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East Timor 1974–1975. End of Portuguese rule

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A historical outline of Portuguese rule

The Portuguese first set sail on the waters of the Lesser Sunda Islands in the early 16th century. They were searching for a sea route to China and for new areas from which to obtain commercially attractive products, mainly spices, but also sandalwood. In 1522, the last of the ships of Magellan's expedition around the world arrived at the coast of Timor. The Portuguese had for decades contented themselves with occasional trade with the islanders, having neither reasons nor the resources to establish permanent bases there. The situation changed as rivalry grew between Portugal and the Netherlands. Still, the antagonists did not engage directly in Timor, supporting – as they did in the entire region – local allies, or using local mercenary troops. At the regional level, the confrontation ended victoriously for the Dutch, and the eastern part of Timor remained Portugal's only possession in the archipelago area of the so-called East Indies. As a result, the island got divided into two spheres of influence: the Dutch one in the west of the island and the Portuguese one in its eastern part. The border between the Portuguese and the Dutch parts of Timor was initially established in 1859 on the basis of the Treaty of Lisbon, and the disputes regarding the

exact location of the border were settled in 1916 by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague¹. It was then that the Portuguese colony took its final shape².

Timor was located in the far periphery of the Portuguese empire. The metropolis invested very little there, while exploiting the island and its inhabitants in a ruthless and brutal way. At the beginning of the 20th century, a continuous financial crisis prompted Lisbon to try to increase the profits from the colonies. The tax increase in 1911 led to an uprising in Timor called the Munufahi Uprising (from the name of one of Timor's districts, which was home to Dom Bonaventura, the leader of the uprising) or the Great Rebellion. The rebellion was suppressed using locally enlisted troops, an infantry company transferred from Mozambique, and the gunboat "Patria" sent from Macau³.

Table 1. Distances from Dili to the metropolis and other Portuguese overseas territories [nautical miles]

Distance from Dili to:				
Lisbon	around Africa	through the Suez Canal	through the Panama Canal	around Cape Horn
	13,500	9800	14,200	15,300
Macau	2700			
Goa	4200			
Beira	6100			
Luanda	9100			
Bissau	11,700			

Source: data compiled by the author, based on Google Earth Pro and Google Maps.

- 1 Cf. Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Historical Dictionary of East Timor* (Lanham – Toronto – Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, 2001), xxi–xxiv; Geoffrey C. Gunn, *History of Timor* (Macau: University of Macau, 1999), accessed 13.03.2018, http://pascal.iseg.utl.pt/~cesa/History_of_Timor.pdf.
- 2 Portuguese Timor occupied the eastern part of the island of Timor lying in the archipelago of the Lesser Sunda Islands (the entire island has a surface area of 30,800 km² and is 470 km long and about 80 km wide at its widest part). The island is bordered by the Savu Sea and the Banda Sea in the north and the Timor Sea in the south. The island is the last major landmass between Indonesia and Australia (the south coast of the island lies approximately 700 km away from Darwin). The territory under Portuguese rule covered 15,007 km², of which an area of 814 km² was occupied by the enclave of Oecusse on the northern (Dutch, and later Indonesian) coast (located 60 km from the Portuguese mainland). Portugal also owned the island of Atauro (27 km north of Dili, 105 km²). The highest peak in the east is Foho Ramelau (2,963 m above sea level). The climate is humid subtropical. Precipitation is not high (500–1000 mm per year) as it is controlled by monsoon circulation. The dry period lasts from May to November. The temperatures range between 20–33 °C in the dry season to 29–35 °C in the wet season. The economy used to be based on the export of coffee and precious wood. In 1948, the population was 420,000 (including 1,247 Europeans, mostly Portuguese, 3,592 Chinese, 146 Muslims and 660 people of mixed origin). Muslims and the Chinese, who controlled the wholesale market and also partially the retail market, were resented by the local community. Smaller towns included Liquica, Baucau, Manatuto, Lospalosam Viqueque, Same, Ainara and Sulau.
- 3 Monika Schlicher, *Portugal in Osttimor. Eine kritische Untersuchung zur portugiesischen Kolonialgeschichte in Osttimor 1850 bis 1912* (Hamburg: Abera Verlag, 1996), 114–116; Teresa Bernardino, "Timor e a soberania portuguesa do descobrimento à revolta de 1912", *Revista Nação e Defesa* 9 (1984), 31: 74–85, access: 19.07.2021, <http://comum.rcaap.pt/bitstream/10400.26/2793/1/NeD31TeresaBernardino.pdf>.

