror that seems to foreshadow the behaviour of East Timor’s modern militias. As Cribb writes:

The pirates and bandit princes of pre-colonial times, the rural brigands [*jago*] of the colonial era, and the politicized gangsters of the revolutionary-era *lasykar* all sought to inspire a paralyzing terror among their enemies. Terror, rather than cold, calculated murder, was the prime *modus operandi* of Indonesia’s men of violence.⁵¹

Poised somewhere between the *jago* and the *lasykar* – and like them a source of modern militia style and tradition – are the *preman*.⁵² In colonial times, *preman* served as local enforcers, making them potentially both upholders of law and perpetrators of criminal activity. Likewise, in the post-colonial period the term *preman* gradually came to be used to describe the gangs of youth recruited by political, and especially military, authorities and economic élites to serve both criminal and political purposes.⁵³ Despite, or perhaps because of, their often noted involvement in criminal activities – including gambling, protection rackets, and prostitution – in the late New Order these gangs became an increasingly important political resource. As Ryter has shown for the *preman* organization *Pemuda Pancasila*, such groups were commonly deployed by military and political authorities to harass and intimidate political opponents, to provoke violence and chaos in the course of political demonstrations, and on occasion to commit murder.

⁴⁹ See Robert Cribb, *Gangsters and Revolutionaries: The Jakarta People's Militia and the Indonesian Revolution 1945–1949*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991.

⁵⁰ As Cribb notes: ‘Many of the revolutionary-era *lasykar* had criminal roots despite their strong political orientation’. Robert Cribb, ‘From Petrus to Ninja: death squads in Indonesia’, in Bruce B. Campbell and Arthur D. Brenner, (ed.), *Death Squads in Global Perspective: Murder With Deniability*. New York: St Martin’s Press, 2000, p. 185.

⁵¹ Cribb, ‘From Petrus to Ninja’, p. 187.

⁵² The historical roots and contemporary manifestations of the *preman* have been carefully studied by Loren Ryter and Joshua Barker among others. See Loren Ryter, ‘Pemuda Pancasila; the last loyalists of Suharto’s New Order?’, and Joshua Barker, ‘State of fear: controlling the criminal contagion in Suharto’s New Order’, in *Indonesia*, 66, October 1998, pp. 45–74 and pp. 7–42.

⁵³ Despite its historical roots, in modern times the term *preman* entered common usage only in the 1990s. In the 1980s, the more common term was *gali*. Ryter, ‘Pemuda Pancasila’, p. 49.

The parallels between these antecedents and Indonesia's modern militias are intriguing, and deserve to be explored more fully. The idea that the *jago*, *lasykar*, and *preman* have historically been marginal figures, with one foot in the criminal world and another in the world of law and order, is particularly suggestive. So too is the evidence that these forms, like mafias elsewhere, have tended to emerge where state power is contested or has stagnated.⁵⁴ These parallels seem to lend weight to the idea that militia groups emerge where the state is weak or has collapsed. But they also highlight the extent to which the *jago*, the *lasykar*, the *preman*, and arguably the modern militias, are a product of, and inseparable from, state power.

It is worth recalling that, as in East Timor, in Indonesia successive states have sought to harness the power of such local formations – and indeed, may even be said to have helped create them. Dutch authorities, like most colonial powers, relied heavily on troops mobilized with the assistance of local power-holders to assist them in fighting colonial wars. Even the supposedly marginal and criminal figures, such as the *jago*, were to some extent the products of Dutch state power. As Schulte Nordholt and van Till have argued, 19th century colonial administrators, as well as district and village heads, recognizing the dangers of supplanting the *jago*, effectively acquiesced in them, thereby solidifying their position at least for a time.⁵⁵ Under colonial rule, they write, 'there was ample space for brokers in violence, even if their room for maneuver was redefined'.⁵⁶

A similar pattern is evident in the period of Japanese rule, and in the revolutionary years (1945–49). In just over three years, the Japanese managed to recruit and mobilize tens of thousands of young men and women into paramilitary organizations. These efforts left important organizational and ideological legacies, including the rudiments of Indonesia's future internal intelligence apparatus, and associated methods of political repression, including torture.⁵⁷ In August 1945, returning

⁵⁴ Drawing on Anton Blok, Schulte Nordholt and van Till make this case for the *jago*, arguing that 'a process of "unfinished" or stagnating state formation enabled new groups of violent entrepreneurs to dominate the local order in alliance with, or under the patronage of, rural elites'. Schulte Nordholt and van Till, 'Colonial criminals in Java', p. 68.

⁵⁵ On the position of district and village heads, see Schulte Nordholt and van Till, 'Colonial Criminals in Java', pp. 52–55.

⁵⁶ Schulte Nordholt and van Till, p. 50.

⁵⁷ On the impact of Japanese mobilization and ideas on Indonesian, especially Javanese, youth in the revolutionary period, see Benedict Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972.

Dutch colonial authorities followed the Japanese example, encouraging the mobilization of militia forces at the local level to fight against the Indonesian Republic.⁵⁸ Likewise, the authorities of the fledgling Republic sought to harness the power of local militia groups, the *lasykar*, making them part of its doctrine of 'total people's defense', which called for the close cooperation of regular military forces and the civilian population.⁵⁹ With the possible exception of the Japanese, however, during the colonial and revolutionary eras, none of these state authorities was able fully to control the militia groups.⁶⁰

The same was true in the first decade and a half after independence, as Indonesian authorities tried in vain to control the vast array of irregular forces that had sprung up during the war. Unable to get rid of these forces, the armed forces began to co-opt them and deploy them against perceived enemies.⁶¹ Guided by General Abdul Haris Nasution, who was in turn inspired by Mao's idea of 'People's War', local militia units were mobilized to crush the *Darul Islam* rebellion that challenged the new Republic from 1948 to the early 1960s.⁶² However, army control of local militias was always incomplete, and many became involved

⁵⁸ In Bali, for example, several rajas with Dutch backing became patrons of anti-Republican youth gangs. In the eyes of Dutch strategists this approach was essential to undermine the civilian base of support for Republican guerrilla forces. In the short term, the strategy worked rather well. By dividing the local population, the Dutch weakened the social base of the resistance and ensured that most of the actual fighting was carried out by the Balinese themselves, with minimal loss of Dutch lives. In the longer term, the consequence of this strategy was the exacerbation of bitter conflict among Balinese, which set the stage for further political conflict and violence later on. In the post-independence period, the Indonesian state employed similar methods, with similarly damaging effects. See Geoffrey Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise: Political Violence in Bali*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995, chapters 5, 6, and 7.

⁵⁹ For the history and political implications of this doctrine, see Geoffrey Robinson, 'Indonesia: on a new course?', in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *The Declining Role of the Military in Asia*. Stanford University Press, 2001. Also see Abdul Haris Nasution, *Fundamentals of Guerrilla Warfare*. New York: Praeger, 1965.

⁶⁰ As Cribb writes on the revolutionary period: 'To control the *lasykar*, the military adopted a strategy of both repression and cooptation, but even by the time the Dutch conceded Indonesian independence in late 1949 not all *lasykar* groups had been tamed.' Cribb, 'From Petrus to Ninjas', pp. 183–84.

⁶¹ The military, indeed different branches of the armed forces, also sponsored militia-type youth groups affiliated with one or another of the political parties. See Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise*, chapter 9.

⁶² This was the origin of the militia formations known as *Hansip* (*Pertahanan Sipil* or Civil Defence) which eventually became an integral element in Indonesia's system of internal security, discussed below.

in criminal rackets, including extortion, smuggling, and black marketeering. As the first national elections approached in 1955, moreover, they proliferated under different political party banners, engaging in campaigns of intimidation against political opponents.

Throughout this period, a variety of youth and militia groups existed and competed but, notwithstanding some military successes when deploying them to fight rebels, the state was unable to establish anything like a monopoly of control over them. That configuration changed fundamentally in 1965, when army forces under Major General Suharto seized power and set about annihilating his political enemies. Within hours of what has been dubbed the 'abortive coup' of 1 October 1965, Suharto's forces mobilized a network of militia groups and political organizations, and over the next several months encouraged them to kill as many as one million people, most of them members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). The killing reached its greatest intensity in Central and East Java, Bali, and Aceh. In all of these places, the army provided essential political backing and logistical support to existing youth organizations, such as the NU-affiliated *Ansor* in East Java, the PNI's *Tameng Marhaenis* in Bali, and the *Pemuda Pancasila* in Aceh.⁶³

The manner in which Suharto, the army and their paramilitary allies destroyed the PKI shaped and prefigured a new style of governance characterized by military dominance, and an evolving institutional culture of violence. The coup and massacre also signalled a significant new departure in the character of militia groups, especially in their relationship with state authorities, and in their repertoires of action.

Whereas before 1965 state authorities had had only limited success in harnessing the power of the militias, after the coup virtually all militia groups were drawn tightly under the army's authority. Once they had done what was required in 1965–66, most were disarmed and disbanded, while the rest were integrated into the state apparatus, ready to be deployed in a coordinated fashion under strict army control.⁶⁴ Drawing on the model of 1965, the deliberate mobilization of 'civilians' into

⁶³ On the logic of the killings see Robert Cribb, (ed.), *The Indonesian Killings, 1965–1966: Studies from Java and Bali*. Clayton, Victoria: Monash University, Papers on Southeast Asia, 21, 1990; and Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise*, particularly chapter 12.