Portuguese Timor did not play any role in World War I. In the 1930s, the Portuguese territory, together with the Dutch East Indies, became of special interest to Japan, which was looking for new directions of expansion. Ultimately, despite the fact that Portugal remained neutral, the Japanese army invaded and occupied East Timor, which had previously been entered by the Allied Forces⁴. Portuguese institutions were reduced to the role of purely façade organisations. It was only after their military defeat that the Japanese began handing power back to the Portuguese administration on 15 August 1945⁵. The first post-war assessments showed the extent of the losses the “neutral” Portuguese territory suffered during the war. Estimates made by the local administration showed that out of the pre-war population of around 450,000, about 40,000 islanders died as a result of direct action of the occupying forces, devastating forced labour (mainly in road construction), and starvation caused by food requisitioning. One should add to that about 60 Chinese murdered by the invaders and a further 200 dead (before the war, the Chinese community numbered about 2,000 people)⁶. The war ruined the plantation economy, which, prior to 1941, had been developing largely owing to Japanese capital. Due to the fact that in the first post-war years it was practically impossible to collect taxes in cash, successive governors resorted to forced labour to rebuild the most important elements of the infrastructure, such as the main roads. Tribal chiefs “settled accounts” with the state by providing manpower.

From the end of World War II to the Carnation Revolution

After Japan’s capitulation in 1945, Portugal regained control of East Timor. Governed by a governor general (usually an active-duty army officer with the rank of captain-lieutenant colonel) nominated by the Portuguese Prime Minister at the request of the Minister of Colonies (overseas territories). He was assisted by the Governing Council, which *ex officio* included the commander of the armed forces and the chairman of the Legislative Council. The latter body consisted of three nominated members (including the governor) and seven members (four Europeans and three locals) elected in a complicated procedure that was more of a nomination than an election. Timor was divided into 13 administrative areas (counties) and a total of 47 districts (communities).

4 The military issues are discussed in detail in: Michael Leach, *Nation-Building and National Identity in Timor-Leste* (Abington: Routledge, 2017), 43–51; Bernard Callinan, *Independent Company: The Australian Army in Portuguese Timor 1941–43* (London: William Heinemann, 1953). The geopolitical and geostrategic circumstances and the meanders of Portugal’s policy towards Japan are discussed in: David Martelo, *A Imprevidência Estratégica de Salazar – Timor (1941) – Angola (1961)* (Lisboa: Edições Sílabo, 2015). On the other hand, the Portuguese emotional narrative about the occupation of Timor is well represented by Carlos Cal Brandão’s memoirs, *Funo. Guerra em Timor* (Porto: Edicoes “Acu”, 1946).

5 Morito Morishima, *Pearl Harbor Lisboa Tóquio* (Lisboa: Ad Litteram, D.L., 2017), 152–157.

6 Robert Lee, “Crisis in a Backwater. 1941 in Portuguese Timor”, *Lusotopie* 7 (2000): 163–164.

61 administrative offices were maintained (a central one in Dili and 60 in counties and communities). The offices also served as local police stations, which were manned by 10 to 25 local policemen led by a Portuguese non-commissioned officer or officer. The level of education was very low. It was not until 1952 that the first secondary school was opened on the island. Compulsory education was introduced in 1958. Until 1962, the entire educational system (with the exception of Chinese elementary schools) was under the aegis of the Church (57 elementary schools and two minor seminaries offering further education in Macau). In 1974, the illiteracy rate was 90%. During the 1974 census, 229,000 of the island's inhabitants declared themselves Catholic. The health-care system was practically non-existent. In 1950, the island had four physicians and one dentist, who worked chiefly for the European community. Life expectancy was under 40 years, and the infant mortality rate was 40%⁷. Economic development was slow since the economy was based on extensive farming and there was a chronic lack of investment. In 1964, the island's airport was modernised. It was fitted with a concrete runway which could be used by aircraft of the Boeing 707 type. The seaport in Dili was also expanded (the investment was completed in 1966, the quay could accommodate ships up to 100 m in length). Still, the road network was in a deplorable condition, as the Portuguese were unable to maintain it in the difficult Timorese climate. They tried to shift most of the effort on to the locals who did compulsory work. Just as in the pre-war period, the dominant role in the island's economy was played by the Agriculture, Homeland and Work Company (*Sociedade Agrícola Pátria e Trabalho Lda.*, SAPT⁸).

The military forces in Timor were under the authority of the Independent Territorial Command of Timor (*Comando Territorial Independente de Timor*) in Dili. In 1974, the Command controlled four rifle companies, a communications company, a cavalry squadron (with 10–12 armoured cars), and a field artillery battery reinforced with two platoons of paratroopers. The navy and the air force had liaison groups on the island. In the 1970s, a ship from the metropolis came to Timor once every three months (the route was served by the ships “India” and “Timor” belonging to the state-owned shipping company *Companhia Colonial de Navegação* (CCN⁹), and once a month the

7 Geoffrey Gunn, *History of Timor* (Macau: University of Macau 1999), accessed: 13.03.2018, http://pascal.iseg.utl.pt/~cesa/History_of_Timor.pdf, 136.

8 Forty percent of the company's shares belonged to the state (Japanese shares taken over after the war), 8 percent belonged to Banco Nacional Ultramarino (BNU), and the remaining 52 percent to the da Silva family (the descendants of the company's founder, former governor José Celestino da Silva). *History of Timor*, accessed: 03.08.2020, https://cesa.rc.iseg.ulisboa.pt/History_of_Timor.pdf, 11–12.

9 The company was launched in 1918 through the partial nationalisation of a shipping company established in 1881 as a joint stock company. This move was made to strengthen state control over transport between the metropolis and the Portuguese overseas territories. The company became known during World War II, when it took advantage of the neutrality of the country under whose flag its ships sailed to provide transport services on routes from South America, the Caribbean and the United States to Lisbon. Both vessels were passenger/cargo motor ships built between 1950 and 1951 by

island was visited by a ship from Singapore. In addition, freighters called at the port of Dili to collect coffee and sisal. The Air Transport Service of Timor (*Serviço de Transportes Aéreos de Timor*), which came under the Governor's authority, had two planes: de Havilland Dove and de Havilland Heron. They were scheduled to fly to Darwin, Australia¹⁰.

Despite the fundamental change in the balance of power in the region after World War II, Portugal's sovereignty over East Timor was not threatened. Indonesia, which gained independence after a long war (1945–1949)¹¹ was not interested in escalating the tensions in its relations with Portugal. The efforts of Indonesia's first President, Sukarno, focused on consolidating the country and attempting to seize West Irian (the western part of New Guinea which was still in the hands of the Dutch)¹², Brunei, and areas located in the north of Borneo which were part of Malaysia (Sarawak and Lebuwan, Sabah)¹³.