⁶⁴ Cribb correctly observes that the post-66 demobilization was 'a powerful indication of the control that the military kept over the vigilantes'. However, he understates the extent to which such militia mobilization was revived and replicated in other parts of the country in later years. Cribb, 'From Petrus to Ninjas', p. 184.

armed militia groups thereafter became a central component of the government's strategy for dealing with real or imagined enemies, particularly in 'troubled' areas such as West Irian (West Papua), Aceh, and East Timor.

In the post-coup period, moreover, both the military and the militias adopted far more brutal repertoires of action. Many of these were modelled on actions taken during the pogrom of 1965–66, though these were themselves sometimes adaptations of methods learned under Japanese rule, or developed during the counter-insurgency campaign against *Darul Islam*. One of the clearest examples of this pattern of historical borrowing was the so-called 'fence of legs' (*pagar betis*) tactic, in which civilians were made to form a protective boundary behind which army troops could safely move into rebel territory. First used against *Darul Islam* in the early 1950s, it was used to more terrible effect in 1965, in East Timor after 1975, and later in Aceh.⁶⁵ Under army guidance, after 1965 militias and paramilitary forces were also increasingly deployed to carry out a range of 'dirty tricks' and covert operations, including assassination, torture, public execution, decapitation, and rape, as mechanisms of political control.⁶⁶

I am suggesting, therefore, that the coup and massacres of 1965 marked a critical historical turning point after which, at least for a time, militias no longer operated at the margin of state power but rather were directly mobilized and controlled by the state, and to which end they developed and used a common repertoire of unusual brutality modelled, in large part, on the anti-communist purges of 1965–66. This arrangement did not wipe out all memory of past forms – indeed it drew upon them – nor would it last forever. As we shall see, the relationship between state authorities and militia groups would continue to change, especially during the final years of the New Order, as would militia organization and repertoires. Nevertheless, as Indonesian forces prepared to invade East Timor in 1975, the legacy of 1965 was still strong and, alongside

⁶⁵ I am grateful to Ruth McVey for drawing my attention to the importance of the fight against *Darul Islam* in the development of this and other aspects of Indonesian military doctrine.

⁶⁶ The origins and evolution of these features of New Order military doctrine and practice have been analysed in some depth by Tanter, Van Langenberg, and others. See Richard Tanter, 'The totalitarian ambition: intelligence organisations and the Indonesian state', in Arief Budiman (ed.), *State and Civil Society in Indonesia*. Clayton, Victoria: Monash University, Papers on Southeast Asia, 22, 1990; and Michael van Langenberg, 'The New Order state: language, ideology, hegemony', in Arief Budiman (ed.), *State and Civil Society in Indonesia*.

East Timor's own surviving 'traditions' and models of violence, it profoundly affected the role and character of the militias that were formed there.

The legacy of 1965: East Timor's early militias

Even before the December 1975 invasion, Indonesian strategy entailed the mobilization of East Timorese into rudimentary militia forces. Beginning in late 1974, several hundred young men were taken to sites near the town of Atambua on the west side of the border, where they received military training and supplies, before being infiltrated back into East Timor to fight against soldiers of the pro-independence party, Fretilin.⁶⁷ Recently declassified Australian government documents provide a glimpse of these training operations. One report on a visit by an embassy official to the border area in April 1975 describes what the Indonesians claimed was a refugee camp in which Timorese were ostensibly receiving training in agriculture and carpentry. Having noted that all those at the camp were men aged 18 to 30, and that there was little indication of any agricultural activity, the author observed:

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this camp is involved in other activities besides agriculture and carpentry in spite of adamant statements by the Indonesian officials . . . that Indonesia is not involved in any way . . . in the military training of Portuguese Timorese.⁶⁸

In September 1975, a US State Department report noted more bluntly that 'Indonesian intelligence . . . has trained, organized and covertly committed 650 Timorese irregular troops into Portuguese Timor to stem the advance of Fretilin forces'.⁶⁹

As in Portuguese times, the mobilization of these militia forces was facilitated in 1974–75 by sympathetic *liurai*, who continued to exercise considerable authority within their localities. Especially helpful was the *liurai* of Atsabe, Guilherme Maria Gonçalves, and his son

⁶⁷ Roughly 300 young men and boys were deployed alongside Indonesian army regulars in an October 1975 cross-border attack. Dunn, *Timor*, pp. 128 and 164.

⁶⁸ Cablegram to Canberra, 15 April 1975, Document 126, in Wendy Way (ed.), *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974–1976*. Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2000.

⁶⁹ US Department of State, cited in Dunn, *Timor*, p. 193.

Tomás.⁷⁰ Both men became active in the small pro-Indonesian political party, Apodeti; and the son served as a commander of the Apodeti forces that took part in the October 1975 attack on Balibo in which five foreign journalists were killed.⁷¹

But while Indonesian strategy relied on local power holders, as the Portuguese had done, there were important differences in the Indonesian approach, stemming mainly from distinctive features of its military and political strategy. Most importantly, the purpose of the militias at this stage was not so much military as political. The creation of local militias in 1974–75 was part of a covert operation called *Operasi Komodo*, designed to prepare the ground for an Indonesian takeover of East Timor. Within this operation, the role of the militias was primarily to provide political cover for a military intervention by regular Indonesian troops.⁷² While some of the militias were in fact pro-integration Timorese from Apodeti and UDT, most were Indonesian soldiers dressed as Timorese, described as ‘volunteers’, and carrying letters to that effect.⁷³ The Timorese militia force was, in reality, nothing more than a deception.

The main purpose of the deception was to allow the Indonesian government to undertake military intervention in Portuguese Timor while maintaining the fiction that it was seriously pursuing a peaceful,

⁷⁰ Apart from the Gonçalves family, the key figures included Francisco Lopes da Cruz, a leader of the anti-communist UDT, who reappeared in the late 1990s as Indonesia's ambassador at large for East Timor.

⁷¹ Australian documents make clear how the *liurai* of Atsabe was being used by the Indonesian side. Reporting on a conversation with an Indonesian government contact (Harry Tjan) the embassy wrote: ‘He said that up to 3800 Indonesian soldiers from Java would be put in Portuguese Timor gradually. Atsabe would be their base. The King [*liurai*] would be the figure-head for the anti-Fretilin side.’ Cablegram to Canberra, 30 September 1975, Document 246 in Wendy Way (ed.), *Documents*.

⁷² An Australian embassy report records that an Indonesian government contact (Harry Tjan) explained that ‘They will replace some of the refugees forced across the border . . . with well armed “volunteers” who will provide backbone for UDT and other anti-Fretilin troops.’ Cablegram to Canberra, 6 September 1975, Document 217 in Wendy Way (ed.), *Documents*.

⁷³ As Australian Ambassador Woolcott reported to Canberra on the eve of the major military intervention in mid-October 1975: ‘General Murdani added that all the Indonesians involved would be “volunteers”. Each would have a signed document to this effect. Most would be ethnic Timorese.’ Cablegram to Jakarta, 15 October 1975, Document 265 in Wendy Way (ed.), *Documents*. An earlier cable likewise confirmed that ‘All Indonesian forces operating in Portuguese Timor will be dressed as members of the anti-Fretilin force.’ Cablegram to Canberra, 15 October 1975, Document 262 in Wendy Way (ed.), *Documents*.

diplomatic solution.⁷⁴ The Timorese militias and ‘volunteers’, it was hoped, would provide the government with plausible deniability for an act of military aggression.⁷⁵ As an Australian embassy report explained in September 1975: ‘At this level Indonesia is seeking to keep the President “clean” and to ensure that Indonesia’s international standing is threatened as little as possible.’⁷⁶

The operation, set in motion in October 1974, was led by General Ali Murtopo, then deputy head of the intelligence agency, *Bakin*,⁷⁷ but best known as a master of covert operations and dirty tricks under the auspices of the ‘Special Operations’ outfit known as *Opsus*.⁷⁸ By September 1975, the head of military intelligence, Benjamin Murdani, was also closely involved in the East Timor operation, but it was clear that this was still an *Opsus* plan.⁷⁹ It was probably no coincidence that the operation bore striking similarities to one Murtopo had orchestrated in 1968 to wrest West Irian from Dutch control. Known as the ‘Act of Free Choice’, that operation had involved the deployment of ‘volunteers’ to create the illusion that the local population was demanding integration with Indonesia. Summarizing what Indonesian contacts described in June 1975 as their ‘elegant’ plan to get Portuguese Timor to join Indonesia, Australian Ambassador Woolcott wrote:

⁷⁴ A report from the Australian embassy in Jakarta summarized the Indonesian strategy as follows: ‘On one level a covert operation is under way to secure incorporation of Timor into Indonesia with which the President and Acting Foreign Minister will not be publicly associated On another level the semi-public, diplomatic approach for accommodation continues.’ Cablegram to Canberra, 10 September 1975, Document 221 in Wendy Way (ed.), *Documents*.

⁷⁵ As the Australian embassy noted in a cable to Canberra: ‘The President’s policy will be to deny any reports of the presence of Indonesian forces in Portuguese Timor. . . . It is possible that they will be said to be “volunteers” or “Timorese deserters” acting in response to UDT/APODETI calls for assistance.’ Cablegram to Canberra, 15 October 1975, Document 262 in Wendy Way (ed.), *Documents*.

⁷⁶ Cablegram to Canberra, 10 September 1975, Document 221 in Wendy Way (ed.), *Documents*.