After World War II, the Portuguese in Timor faced large-scale protests against the colonial administration only once. In May 1958, peasants in the Viqueque area revolted as a result of underground activities initiated by local lower-ranking officials. This was mainly a demonstration against the forced labour system. The rebellion was suppressed by the local garrison and tribal militias mobilised in other parts of Timor.

the British shipyard W. Bertram & Sons Ltd of Sunderland. Gross capacity 7,655, load capacity 4,223 tons, 390 passenger seats. Length 131.6 m, width 17.98 m, draught 7.8, two Richardsons, Westgarth & Co Ltd diesel engines 5,000 hp, speed 15 knots. The vessels had been ordered under the Merchant Navy Reconstruction Plan (*Plano de Renovação da Marinha de Comércio*) adopted in 1945, which aimed at the purchase of 70 new vessels within 10 years.

- 10 Madureira de Carvalho, Luís, *O Dispositivo do Exército Português no Império Ultramarino, durante o período Republicano (1910–1975)* (Lisboa: Academia Militar, 2017), 30.
- 11 The issue of the Indonesian War of Independence is not discussed in the Polish literature of the subject at all. Natalia Laskowska, in a synthetic history of Indonesia published in 2012, mentions these four years of struggle in a single paragraph. Cf. Natalia Laskowska, *Indonezja* (Warszawa: Trio, 2021), 72. In international literature, the most extensive treatment of the war, including descriptions of the course of the military operations, is that by Joseph H. Daves. Unfortunately, his work is burdened with an emotional approach and is lacking in writing and editing. Joseph H. Daves, *The Indonesian Army from Revolusi to Reformasi, vol. 1–3* (n.p.: published by the author: 2013–2014). The general course of the political and military events of that period is described by: Jan Gelman Taylor, *Indonesia: Peoples and History* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003); John E. Jessup, *A Chronology of Conflict and Resolution, 1945–1985* (New York: ABC Clio, 1989); Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 12 Cf. Arent Lijphart, *The Trauma of Decolonization: The Dutch and West New Guinea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); Wies Platje, “Dutch Sigint and the Conflict with Indonesia 1950–62”, *Intelligence and National Security* 1 (2001), 16: 285–312, DOI:10.1080/714002840; Nicholas Tarling, *Britain and the West New Guinea Dispute, 1949–1962* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).
- 13 Cf. Harold James, Denis Sheil-Small, *The Undeclared War: The Story of the Indonesian Confrontation 1962–1966* (Totowa: N.J. Rowman & Littlefield, 1971); Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in South East Asia, 1961–1965: Britain: The United States and the Creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Davis Easter, *Britain and the Confrontation with Indonesia, 1960–1966* (London, Cambridge University Press, 2004).

The volunteers were rewarded by receiving a permission to loot the “wayward” villages. In addition, eighty paratroopers were flown from Lisbon via Beirut, Karachi, Goa, and Colombo in Ceylon to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, which were under Australian administration¹⁴. The soldiers were transported over a route of approximately 16,200 km by two C-54 planes. This took four days. During the rebellion and the pacification operations, the region of Uato-Lari was ravaged. Villages were burned down, herds were slaughtered, crops were destroyed, and people fled into the forest. One hundred and fifty to one hundred and seventy (according to other publications as many as fifteen hundred) rebels and individuals suspected of supporting the rebellion were killed¹⁵. The suppression of the Viqueque rebellion was a special combination of “the old and the new” in the colonial history of Portugal. What was old about the Portuguese strategy was that they took advantage of regional antagonisms and used tribal militia, with relatively little involvement of the colonial forces (though almost half of the garrison stationed on the island was involved in the direct action). The new element was the transfer of paratroopers by airplanes. This operation, although costly, made the Portuguese believe that they were able to respond effectively to threats appearing unexpectedly at various places in the empire. In the following years, the internal situation in Timor was stable. A change, and a fundamental one, was brought about only by the Carnation Revolution.

East Timor after the Carnation Revolution

After the rebellion of 1959, Portugal initiated an education reform in Timor. Its goal was to create a local elite associated with Lisbon. This naturally, though completely contrary to Lisbon’s intentions, stirred some political fervour, with the small class of rather superficially educated Timorese starting to show some activity in politics. They were inspired by the wars which flared up in the Portuguese colonies in Africa. However, the first political party was not formed until 11 May 1974, three weeks after the coup in Lisbon. It was the Timorese Democratic Union (*Uniao Democratica Timorense*, UDT). Led by Francisco Lopes da Cruz and Augusto da Costa Mousinho, Timorese MPs in Lisbon elected in 1972 as representatives of Caetano’s People’s National Action (*Acção Nacional Popular*), the party advocated for Timor to maintain ties with Portugal. The Union was supported by the majority of senior officials, landowners and wealthy Chinese merchants. As a response, the independent-minded employees

14 The archipelago is located almost halfway between Sri Lanka and Australia (2,600 km from Ceylon and 2,200 km from Australia). The nearest landmass is Indonesian Sumatra, 1,100 km). Timor is located 2,900 km from the Cocos Islands.

15 João Luís Gonçalves, *A Revolta de 1959 em Timor Leste* (Lisboa: Letras e Coisas, 2018), 98–102.

of mid-level administration, who believed in the slogans of social revolution, established, on 20 May, the Revolutionary Front for the Independence of East Timor (*Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente*, FRETILIN¹⁶). Unlike UDT, which established itself mainly in the capital, FRETILIN started building local party structures. Under the leadership of Jose Ramos-Hort, the Front organised the first strike of public workers in Timor's history. The strikers obtained a fifty percent increase in salaries. Later on, the leadership was taken over by Francisco Xavier do Amaral and Nicolau dos Reis Lobato. On 27 May, the Timorese Popular Democratic Association (*Associação Popular Democrática Timorese*, APODETI) was established. In slightly simplified terms, it gathered supporters of integration with Indonesia, including groups of refugees who had escaped from Portuguese Timor after the 1959 rebellion and influential representatives of the Muslim minority. An important part in this movement was played by Guilherme Gonçalves. In the border zone, a prominent role was played by the Association of Timorese Heroes (*Klibur Oan Timor Asuwain*, KOTA), also known as Sons of the Mountain Warriors, which grew out of tribal resentment. It was led by Jose Martins, who had left APODETI. A much less influential political group was the cosy Labour Party (*Partido Trabalhista*), while the Democratic Association for the Integration of East Timor into Australia (*Associação Democrática para a Integração de Timor-Leste na Austrália*, ADITLA), which showed no true interest in the said integration, had marginal political power. Initially, UDT and FRETILIN acted jointly under an agreement concluded on 21 January 1975¹⁷.

The administration was headed by the Governor General, Colonel Fernando Alves Aldeia (an officer of the older generation, born in 1925, who was considered to be a supporter of the overthrown regime). Although the decree of the National Salvation Junta, established after the Carnation Revolution, dismissed all the governors, Timor was far away and there was no one there to enforce the revolutionary decrees flowing in from Lisbon. And so, the colonel acted undisturbed as a “midwife of political life” in Timor, and resigned his office only on the 15 July, after being urged several times by the metropolis. He was succeeded by Lieutenant Colonel Níveo José Ramos Herdade, former head of the military force in Timor, who was not appointed as Governor, but as Acting Governor. Initially, when General António Sebastião Ribeiro de Spínola was President of the Republic, he hoped to maintain some form of ties with part of Portugal's overseas territories, including East Timor. However, when the General was pushed to the sidelines and ultimately resigned his office, Portugal set course for fast decolonisation¹⁸. It was then that the new Governor of Timor, Colonel Mário Lemos Pires was

16 Initially known as the Timorese Social Democratic Union (*Associação Social-Democrata Timorese*).

17 *History of Timor*, accessed: 03.08.2020, https://cesa.rc.iseg.ulisboa.pt/History_of_Timor.pdf.

18 The Portuguese retreated very quickly from Guinea (Bissau), Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe. Civil wars broke out in Angola and Mozambique even as the evacuation of

appointed. His priority was to accelerate the process of “Portugal’s withdrawal” from Timor.