⁷⁷ *Bakin* (*Badan Koordinasi Intelijen Nasional*, Strategic Intelligence Coordinating Body), an ostensibly civilian intelligence body, was set up in 1968. In 1975, it was headed by General Yoga Sugama. See Tanter, ‘The totalitarian ambition’, p. 229.

⁷⁸ *Opsus* was set up in 1963, but it gained a reputation for the use of dirty tricks – such as provocation, infiltration, and assassination – only during the New Order. See Hamish McDonald, *Suharto’s Indonesia*. Blackburn, Victoria: Fontana, 1980, chapter 9. Among his achievements, Cribb writes, General Murtopo successfully ‘managed’ the national elections of 1977 and 1982, in part through the ‘effective deployment of men of violence and agents provocateurs’. Cribb, ‘From Petrus to Ninja’, p. 189.

⁷⁹ Murdani’s role, and the fact that this was an *Opsus* plan, are both made clear in Australian embassy reporting. See, for example, Cablegram to Canberra, 6 September 1975, Document 217 in Wendy Way (ed.), *Documents*. In 1983 Murdani took Murtopo’s place as Suharto’s most trusted political manager.

Indonesia's covert activities in Portuguese Timor will be stepped up, as will the training of APODETI leaders. 'Refugees' are being prepared at Atambua to return to Portuguese Timor to play their part in persuading people to support integration. In short, Indonesia hopes to repeat the success achieved in the West Irian act of free choice.⁸⁰

The similarities between the *Opsus* operation in Portuguese Timor and the earlier operation in West Irian highlight the role of the armed forces as an institutional channel along which military strategies – including the use of militias – travelled from one theatre of operations to another. It also draws attention to the role of particular officers as key agents or vectors of such transfers.

Even after the massive invasion of December 1975, Indonesian officials maintained the pretence that the forces involved were simply 'volunteers' and local 'anti-Fretilin' fighters. The acknowledgement that there were in fact thousands of regular Indonesian troops in the territory came only after East Timor had been formally declared an Indonesian province in July 1976. Once their essentially political purpose had been served, the militias began to be regrouped and organized to perform more conventional militia functions, as guards, auxiliaries, and so on. An Australian embassy official who visited East Timor in mid-1976, reported some of the first evidence of this militia mobilization:

Indonesian 'volunteers' in charge of these groups drilled them in military fashion. (A platoon of men in traditional costume in Viqueque drilled with some precision using wooden rifles capped with Indonesian flags.) Light blue uniformed 'partisans' – ex-Apodeti and UDT soldiers – acted as guards and controlled crowds. They formed a Timorese militia force.⁸¹

With the start of a major new military campaign in September 1977, the Indonesian army began even more energetically to recruit local people to fight on their side. Following the model of 1965, thousands of ordinary Timorese were now conscripted to join military operations against the pro-independence group Fretilin which, again evoking 1965, the Indonesian authorities portrayed as 'communists'.⁸²

⁸⁰ Dispatch to Willesee, 2 June 1975, Document 137 in Wendy Way (ed.), *Documents*.

⁸¹ Report by Taylor, 21 May 1976, Document 450 in Wendy Way (ed.), *Documents*.

⁸² George Aditjondro, one of the few Indonesian scholars to pay any serious attention to East Timor before the 1990s, writes: 'Even back in the 1970s, Indonesian troops already relied on East Timorese scouts, some of whom belonged to the anticommunist pro-independence party UDT, or were former Portuguese soldiers, to track down the guerrillas in their hiding places in the mountains'. George J. Aditjondro, 'Ninjas, Nanggalas, monuments and Mossad manuals', in Jeffrey A. Sluka, (ed.), *Death squad: the Anthropology of State Terror*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000, p. 165.

Eyewitness accounts from this period describe villagers being forced at gunpoint to beat, or to kill, other members of their community.⁸³ In a letter sent in November 1977, a priest wrote that the Timorese ‘are being recruited to fight their brothers in the jungle. It is they who march in front of the [Indonesian] battalions to intimidate their targets.’⁸⁴ He may well have been referring to the so-called ‘fence of legs’ tactic, in which hundreds of civilians were forced to form a line and march for days through forests and up mountains ahead of Indonesian soldiers, in order to flush out guerrilla fighters.⁸⁵ Others who witnessed such an operation described it as the ‘mass mobilization of citizens to make war on each other’.⁸⁶

As noted above, the tactic had been used in the army’s campaign against *Darul Islam* rebels in the early 1950s, but it was used more widely and with more devastating effect in the anti-communist purges of 1965. After its successful use in 1965 and in East Timor, moreover, the ‘fence of legs’ tactic was made an essential component of virtually every other counter-insurgency campaign in Indonesia, notably those in Aceh and in West Irian. Here again we see the legacy of the past, particularly of 1965, and also the geographical mobility of the militia model through the agency of the military.

So began the shift away from what may be called the ‘traditional’ pattern in East Timor – in which militias were mobilized primarily through *liurai*, and maintained a degree of local autonomy – in the direction of a more bureaucratized arrangement, shaped by modern Indonesian counter-insurgency doctrine and by the experience of 1965. Semi-permanent militia forces were now to be spread throughout the entire territory, a certain number in every village and town; and they were to be tightly controlled not by *liurai* but by Indonesian military officers and other government officials, with nominal support from village and district heads.⁸⁷

⁸³ See the testimonies in Turner, (ed.), *Telling East Timor*, especially part III.

⁸⁴ Cited in Dunn, *Timor*, p. 276.

⁸⁵ The ‘fence of legs’ strategy is known to have been used in East Timor as early as 1981. But given this description from 1977 it seems likely that it was used even earlier. Use of this tactic is described, complete with diagrams, in one of the secret army documents discussed below. See, Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, ‘Prosedur Tetap Tentang Razia Daerah Pemukiman’ (*Protap/01-A/VII/1982*) p. 3. For a detailed description of these operations in English, see John Taylor, *Indonesia’s Forgotten War: The Hidden History of East Timor*. London: Zed Books, 1991, pp. 117–118 and 161.

⁸⁶ Cited in Taylor, *Indonesia’s Forgotten War*, p. 117.

⁸⁷ The key military authorities were, in rank order: the Resort Military Commander

Secret army documents from 1982 provide important details on the nature of these militia units and their role in the army's counter-insurgency strategy.⁸⁸ As the auxiliary formations continued to exist and to function for most of the next two decades, and were one of the bases or models on which the 1999 militias were formed, it is important to look in some detail at how they were organized, and what they were expected to do.

The 1982 documents make clear that an essential starting point for Indonesian military strategy in East Timor was the doctrine of 'total people's defence'.⁸⁹ They also show that, in practice, this meant that East Timorese could expect to be called upon to fight 'the enemy' at a moment's notice.⁹⁰ In addition to formally constituted auxiliaries, discussed below, most operational military plans indicated that, when necessary, ordinary people armed with knives, swords, and spears would also be called up. A document outlining security arrangements for the district of Baucau, for example, notes that 'in the event of danger, ordinary citizens armed with spears and swords will be gathered at a designated place in their respective villages'.⁹¹

While important in theory, the military paid less attention to these informal popular forces than to a variety of formal auxiliary forces. Most local conscripts and 'volunteers' were grouped into two distinct, but related, official bodies – *Hansip* and *Ratih* – and the role of each in eliminating the enemy was carefully spelt out. Both were village-based

(*Danrem*), the District Military Commander (*Dandim*), the Sub-District Military Commander (*Danramil*), and the Village-Level NCO (*Babinsa*). In especially 'troubled' villages, the *Babinsa* was replaced by a 'Village Guidance Team' (*Team Pembina Desa*) dominated by military figures. See, Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Desa sebagai Titik Pusat Perhatian dan Cara Membinanya Secara Utuh' (*Juknis 01-A/IV/1982*).

⁸⁸ The eight documents in question were prepared by the Intelligence Section of the Resort Military Command (*Korem*) for East Timor, and signed by the *Korem* commander, Colonel Rajagukguk, or by the Chief of Intelligence for East Timor, Major William da Costa.

⁸⁹ After referring explicitly to this doctrine, one document states grandly: 'Thus, at root, it is the whole populace that serves as resisters of the enemy.' See, Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Rencana Penyusunan Kembali Rakyat Terlatih', 1982, p. 2.

⁹⁰ One document provides a detailed profile of a village (Bualale), noting: 'Apart from the official auxiliary forces (*Hansip/Wanra* and *Ratih*) there are about 50 people who can be called up as needed.' See, Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Desa' (*Juknis/01-A/IV/1982*).

⁹¹ Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Sistem Keamanan Kota dan Daerah Pemukiman' (*Juknis/05/I/1982*), p. 5.

auxiliary units, designed to assist the armed forces in detecting and combatting the enemy. Both were organized along military lines, divided into companies, platoons, and teams, and were 'guided' by an assortment of military figures, including the Sub-District Military Commander (*Danramil*), soldiers from the all-East Timorese Battalion 745, and representatives of the powerful intelligence outfit, SGI (*Satuan Tugas Intelijen*, Intelligence Task Force).⁹² Members of both were to be stationed at military command posts, so that they would be ready for deployment at short notice.⁹³

The most basic organized units were the *Ratih* (*Rakyat Terlatih*, Trained Populace). *Ratih* recruits received rudimentary military training, with an emphasis on discipline and ideology, and although the village head was usually their formal commander, they were in reality controlled by military officers.⁹⁴ Their prescribed role was 'to conduct patrols and reconnaissance outside the town, and to be ready to be deployed for combat on short notice'.⁹⁵ *Ratih* members did not receive compensation except when they went on patrol, and when they did receive something, it was seldom more than some poor quality corn.⁹⁶ Numbers varied, depending on the size of a village and on the army's assessment of the security situation there, but the army documents indicate that in 1982 most villages had one or two *Ratih* platoons. In the district of Baucau alone there were 2,392 *Ratih* members.⁹⁷ Multiplied by thirteen, the number of districts in East Timor, we can estimate that, in 1982, there were some 31,000 *Ratih* in the territory.⁹⁸

⁹² The presence of SGI and of Battalion 745 soldiers is mentioned in: Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Desa' (*Juknis/01-A/IV/1982*), pp. 6–7.