However, things got complicated quickly. Indonesia, which had previously pursued a restrained policy towards the Portuguese part of the island, decided to join the conflict. The motives that guided General Suharto, who had wielded full power over Indonesia since 1967, were quite complex. In addition to territorial expansionism, he was spurred on by a great fear that the People’s Republic of China would gain a strong position in Timor. It has to be remembered that when he had seized control over the state in 1965–1967, Suharto had dealt bloodily with the Communist Party of Indonesia and the Chinese minority which had been considered the communists’ ally¹⁹. Fears about the increase in Chinese influence²⁰ were also voiced by Australia and the United States. East Timor not only found itself at the centre of the regional conflict, but also became part of the global Cold War rivalry, a fact which local activists probably failed to fully realise. The latter (global) dimension was gaining importance in the context of the withdrawal of the United States from the Republic of Vietnam. In Washington, the supporters of the “domino theory” and other simplified models of geopolitics were once again making themselves known. They insisted that the probable collapse of Vietnam and communists gaining a foothold in East Timor were both elements of a single grand communist plan²¹. Indeed, after President Richard Nixon had resigned in the wake of the Watergate scandal, the Republican administration of his successor Gerald Ford was weak (both politically and intellectually) and did not resist ceding the Timorese case to Indonesia²².

In such circumstances, the Indonesian propaganda machine began to disavow both UDT, which it referred to as “fascist” due to the support the party gave to the solutions forced through by General Spínola, and FRETILIN, which it described as a communist movement. The latter party did indeed refer to the writings of the leftist Guinean guerrilla leader Amílcar Cabral, but what was much more dangerous from Indonesia’s point of view was the fact that it had achieved measurable success in building local

metropolitan troops was taking place.

- 19 These issues are discussed in detail in: Łukasz Bończol, *Zrozumieć Indonezję. Nowy Ład generała Suharto* (Warszawa: Dialog, 2012).
- 20 The complexity of the Australian approach to Timor is perfectly reflected in the collection of published documents: Wendy Way, Damien Browne, Vivianne Johnon, eds. *Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese Timor, 1974–1976* (Canberra: The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Melbourne University Press, 2000).
- 21 Brad Simpson, “‘Illegally and Beautifully’: The United States, the Indonesian Invasion of East Timor and the International Community, 1974–76”, *Cold War History* 5 (August 2005), 3: 281–315.
- 22 Moisés Silva Fernandes, “A Preponderância dos Factores Exógenos na Rejeição do Plano Português de Descolonização para Timor-Leste, 1974–1975”, *Negócios Estrangeiros*, 10 (Fevereiro, 2007): 106–109, accessed: 27.06.2021, https://repositorio.ul.pt/bitstream/10451/327/1/21028_ulsd_Moisés_Fernandes.pdf.

party structures and that it had reached out to villagers by initiating, among other things, a general program of fighting against illiteracy²³.

Immediately upon arrival, the new Governor proposed to create a Government Council, which, in a certain time span, was to take over the functions of the provisional government. His initiative was rejected by both APODETI and FRETILIN. In these circumstances, the Portuguese started to organise local elections, striving – in the face of the parties' inability to reach an agreement – to build a political system “from the bottom up”. The elections were held at the beginning of May 1975, and FRETILIN won about 50 percent of the seats in local councils. This undoubtedly was a satisfactory result for the left-leaning officers in power in Lisbon, who were de facto interested in handing power over to one party which they considered to be close ideologically. Such a development of events, however, was not going to be accepted by Indonesia.