⁹³ Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Sistem Keamanan Kota dan Daerah Pemukiman' (*Juknis/05/I/1982*), p. 4.

⁹⁴ Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Rencana Penyusunan Kembali Rakyat Terlatih' pp. 2 and 6.

⁹⁵ Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Sistem Keamanan Kota dan Daerah Pemukiman' (*Juknis/05/I/1982*), p. 5.

⁹⁶ Some funding for *Ratih* compensation came from the *Korem*, through the *Kodim*, but it was apparently nowhere near enough: therefore payment usually depended on the capacity of each local military commander. See Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Rencana Penyusunan Kembali Rakyat Terlatih', p. 4. Also see Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Kegiatan Babinsa/Team Pembina Desa Dalam Rangka Penyembangan dan Penyusutan Kekuatan Perlawanan Rakyat Terlatih' (*Juknis/06/IV/1982*), pp. 1, 5.

⁹⁷ Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Rencana Penyusunan Kembali Rakyat Terlatih', p. 3.

⁹⁸ The village of Bualale, for example, had 'ten *Hansip/Wanra*, with seven guns, and one Platoon of *Ratih*, with ten guns'. See, Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Desa' (*Juknis/01-A/IV/1982*), p. 5.

One step up in the militia hierarchy were the *Hansip* (*Pertahanan Sipil*, Civil Defence).⁹⁹ Recruited from the more promising *Ratih* members, they received somewhat more intensive military training, typically carried firearms, and performed a variety of combat-related functions, including reconnaissance. Unlike the *Ratih*, they received regular compensation, in cash and kind. In 1982, the standard compensation for a *Hansip* member was 33 kilos of rice and Rp.11,500 per month, paid out by the armed forces.¹⁰⁰ By 1982, *Hansip* units had reportedly been established in every village, but there tended to be somewhat fewer of them than the *Ratih*. In the district of Baucau, for example, the total number of *Hansip* in 1982 was 520.¹⁰¹ Thus, for the territory as a whole, a reasonable estimate would be roughly 6,700.

In addition to these basic auxiliary forces, the army also established a number of more highly trained paramilitary units, drawn from the most promising local recruits. These élite units performed important reconnaissance, intelligence, and combat roles, but they also took part in special operations, including assassinations. Formally coordinated at the level of the District Military Command, they had close ties with, and often operated alongside, the élite counter-insurgency force, *Kopassus* – and in particular the so-called *Nanggala*, a name that Timorese came to associate with the very worst experiences of the occupation.¹⁰² Also sharing close ties with *Kopassus* and other army units were individual East Timorese, some of them boys as young as twelve years, who were brought along on combat missions at the request of a military unit. Officially dubbed *TBO* (*Tenaga Bantuan Operasi*), these young men provided the same sort of invaluable service as the boy 'guides' or *criados* who operated alongside Australian forces during the Second World War.¹⁰³

The use of local people to assist in pacification had some obvious

⁹⁹ *Hansip* was in fact further divided into two sections, one of which (*Kamra*) served as a police auxiliary, while the other (*Wanra*) served with the army, air force, and navy. In practice, *Wanra* were by far the most important, so that the terms *Wanra* and *Hansip* came to be used interchangeably.

¹⁰⁰ Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Kegiatan Babinsa' (*Juknis/06/IV/1982*), p. 1.

¹⁰¹ Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Rencana Penyusunan Kembali Rakyat Terlatih', p. 6.

¹⁰² The *Nanggala* were special *Kopassus* units, set up in the late 1970s. A unit called *Nanggala 28*, commanded by a young Prabowo Subianto, was responsible for killing Fretilin commander, Nicolau Lobato, in December 1978.

¹⁰³ On TBOs see, Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Kegiatan Babinsa' (*Juknis /06/IV/1982*), p. 9.

military and political advantages. Unlike most Indonesian soldiers, they knew the terrain and the language, extremely important qualities in fighting a counter-insurgency war. Moreover, they cost little to maintain while alive, and did not require much in the way of compensation when they were killed or wounded.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, they allowed the Indonesian army to pretend that it was not, in fact, an invading or occupying army. But the strategy also had serious drawbacks, reminiscent of Portuguese problems with their *moradores*. Most pressing was the problem of disloyalty, a subject to which the 1982 army documents repeatedly return.¹⁰⁵ One document states plainly that there was always a danger that the local auxiliaries might use their guns against Indonesians, and suggests strategies for minimizing that possibility.¹⁰⁶ Another speaks directly about the problem of desertion, and spells out plans for the reform of the militia forces in order to overcome it.¹⁰⁷

Notwithstanding these problems, the network of militia organizations formed in the early 1980s – the village-based auxiliaries, the élite paramilitaries, and the TBOs – came to form an essential bulwark in the Indonesian occupation and counter-insurgency campaign for the next two decades. The *Hansip* and *Ratih* infrastructure continued to function throughout this period, and provided the model for the basic repertoire of training, marching, and patrolling that were common elements throughout the territory in 1999. Moreover, many of the militia

¹⁰⁴ The procedures to be followed in the event of the death of, or injury to an auxiliary member are spelt out in extraordinary detail in Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Kegiatan Babinsa' (*Juknis/06/IV/1982*). The procedures are eloquent testimony to the increasing bureaucratization of Indonesia's military and militia strategy in East Timor.

¹⁰⁵ The danger was surely compounded by the army's practice of recruiting former Fretilin guerrillas and political detainees to serve in these auxiliaries. See Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Cara Mengamankan Masyarakat Dari Pengaruh Propaganda GPK' (*Juknis/04-B/IV/1982*), pp. 3–4.

¹⁰⁶ 'In general [the auxiliary forces] carry arms and so constitute a real armed force. In order to ensure that this force is truly directed at the intended target . . . constant guidance is essential. Without such guidance, the weapons in question could well be misused . . . [and] could even boomerang and be used against the People and ABRI.' Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Kegiatan Babinsa' (*Juknis/06/IV/1982*), pp. 7–8.

¹⁰⁷ Among the strategies proposed were the designation of a network of informers (one for every 10–15 families); the establishment of inspection posts at the entrance of every village; and the requirement that anyone entering or leaving a village be in possession of a 'travel document' (*surat jalan*). See Korem 164/Wira Dharma, Seksi Intel, 'Petunjuk Tehnis tentang Cara Mengamankan Masyarakat' (*Juknis/04-B/IV/1982*).

units that seemed to appear out of nowhere in 1999 – including *Rajawali*, *Makikit*, *Saka*, *Sera*, *Partisan*, *Combat*, *1959/75 Junior*, *Team Alfa*, and *Railakang* – were in fact the remnants of much older paramilitary outfits that had been set up from the late 1970s and had continued to function in the intervening years. Likewise, at least some of the militia members and leaders in 1999 were former TBOs with long and close attachments to Indonesian army officers and units.

The importance of such historical and personal links was epitomized by the career path of Joanico Cesario, one of the four main militia commanders in 1999.¹⁰⁸ Cesario had been involved with the Indonesian armed forces for at least two decades when the militia mobilization began in late 1998. As a boy he had lost his father in the war, and was attracted very early on to the impressive soldiers who clearly ran the show in his village. Before long he had volunteered to serve in an auxiliary force organized by *Kopassus*. By his own account, the *Kopassus* soldiers were good to him, took him on helicopter rides, allowed him to join them on patrol, and so on. Eventually he was rewarded by being made commander of a *Kopassus* auxiliary force called *Saka*, based in Baucau. And when the militias were reorganized in early 1999, he was designated as commander of all militia forces in the entire eastern sector, giving him command over some of the oldest militia groups in the territory, such as *Saka*, *Sera*, *Rajawali*, *Makikit*, and *Team Alpha*.¹⁰⁹

The history of the Indonesian invasion and occupation may also provide clues to the uneven pattern of militia activity and violence in 1999 noted earlier. One explanation is that, as a result of the strategy adopted in 1974–75, the western districts had a reliable network of pro-Indonesian power brokers in place long before 1999, who could be relied upon to mobilize substantial forces at relatively short notice. A case in point was João Tavares, the man designated in 1999 as the overall commander of the Pro-Integration Struggle Forces (*Pasukan Pejuang Integrasi* or PPI). Tavares had earned his stripes by fighting alongside Indonesian troops as early as 1975: in fact he had commanded UDT troops in the attack on Balibo in mid-October 1975. He was rewarded for his loyalty and service by being appointed for two terms as District

¹⁰⁸ The information in the following paragraph is based on several conversations with Joanico Cesario between June and August 1999.

¹⁰⁹ In 1999 Joanico's business card bore the *Kopassus* emblem, and identified him as 'Dan Ki Sus Pusaka', which probably stands for 'Commander of Kopassus Company Pusaka'.

Head of Bobonaro.¹¹⁰ He was also able to amass substantial landholdings, making him one of the largest landlords in the territory, after President Suharto and his cronies. By 1999, then, Tavares had long been a very powerful local operator, and he was only one of several in the western districts who could be relied upon to organize pro-integration militias and activities.

Thus, just as the Portuguese period left a legacy of practices and norms that reappeared in 1999, so the Indonesian occupation introduced models that powerfully influenced the style and organization of the later militia formations. Most of those models appear to have been introduced by Indonesian military officers, particularly those with experience in crushing the PKI in 1965, and in conducting dirty-tricks campaigns in other parts of the country. As in Portuguese times, there was a discernible political logic to the Indonesian deployment of militias. They were cheap, they were useful, they provided plausible deniability for acts of violence committed by soldiers, and they helped to establish bonds of loyalty with the occupying forces.

Nevertheless, these were not the only models for the militias that emerged in 1999, nor would the political logic of these early years remain unchanged. Indeed, in their organization, their rhetoric, and their repertoire, some of the militias in East Timor in 1999 were closer to those that arose elsewhere in Indonesia, notably in Aceh in the early 1990s. The similarities with Aceh's militias are so striking that it is tempting to see the latter as a model for some of the groups that emerged in East Timor a decade later. But the similarities also suggest that, apart from the possibility of borrowing, there may have been similar political forces at work in both places. An examination of the militia phenomenon in Aceh, then, may provide some additional clues to the emergence of modern militias in East Timor, and at the same time shed light on the general political conditions in which militias emerge and take the forms that they do.

Militias in Aceh, 1989–93

We do not have anything like the level of detail about Aceh as we have for East Timor in 1999, but the available evidence suggests that the relationships between the militias and the authorities were similar in

¹¹⁰ Dunn writes that, after the formal 'integration' of East Timor in 1976, 'trusted Timorese, such as João Tavares and Tomás Gonçalves were appointed bupatis'. Dunn, *Timor*, p. 266.

both places. Like the militias in East Timor in 1999, those in Aceh were ostensibly spontaneous groups established by concerned civilians, but it was clear that they were deliberately organized, trained, and supplied by military authorities, with assistance from civilian authorities. The evidence of official backing came in a variety of forms.

First, there was the matter of timing. Militia units began to appear in a serious way only after the Indonesian armed forces began counter-insurgency operations there in mid-1989. Whereas there had been perhaps one or two militia groups in 1989, by 1991, authorities estimated that tens of thousands of men had joined such units.¹¹¹ Second, there were clues in the militia names, and in the rhetoric they used. Like those in East Timor, the Acehnese militias bore names reflecting the ideological preoccupations of the armed forces, and were reminiscent of the *lasykar* units of the National Revolution.¹¹² They included groups such as the *Unit Ksatria Penegak Pancasila* (Noble Warriors for Upholding Pancasila), *Bela Negara* (Defend the Nation), *Pemuda Keamanan Desa* (Village Security Youth), and *Lasykar Rakyat* (People's Militia).

The activities of the militias in Aceh – their repertoires of violence – also reflected the nature of their relationship with military authorities. Recruits received basic military training and, after being armed with knives, spears, machetes, and sometimes firearms, they were urged to ‘hunt’ *Aceh Merdeka* supporters. As in East Timor, the forms of violence used by the militias included house burning, rock throwing, the public display of corpses, the parading of heads on stakes, and rape.

It is noteworthy that the militias in Aceh were also compelled to take part in the same ‘fence of legs’ operations that had been used in East Timor, in which ‘ordinary villagers were compelled to sweep through an area ahead of armed troops, in order both to flush out rebels and to inhibit them from returning fire’.¹¹³ The idea behind the strategy was succinctly stated by Colonel Syarwan Hamid in 1991, then head of the Military Operations Command for Aceh: ‘The youths are the front line. They know best who the [terrorists] are. We then settle the matter.’¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ In mid-1991, the Governor of Aceh, Ibrahim Hasan, estimated that some 60,000 people had been mobilized into militia groups. Timothy Kell, *Roots of Acehnese Rebellion*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, 1995, p. 75.

¹¹² On the Japanese and revolutionary periods in Aceh, see Anthony Reid, *Blood of the People: Revolution and the End of Traditional Rule in North Sumatra*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979.

¹¹³ Amnesty International, *Shock Therapy: Restoring Order in Aceh, 1989–1993*. London, 1993, p. 12. The ‘fence of legs’ tactic was reported again in 1997, with the start of a new military offensive in Aceh. See *Tapol*, 143, October 1997, p. 17.

¹¹⁴ *Kompas*, 11 July 1991.

The mobilization of militias was part of a familiar Indonesian military strategy of mobilizing the entire civilian population against the ‘enemy’. As they had done in East Timor, and during the anti-communist campaign in 1965–66, military authorities in Aceh organized mass rallies at which civilians were exhorted to swear an oath that they would ‘crush the terrorists until there is nothing left of them’.¹¹⁵ The failure to participate in such campaigns – or to demonstrate a sufficient commitment to crushing the enemy by identifying, capturing, or killing alleged rebels – could result in punishment, and sometimes public torture and execution.¹¹⁶

Also widely used in Aceh, and with similar consequences for local communities, were military-led campaigns encouraging all civilians to spy upon, turn in, or kill any suspected member of an alleged enemy group. In November 1990, for example, the Regional Military Commander, Major General R. Pramono, said:

I have told the community, if you find a terrorist, kill him. There’s no need to investigate him. Don’t let people be the victims. If they don’t do as you order them, shoot them on the spot, or butcher them. I tell members of the community to carry sharp weapons, a machete or whatever. If you meet a terrorist, kill him.¹¹⁷

These familiar repertoires of militia violence in Aceh, and their association with the equally familiar strategy of civil-military cooperation, serve to highlight the fact that the practices employed in one operational theatre are often modelled on those previously tried in other parts of the country. While some of the methods used in Aceh date back to the Revolutionary period, and perhaps further, many may be traced directly to the massacres of 1965, to the early military campaigns in East Timor, and to the *Petrus* ‘anti-crime campaign’ of the mid-1980s, described in greater detail below.

And yet the more intriguing, and difficult, question is why the militias that arose in Aceh in 1989 bore such striking similarities to those that appeared ten years later in East Timor. Was this simply a matter of the replication of a model that had proved successful in a different operational theatre? Or were there some deeper similarities in the political or military context in each case that may help to explain the parallels?

¹¹⁵ Amnesty International, *Shock Therapy*, pp. 13–14.

¹¹⁶ Confidential interviews with Acehnese refugees in Malaysia, October 1991; and Amnesty International, *Shock Therapy*, p. 13.

¹¹⁷ From an interview with Major General R. Pramono, *Tempo*, 17 November 1990; translation as cited in Joint Publications Research Service, 16 December 1990.

The most obvious similarity between Aceh in 1989 and East Timor in 1999 is that the armed forces faced in each situation what they believed or claimed to be a serious threat to the integrity of the state. The mobilization of militia forces arguably represents a standard military response to such threats, shaped by military doctrine. In view of the growing international and domestic criticism of human rights abuses by the Indonesian armed forces at this time, the use of militias would also have provided a useful cover for the anticipated violence and inevitable human rights violations – that is, a basis for plausible deniability.

This is undoubtedly part of the story: but there is another part that has less to do with formal doctrine, or with political calculations of deniability, and more to do with the military's relationship with local power brokers. Writing in 1992, the editors of the journal *Indonesia* provided a hint of what that relationship entailed. They postulated that lower- and middle-ranking military men of middle age might be involved in 'local mafias' in various parts of the country. Such mafias, they said, also included local civilian power brokers, businessmen, and an assortment of criminals. The interests of these local mafias, they suggested, were at odds with those of power brokers at the 'centre', and the tension between the two groups explained much of the violence and political conflict in places like Aceh and East Timor.¹¹⁸

There is undoubtedly some truth in this analysis, but by identifying the mafias as 'local' and counter-posing them to a homogenous 'centre', the editors may have misled us slightly. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that there was probably more than one 'mafia' in Aceh – a local one perhaps, as the editors surmised, and another that was not really local at all. On the contrary, the second mafia seems to have had very powerful patrons at the centre, including the president and key military officers. And it was arguably because of that powerful patronage that such extraordinary military resources were deployed to the area in 1989, and remained there for more than a decade.¹¹⁹

If this analysis is correct, then the counter-insurgency campaign that began in Aceh in 1989 may be understood as an attempt by this 'central' mafia to assert its control in the face of a local challenge. In this context,

¹¹⁸ The Editors, 'Current data on the Indonesia military elite: July 1, 1989–January 1, 1992', *Indonesia*, 53, April 1992.

¹¹⁹ Indeed, as Ruth McVey has suggested, this group was so powerful and so closely tied to formal centres of power, that 'mafia' may not be the right term. Unable to think of a better term, however, I have decided to stick with mafia here.

the mobilization of militias, such as those just described, might be seen as a way to ensure that the young men who were potential recruits for, or were already members of, local gangs would be safely brought under central control and patronage. In other words, whatever else it may have achieved, the mobilization of militias was arguably a mechanism to ensure and maintain control of young men, not just to keep them out of the rebel movement (which at that stage was still very small) but to keep them out of the hands of a local mafia.