The decline of Portuguese power

At that time, anarchy was spreading in metropolitan sub-units. The soldiers had established very friendly relations with radicals, some of whom had previously studied in Lisbon under a government scholarship. Lemos Pires informed Lisbon that this could lead to serious disturbances and asked for the support of soldiers from elite formations, whom he wanted to stay in Timor for at least 6 months. However, Portugal had very limited possibilities of buttressing the forces deployed in Timor. On 15 March 1975, General Costa Gomes decided to airlift (by C-54 planes) a paratrooper company to the island. The preparation of the “mini-airbridge” lasted until 8 April. The first reinforced platoon landed on the island on 14 April, and another one in July. Together with the paratroopers, two Alouette III helicopters were deployed. The sub-units created the Detachment of Timorese Paratroopers (*Destacamento de Paraquedistas de Timor*), which served as a reserve of the Portuguese forces. However, the Governor's request to expand the manoeuvring component to two companies was rejected²⁴.

At that time, Indonesia was conducting a heated propaganda campaign against UDT and FRETILIN. Jakarta's obvious ally was APODETI. Military training for fighters from this organisation and members of KOTA began²⁵. On 27 May, UDT decided to terminate cooperation with FRETILIN. A day later, Indonesian troops, occupied the

23 *History of Timor*, accessed: 03.08.2020, https://cesa.rc.iseg.ulisboa.pt/History_of_Timor.pdf.

24 Mário Lemos Pires, *Descolonização de Timor: missão impossível?* (Lisboa: DoM Quixote: 1994), 152–157.

25 John H. Daves, *The Indonesian Army from Revolusi to Reformasi*, vol. 2, *Soeharto and the New Order* (n.p.: 2013), 391–403; Ken Konboy, *Copassus. Inside Indonesian's Special Forces* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2003), 186–204.

enclave of Oecusse, using as a pretext the clashes between members of the two organisations²⁶. Portugal limited itself to a diplomatic protest. Governor Mário Lemos Pires was still trying to mediate and offered to organise a summit in Macau on 16–18 June with the participation of the Timorese organisations and representatives of Indonesia and Portugal. However, FRETILIN boycotted the initiative and did not take part in the summit. In this situation, the Portuguese (namely the Supreme Revolutionary Council, *Conselho Superior da Revolução*) unilaterally adopted a “road map” (schedule) for the decolonisation of Timor, which was announced on 17 July. It planned for a general election to the People’s Assembly (*Assembleia Popular*) to be held in October 1976. The final withdrawal from Timor was scheduled for October 1978. Until then, executive power was to be exercised by the government appointed by the Portuguese High Commissioner within 100 days of the publication of the document in question²⁷.

On 25 July, a UDT delegation visited Jakarta. It can be supposed that in view of the leftist attitude demonstrated by the Governor General and most of the officers, the moderate party was looking for another partner. General Ali Murtopo, deputy head of the State Intelligence Coordination Agency (*Badan Koordinasi Intelijen Negara*, BAKIN), informed the Timorese that FRETILIN was preparing for an armed seizure of power. The leadership of UDT decided to take action to forestall the biggest competitor to power. On 11 August, the organisation’s militia began to occupy Dili. They seized the city’s airport, seaport, telephone exchange, civilian radio station, power plant and pump station. The plan had been well prepared and was efficiently carried out. At the same time, public sector employees started an indefinite strike. The attitude of the Portuguese was ambivalent. There are indications that the police commissioner in Dili cooperated with the assassins and even supplied them with some weapons. The army, however, remained in the barracks. FRETILIN not only defended itself, but also quickly started a counterattack. Given the organisation’s program, the enmity of Timor’s neighbouring countries towards it and the geographical remoteness of the island, it can be assumed that the only source of armament for the party’s armed force were Portuguese barracks, especially smaller posts, which were taken over and robbed of their weapons and ammunition. The soldiers, forewarned of the assailants’ plans, usually left the barracks little by little or withdrew before the attackers actually appeared in the barracks. Even so, 23 prisoners of war fell into the hands of FRETILIN. The Portuguese conscripts saw no reason to risk their lives in a conflict that they did

26 An area located on the north coast of the western part of Timor. Under the agreements concluded with the Dutch, it remained in the hands of the Portuguese. Surface area: 814 km² (length along the coast – 46 km, maximum width – 30 km). In 1975, the enclave had a population of about 25 thousand people.