Far from bringing an end to criminality, the decade-long military campaign in Aceh actually created a perfect opportunity for the emergence, through the 1990s, of a new and improved 'central' mafia, dominated by *Kopassus*. Ten years on, that mafia made use of locally-recruited militias not so much for the purpose of fighting the insurgency but to preserve its political and economic dominance in the area. Thus, when *Kopassus* was ordered to leave the area in 1998, it was a local militia group – *Pemuda Keamanan Desa* – that came to its assistance, by staging a violent demonstration that provided the pretext for a continued *Kopassus* presence.¹²⁰

In short, in addition to showing that militia organization and repertoire were transferred between theatres of operation, the case of Aceh points to the more general conditions in which militias may emerge. The most obvious condition is the existence of a national security doctrine that stipulates the deployment of such local auxiliary forces where there is a real or claimed threat to the integrity of the state. A second is the need for deniability in the face of domestic and international scrutiny. A less obvious, but perhaps equally important, condition is the existence of links between the military and criminal networks, which provide both the manpower essential for the formation of a militia force and a variety of motivations for mobilizing them. It remains to be seen whether evidence from East Timor in the final years of the New Order supports these propositions, or suggests new ones.

East Timor's militias in the late New Order

It would be another ten years before militias like those which arose in Aceh in 1989 would appear in East Timor. In the interim, a rather different sort of group – more like death squads than citizens' auxiliaries – began

¹²⁰ Geoffrey Robinson, 'Rawan is as Rawan does: the origins of disorder in New Order Aceh', *Indonesia*, 66, October 1998, pp. 137, 151.

to make its presence felt in East Timor. Despite the differences, however, these new groups and their successors would come to constitute an important basis for the militias of 1999. They also bore remarkable similarities to the death squads and agents provocateurs that appeared in parts of Java in 1998–99.¹²¹ Their history therefore helps to elucidate further the historical origins of East Timor's modern militias, and perhaps also the conditions for the growth of militias more generally.

The best known manifestations of the new type in East Timor were the so-called *Ninja* gangs, first reported abroad in 1991, but very likely in existence a year or two before that.¹²² Also known locally as *Buffo* (the Portuguese word for 'clown'), these gangs roamed the streets at night, dressed in black, their heads covered with dark balaclavas, harassing, kidnapping, and sometimes killing supporters of independence, leaving their dead bodies in public places. For Indonesians, and probably for East Timorese, the *Ninjas* evoked memories of the terrifying state-sponsored killing of at least 5,000 alleged petty criminals in the mid-1980s in Indonesia, known by the acronym *Petrus* (*penembakan misterius*, or 'mysterious shootings').¹²³ Those executions were often carried out by men in plain clothes and balaclavas, and the victims' bodies were usually left in full public view. At the time, officials denied government responsibility. Yet in 1989 President Suharto boasted in his memoirs that the killings had been deliberate government policy – a form of 'shock therapy' to bring crime under control.

A document from the East Timorese resistance, dated October 1991, makes it clear that the similarities between the *Ninja* squads and *Petrus* were no coincidence. It refers to the existence of three separate vigilante groups, all of them made up of East Timorese but organized by Indonesian military intelligence. These were: the *Regu Gelap* (Black Squad), the *Regu Railakan* (Flash Squad), and the *Regu Ninja/Petrus* (*Ninja/Petrus* Squad).¹²⁴

¹²¹ On the death squads of the late 1990s, see Cribb, 'From Petrus to Ninjas'.

¹²² Circumstantial evidence suggests that they emerged in the late 1980s, when Abilio Osorio Soares, the Apodeti leader and future governor with close links to Prabowo, was the Mayor of Dili.

¹²³ On the *Petrus* killings, see David Bouchier, 'Crime, law and authority in Indonesia', in Arief Budiman (ed.), *State and Civil Society in Indonesia*. Clayton, Victoria: Monash University, Papers on Southeast Asia, 22, 1990, pp. 177–211. The exact number of victims has been impossible to ascertain, but Cribb writes that 'it certainly seems safe to suggest that the figure lies between 5,000 and 10,000'. 'From Petrus to Ninja', p. 191.

¹²⁴ The document is entitled 'Planos do IN [Intelligence] Para Contrabalançar ou Manobrar a Situação Política Durante a Vinda do Parlamento Português a Timor Leste'.

According to this document, which described Indonesian intelligence plans for the aborted Portuguese visit of late October 1991, each group had a slightly different composition and was designed to perform a distinct function. The Black Squad was composed of surrendered or captured ex-guerillas, and its objective was 'to capture or execute Xanana Gusmão', the leader of the armed resistance. Members of the Flash Squad were 'usually illiterate young people . . . trained to threaten and terrify people as well as provoke riots'. Finally, the *Ninja/Petrus* Squad was described as a group of masked East Timorese whose job was to 'threaten, terrify and torture people without being recognised . . . [and to] carry out mysterious executions'. The *Ninja/Petrus* Squad was said to be well supplied 'with automatic pistols, broadcast and receiver equipment, night binoculars, hidden tape-recorders and cameras with automatic lenses . . . as well as knives, axes and other sharp and cutting instruments which they use to break into East Timorese houses during the night'.

Despite official claims that the *Ninjas* and *Buffos* were nothing more than disgruntled local youths engaged in random acts of criminality, this evidence – together with the clear similarities with the *Petrus* squads of the mid-1980s – indicates that something more systematic was at work. Likewise, the appearance of death squads, also called *Ninjas*, in parts of Java in 1998–99 seems more than coincidental.¹²⁵ At the very least, the emergence of these death squad formations at different times and in different locales, and the remarkable similarities among them, attests to the mobility of certain models of militia violence.

But the appearance of *Ninjas* in East Timor in the early 1990s also seems to have been part of a strategic response, evidently developed by *Kopassus*, to two important political developments in East Timor in the late 1980s. The first was the emergence of a well-organized, pro-independence clandestine front, comprised mostly of students and operating mainly in the towns, but with close ties both to the armed resistance and to the outside world.¹²⁶ The second was Suharto's decision in 1988 to 'open' East Timor to foreign visitors for the first time since

¹²⁵ Cribb has correctly noted the strong similarities between the *Petrus* killings of the early 1980s and the *Ninja* killings of 1998–99 in East Java. Curiously, however, he fails to mention the clear parallels with the *Ninjas* and other death squads in East Timor and Aceh. See Cribb, 'From Petrus to Ninja', p. 193–194.

¹²⁶ For a glimpse of the underground resistance at this time, see Constancio Pinto and Matthew Jardine, *Inside the Timorese Resistance: East Timor's Unfinished Struggle*. Boston: South End Press, 1997. On the armed resistance, see Xanana Gusmão, *To Resist is to Win! The Autobiography of Xanana Gusmão*. Richmond, Victoria: Aurora Books, 2000.

1975, in order to prove that there was no problem there. The first of these developments suggested the need for a covert strategy designed to penetrate and disrupt the clandestine front, while the second dictated an approach that avoided open, or unprovoked, displays of force by regular troops.

A related explanation, offered by the editors of the journal *Indonesia* in 1992, is that the *Ninjas* and *Buffos* were the brainchild of a 'local mafia' of military and civilian officials with criminal connections, similar to the one described in Aceh.¹²⁷ According to this interpretation, the East Timor mafia created these vigilante groups on the basis of existing criminal networks, and used them to terrorize the pro-independence resistance, and as agents provocateurs. Among other things, the mafia was said to have infiltrated its vigilantes into a November 1991 procession to the Santa Cruz cemetery, in order to provoke an incident that could be used to justify a 'firm' military response.¹²⁸ In this regard, the previously cited description of Indonesian intelligence plans is revealing. It refers to two groups who were supposed to 'cause disorder, riots as well as threaten and terrify locals'. 'During a disorder or a riot', the document continues, 'it will be easy to identify and execute those who are against integration'.¹²⁹

Whether it was the work of provocateurs or not, the Santa Cruz massacre of 11 November 1991 did deal a terrible, if temporary, blow to the pro-independence movement. Apart from the estimated 270 who were killed, many young leaders of the underground resistance were jailed while others were compelled, sometimes under torture, to provide information to their captors. The massacre also led to some highly

¹²⁷ This local mafia included, among others, members of the old pro-integrationist political party, Apodeti, and its local military allies. To complicate matters, the mafia also established relations with their erstwhile enemies. Members of the East Timorese resistance claimed in 1989, for example, that much Fretilin military materiel had actually been bought from the Indonesian army; and that, over the years, army field commanders had worked out unofficial cease-fires with Fretilin in order to facilitate various kinds of economic transactions. Confidential interview with former Fretilin guerrilla, Lisbon, June 1989.

¹²⁸ This evidence includes the testimony of at least one East Timorese youth who claims to have been hired by the military to carry a grenade into the procession and to provoke just such an incident. Confidential communication from East Timor clandestine movement, January 1993. Also see The Editors, 'Current data on the Indonesia military elite', *Indonesia*, 53, April 1992, p. 99.

¹²⁹ 'Planos do IN [Intelligence] Para Contrabalançar ou Manobrar a Situação Política Durante a Vinda do Parlamento Português a Timor Leste'.

unusual disciplinary actions against military officers and soldiers.¹³⁰ Once the dust had cleared, this shake-up looked like a victory for the 'local mafia' that was believed to be behind the *Ninjas* and the *Buffos*.¹³¹ It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that after a brief lull there was a resumption in the activities of the vigilante groups and other militias, though they now began to operate under different names and to revert to ostensibly 'traditional' forms.

In the countryside, for example, the military set about reactivating and recasting its militia forces. In October 1993, an army spokesman announced that some 3,844 young East Timorese men had recently been sworn in as auxiliaries. Rather than calling them *Ratih* and *Hansip*, however, the spokesman referred to them as 'Traditional Forces' (*Pasukan Adat*).¹³² The decision to mobilize these auxiliaries, and the odd choice of name, may have been related to the fact that Indonesia was at the time under unusual international pressure to reduce its troop presence in East Timor, and also to show progress on the human rights front. No doubt some military strategist, or public relations expert, believed that the invocation of 'tradition' would provide a veneer of deniability, and cause less trouble in those circumstances.¹³³

But the real action was in the towns, and especially in Dili, where the underground resistance was regrouping. In early 1995, for example, there were reports that *Ninja* gangs were operating again. Amnesty International reported in February that groups 'referred to as "Ninja" gangs . . . have been roaming the streets at night, stoning and burning houses and attacking residents of Dili. Their primary objective seems to be to target pro-independence activists and to create an intensified atmosphere of fear for those opposed to Indonesian rule.'¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Following the recommendations of a Military Honour Council, a number of high-ranking officers were removed from their posts, while ten low-ranking soldiers and police were eventually tried for disciplinary offences. For details of the charges and sentencing, see Amnesty International, *Indonesia/East Timor: The Suppression of Dissent*, London, 1992.

¹³¹ For example, Governor Mario Carrascalão, who had been openly critical of the *Ninja*, was replaced in October 1992 by Abilio Osorio Soares, who had been Mayor of Dili in the late 1980s when the *Ninjas* first appeared in the city. A leader of Apodeti, and a long time ally of the Indonesian military, with especially close links to Prabowo Subianto, Soares may have been a member of the 'local mafia' but it was a mafia with very good connections at the centre. On Soares's family background and his early dealings with the Indonesians, see Cardoso, *The Crossing*, pp. 102–103.

¹³² *Tapol*, 120, December 1993, p. 20.

¹³³ A few months after the official announcement, Associated Press adopted the new line, identifying the victim of a Fretilin attack as an East Timorese who had 'led a local spear platoon against pro-independence fighters', *AP*, 24 January 1994.

¹³⁴ Amnesty International, Urgent Action 33/95, 13 February 1995.

Later the same year, a new pro-Indonesian group had emerged with many of the hall-marks of the earlier *Ninjas* – but now mixed with characteristics of the *preman* of Java and Sumatra. The new group was called *Garda Paksi* (*Garda Pemuda Penegak Integrasi*) or Youth Guard for Upholding Integration.¹³⁵ Like the *Ninjas*, members of *Garda Paksi* appeared to be drawn largely from unemployed East Timorese youth. Indeed, the pretext for their formation was that they would be given job training and assistance in finding employment, not only in East Timor but in Java.¹³⁶ Like the *Ninja*, and like the militias of Aceh and the *preman* of Java, *Garda Paksi* members and leaders also appear to have had links to criminal networks and to *Kopassus*.¹³⁷

Judging from its activities, *Garda Paksi's* assigned role appears to have been to infiltrate the underground resistance and to provoke disturbances among East Timorese. Dressed in black and armed with knives, its members terrorized Dili, throwing rocks, burning houses, setting up road-blocks, abducting and occasionally killing independence

¹³⁵ Aditjondro writes: 'East Timorese military-trained vigilante groups, initially known as ninjas but lately renamed and restructured as Garda Paksi.' George J. Aditjondro, 'Ninjas, Nanggalas, monuments and Mossad manuals', in Jeffrey A. Sluka, (ed.), *Death Squad: the Anthropology of State Terror*, p. 171.

¹³⁶ As early as 1992 dozens of unemployed East Timorese youth had been sent to Java for 'job training' programmes. Some were then forced to undergo military training at the Kopassus-run training complex in Cijantung, West Java, while others were simply left to their own devices. Many were followers, or fell under the influence of the prominent East Timorese underworld figure, Hercules, and became *preman* Jakarta. See Loren Ryter, 'Pemuda Pancasila; the last loyalists of Suharto's New Order?', *Indonesia*, 66, October 1998, p. 69; and Asia Watch, 'Deception and harassment of East Timorese workers', 15 May 1992.

¹³⁷ *Garda Paksi* is usually described as the brainchild of Prabowo. Aditjondro writes, for example: 'Major-General Prabowo Subianto . . . and his Red Berets [*Kopassus*] were seen as the protectors of these thugs, who operated openly in East Timor and Indonesia under the label of 'pro-integration' youth'. Aditjondro, 'Ninjas, Nanggalas, monuments and Mossad manuals', p. 172. However, the group could have been set up (or supported) by any number of powerful military officers. One candidate is Kiki Syahnakri, who became East Timor Military Commander in late 1994, just a few months before *Garda Paksi* appeared on the scene. His tour of duty was noted for a serious deterioration in the human rights situation. In response to a series of protests in Dili in November 1994, he reportedly said: 'We will not tolerate any more disturbances or demonstrations in East Timor. . . . If it happens again, the armed forces will not hesitate to cut them down, because we have pleaded with them enough and our patience has run out.' *Jawa Pos*, 1 December 1994. Syahnakri returned briefly to East Timor in early September 1999, as martial law commander.

activists.¹³⁸ *Garda Paksi* was in essence a gang of toughs similar to the *preman* of major towns and cities of Java and Sumatra. And, like the *preman*, its purposes were not by any stretch strictly criminal. As East Timor's Bishop, Carlos Ximenes Belo, remarked in 1996: 'The Governor has said [*Garda Paksi*] is for training purposes . . . but they are the ones who are always causing disturbances. . . . They are *Intel* agents.'¹³⁹ In this sense, *Garda Paksi* was simply one manifestation of a model that was characteristic of the final years of the New Order. Whether in Jakarta, Medan, or Dili, the presence of easily mobilized thugs had become an integral element of political life.

In fact, and perhaps not coincidentally, *Garda Paksi* was also the father of one of the most violent militia groups of 1999, *Aitarak*. Almost overnight, *Garda Paksi* disappeared and *Aitarak* emerged in its stead. The link between the two was personified by the career path of one of the most prominent of East Timor's militia leaders, Eurico Guterres. Between 1995 and 1998, he was leader of *Garda Paksi*. When the militias were mobilized in early 1999, he was rewarded for his loyalty by being made commander of *Aitarak*, and overall commander for all militias in the central sector. Guterres was without question one of the most obnoxious and volatile militia leaders around, and his style seems to have reflected his *preman* roots. These links were further emphasized by the fact that, after being flushed out of East Timor in 1999, Guterres moved to Java where he became a key figure in the *preman*-style youth movement of President Megawati's political party, the PDI-P.

But if the *Buffos*, *Ninjas*, and *Garda Paksi* were the closest ancestors of the new militias, they were hardly the only ones. As we have seen, the powerful military-civilian mafia of East Timor was able to draw on a long tradition of militia-type organizations, in order to organize an extensive mobilization at very short notice. In some areas, the militias were formed on the basis of older auxiliary units, such as the *Hansip*, the *Ratih*, and later the *Pasukan Adat*. In others, paramilitary outfits such as *Saka*, *Sera*, *Rajawali*, and *Partisan*, were ready-made for the purpose. Individuals who had served as TBOs with the Indonesian army

¹³⁸ See *Tapol*, 128, April 1995, p. 3.

¹³⁹ Cited in *Tapol*, 136, August 1996, p. 13. Later that year there were allegations that *Garda Paksi* was implicated in various plots against the Bishop, including one apparent assassination attempt in December 1996, shortly after the Bishop had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. For an account of that incident, see Amnesty International, Urgent Action 06/97, 8 January 1997.

were also a ready source of potential militia leaders and members. The result was a militia movement that in fact represented a mixture of 'traditional' armed forces, peoples' *lasykar*, vigilantes, and *preman* – an amalgam of influences dating in their origins from colonial times to the desperate, thug-filled final days of the New Order.

Some final thoughts

The militias that seemed to sprout like mushrooms in 1999 were neither spontaneous expressions of a timeless traditional pattern, as Indonesian officials have claimed, nor simply a modern-day fabrication of the Indonesian army, as critics have suggested. While it is certainly true that the militias received support from Indonesian authorities in 1999, their repertoires, technologies, and modes of organization borrowed heavily from models and antecedents deeply rooted in East Timorese and Indonesian history. They were shaped, moreover, by the political calculations, doctrines, and institutional make-up of a variety of states, and by evolving legal and normative systems.

Even a quick look at the historical record makes it clear that the militias of 1999 in East Timor drew upon antecedents dating from colonial, and even pre-colonial, times. Such borrowing was evident in their choice of weapons, such as swords, spears, and machetes; in their repertoires of violence, including house-burning, rock-throwing and rape; and in elements of their organization, especially the reliance on relatively small units grouped around local power-holders. That did not mean, however, that East Timor's modern militias were simply re-enacting an immutable tradition. On the contrary, the 'traditional' model on which they seemed to draw was, in important respects, a product of long interaction with Portuguese and Dutch colonial authorities. That was especially true of the custom of using local power-holders (*liurai*) to mobilize followers against other Timorese. It was also evident in the fetish for the flint-lock gun, introduced by Europeans in the 17th century; and in the revitalized 'tradition' of head-taking, a practice which seems to have surged in frequency, and brutality, during the Portuguese 'pacification' campaigns of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The militias of 1999 were also influenced by cultural models and historical antecedents imported from Indonesia, including: ideas of sexual potency commonly associated with the *jago*, the local enforcers of ancient and colonial Java; notions of patriotism associated with the *lasykar*, the freedom fighters of Indonesia's National Revolution; and the boorish

arrogance of the *preman*, the politically connected thugs whose influence became so pronounced in the late New Order. Probably more important, and not unrelated, were models rooted in modern Indonesian military doctrine and practice. The doctrine of ‘total people’s defence’, for example, laid the foundation upon which militia groups became part of the army’s standard counter-insurgency strategy, and were mobilized to make war on their fellow citizens. Likewise, the habits and norms of extreme brutality that spread and became institutionalized after the massacres of 1965–66 shaped military and militia behaviour everywhere. Finally, the militias in East Timor seem to have been modelled on the behaviour of criminal gangs, and the military-dominated mafias with which they were often linked. As the similarities between the militias of Aceh and East Timor made clear, the Indonesian armed forces – especially *Opsus* and later *Kopassus* – were crucial vectors in the dissemination of all these elements.

Thus the militias in East Timor were an amalgam of various influences and models forged over the course of at least three centuries, though especially during the 24 years of Indonesian rule. The richness and depth of that history – and the importance of Indonesian military doctrine and practice in shaping it – helps to explain some of the more notable and puzzling features of the modern militias in East Timor, as well as their similarities with militias in Aceh and other parts of Indonesia. It helps to explain, for example, how the militias were able to organize and mobilize so swiftly in 1999. Although they appeared to come from nowhere – and are often described as having been created at a stroke by the army – few of these groups were actually new at all. Most had been around for years, though usually under a different name. Had this not been the case, it is very unlikely that the militias would have formed as quickly and widely as they did.

The depth and complexity of the militia tradition also helps to explain why militia groups in different parts of the territory seemed to know precisely what to do – and why they did more or less the same things wherever they were. As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁴⁰ notwithstanding evidence of high-level official support, the similarities in militia technology and repertoire across the territory cannot simply be attributed to tightly coordinated military planning. It is more likely, I think, that they were the product of a well-established tradition, or what might be

¹⁴⁰ See Robinson, ‘The fruitless search for a smoking gun: tracing the origins of violence in East Timor’.

called shared historical memory. Most militia leaders and members hardly needed to be given detailed instructions; they had been doing this sort of thing for years and knew very well what was required. The same dynamic – shared historical memory – may also help to explain the remarkable similarities in the behaviour of militias in places as distant, and culturally distinct, as Catholic East Timor and Muslim Aceh.

Finally, the long and complex history of militias in East Timor and Indonesia may explain some of the variations in style and repertoire among the different militias. For example, East Timor's most powerful and violent militias were in the western districts, an area that had been the focus of Portuguese pacification campaigns, and had a much longer association with Indonesian military power brokers. It also appears that the most violent and bellicose of the militias were not those associated with the civil defence groups of the 1970s (*Hansip* and *Ratih*), nor even with the paramilitary units of the 1980s (*Saka*, *Rajawali* and others) but rather with *preman*-type thugs of the 1990s. Why this was so is a subject that deserves further study.

As this evidence clearly suggests, the militias of East Timor and Indonesia have been encouraged by a succession of states, notably the Portuguese and the Indonesian, and more especially by their armed forces. Apart from the obvious fact that local people knew the terrain and the language, there have been a number of obvious advantages to state authorities in mobilizing them into militia units. First, like all semi-official forces, locally-recruited militias afforded Portuguese, Dutch, and Indonesian authorities a measure of deniability for acts of extreme violence that violated legal and moral norms. This is unlikely to have been a major preoccupation of the Portuguese and Dutch during colonial times. But for the Dutch in 1945–49, and for Indonesia in 1974–75, and in the 1990s, as international attention focused increasingly on Indonesia's poor human rights record, such plausible deniability was vitally important. Second, compared to regular troops, local militia units were relatively inexpensive to maintain and, as far as Portuguese, Dutch, and Indonesian military commanders were concerned, they were more expendable. Third, militias offered an important political advantage. They helped to create the illusion, and to an extent the reality, that local people were fighting each other. Against that backdrop, Portuguese, Dutch, or Indonesian states could more easily be portrayed as neutral arbiters, as the powers required to maintain peace and order in a fractious and troubled territory.

But while these points may be generally true, they conceal some

important historical variations in the relationship between states and militias in Indonesia and East Timor. We have seen, for example, that in the late colonial and early post-independence period in Indonesia – and under Portuguese rule in East Timor – militias arose in contexts of weak or contested political power, and remained beyond the capacity of the state fully to control. That is to say, state authorities relied upon, and more or less consciously acquiesced in, the authority of local power brokers in mobilizing armed militia forces. By contrast, we have seen that, after 1965, militias were drawn very tightly under Indonesian state control, and became an essential component of the projection of state power in East Timor, Aceh and elsewhere.

In other words, at least on the evidence from East Timor and Indonesia, there is no simple correlation between the strength of a state and the emergence of militias. It is not even true to say that militias tend to arise where political power is dispersed or contested, because that does not account for the phenomenal growth and spread of militias under the New Order. What the evidence from East Timor and Indonesia does suggest, however, is that different configurations of state power may facilitate the emergence of different kinds of militia formation. Where state power was centralized, as in the early New Order, the militias spread broadly across the area of state control. Moreover, they were durable, and employed common names, rhetoric, and repertoires. By contrast, militias that emerged in contexts of diffuse political power, as during the Indonesian National Revolution, tended to be more localized, were less durable, and employed a more diverse range of repertoires and styles.

The evidence from East Timor and Indonesia also suggests a number of more general conclusions about the historical conditions under which militias emerge, and take the forms that they do. These propositions may be summarized as follows.

First, while militias are likely to reflect, and even embrace, elements of the tradition and culture of a given society, explanations for the rise of militia groups are unlikely to be found in such traditions or cultural traits. Most cultures arguably contain elements that might facilitate the emergence of militias – such as historical traditions of warfare, a fetish for particular sorts of weapons, associations between weapons and sexual potency, and so on – but the reality is that militias emerge only in certain places and at certain times. Clearly something else is at work. And, if the historical evidence from East Timor and Indonesia is any indication, that other thing is the relationship with the state, or elements of it.

Second, notwithstanding the evidence from the colonial period, it would seem *not* to be the case that militias arise only, or even primarily, where state power is weak or contested. Rather they tend to emerge where state actors or agencies decide that they are militarily or politically useful. Militias arise and flourish, for example, where state agencies seek to 'sub-contract' violence that they are unable or unwilling to entrust to their normal security forces – either because of normative and legal constraints, or because of resource limitations.¹⁴¹ Militias are also encouraged by state agencies because they allow them to distance themselves from such violence, creating a veneer of 'plausible deniability' that is deemed important for all of these reasons. Finally, state agencies often encourage the activities of violent militia groups because there is a clear political advantage in creating the illusion of internecine conflict, or even of anarchy, into which the armed forces or some other agent may step to restore order.

Third, beyond the political calculations of states or state agents, the prevailing norms and institutions in a given society also appear to have a significant effect on the formation and behaviour of militia groups. Where a regime is dominated by the military and its norms, for example, one tends to find militias assisting in matters of internal security. That is especially likely to be the case where, as in Indonesia, the military has developed a doctrine that explicitly justifies and encourages the mobilization of civilians for such purposes. Those militias are arguably more likely to resort to extreme forms of violence where, over a period of time, little or no action is taken to punish state agents or militia members who commit such acts, leading to a cycle of impunity. That is to say, a state's failure to take violence seriously can help to set in motion, or to fix in place, new norms and moral standards, which make worse violence – including militia violence – much more likely to occur in the future.

Fourth, militias do not simply emerge independently and naturally in each context. Rather, the idea of the militia – including aspects of their repertoire, rhetoric, and organization – is modular, in the sense that it can be learned or borrowed and transported across time and locale. The evidence from East Timor and Indonesia suggests, for example,

¹⁴¹ In a recent contribution to this debate, Bruce Campbell has argued that the proliferation of death squads in the twentieth century may best be understood as part of a more general tendency toward 'sub-contacting' by modern states. See Bruce Campbell, 'Death squads: definition, problems, and historical context', in Campbell and Brenner, (ed.), *Death Squads*, pp. 16–18.

that militias may be modelled on: 'traditional' armies and self-defence units; the pacification techniques of colonial armies; the counter-insurgency strategies of the Cold War period; the repertoires of criminal organizations; and, of course, the movies. If it is true the militias are modular in nature, then the conditions under which they may flourish expand dramatically, perhaps exponentially, with the passage of time and the improvement of communications. That is to say, we can expect to find militias emerging in an increasingly wide range of sociological, political, and military contexts, limited only by the availability of the idea, and by the technology and opportunity for its dissemination.

Finally, there is the matter of agency. Though it has not been dealt with adequately in this paper, the reality is that militia members and leaders do not simply act because they exist within a web of historical conditions, norms, and models. They do so because of what they have experienced, who they are, what they think is to their advantage, and what they believe. So, in seeking to explain the militia phenomenon anywhere, it is necessary to step beyond purely structural and political conditions, and think about the men and women who lurk behind the deeds.