27 Conselho da Revolução, *Diário do Governo* n. ° 163/1975, Série I de 1975-07-17, 985-991, accessed: 03.08.2020, https://dre.pt/pesquisa/-/search/336547/details/maximized?p_p_auth=2MKghZt3.

not understand and did not really want to understand. Their priority was to return home safely²⁸.

FRETILIN's advantage, which became apparent relatively quickly, was due to two main reasons: an extensive network of local party structures (while UDT remained in fact a "city movement") and organisational efficiency, topped up by a social program that was attractive to the rural population. The fights were fierce; according to one Portuguese newspaper, as many as 2,000 people may have died, but this information has never been, and will probably never be, verified²⁹.

The retreat to Ataúro

The Portuguese behaved passively, having neither the power nor the will to end the violence. As already mentioned, metropolitan sub-units were not only small, but with the exception of the paratroopers, they were eaten from the inside with revolutionary decay, the most evident manifestation of which was the lack of discipline. In the face of this situation, Governor Pires decided to evacuate all military and civilian personnel to the island of Ataúro (25 km north of Dili, length 25 km, width 9 km, surface area 105 km²). In Dili, there were fights for the control of the city centre and the airport. The helicopters based at the airport were evacuated to an ad hoc landing strip in the seaport. Lisbon rejected another request from the Governor for military reinforcement. In fact, with local militants taking control of the airport, it could have been extremely difficult to redeploy the aircraft. The building in which the Governor resided at that time, was, at least twice, attacked by militants of the antagonising groups who wanted to occupy it. A dozen or so Portuguese soldiers went missing. It was later revealed that at least three of them had deserted the army with their weapons to join FRETILIN³⁰.

All available watercrafts were gathered for the evacuation. There were not many of them: the patrol boats "Albufeira" and "Tibar" (Alvor type vessels, 37.5 tons, 25.0 m), two landing craft "Lóios" and "Comoro" (50 tons, 24 m long, built in Macau in 1967–1968), the tugboat "Lifau", the coaster "Musi" (capacity 586 tons, length 67.6 m, ensign of Singapore), and the self-propelled barge "Laleia". The tugboat was purchased

28 Mário Lemos Pires, *Descolonização de Timor*, 152–157.

29 After the Indonesian invasion, and later, after Timor had regained independence, the civil war was marginalised in the official idiom dominated by talk of resistance to the invasion, guerrilla warfare, and the suffering of the civilian population. It is practically impossible to reconstruct the events of the period from August to December 1975.

30 José Leiria Pinto, "Timor 1973/75. Recordações de um Marinheiro", *Rivista da Armada* (Julho 2012): 26–27.

in early May 1974 to replace a lost coaster “Arbid”³¹. It was navigated by sea on a route of 2,300 nautical miles using solely astronavigation, as the vessel was only equipped with a magnetic compass and a log. The barge “Laleia”, built in Macau, was collected in May 1975. The landing craft “Lóios” was soon withdrawn from use due to a malfunction. The pilot motorboat “Laga”, which had recently been imported from Macau, had not yet been launched. Earlier, on 12 August, a Portuguese-chartered coaster “Mac Dili” (“Macdili”, capacity 885 tons, length 65.3 m, ensign of Malaysia) with 272 civilians on board (families of military men, officials with families) left for Darwin³².

On 17 August, paratroopers seized the loading points in the seaport. This was theoretically agreed upon with the combating organisations, which showed the will to cooperate, releasing Portuguese soldiers caught during the fights. At the same time, Portuguese troops began to arrive from the interior of the island. They were demoralised, partially disarmed, and had no intention to do anything except retreat to a safe place. The soldiers started to be slowly transported to the island. The abandoned vehicles ended up in the hands of the Timorese. On 18 August, FRETILIN took control of the Aileu training facility. A helicopter was seized there, which was performing a liaison task (the Portuguese negotiated with UDT the possibility of flying between garrisons). Another craft, sent in search of it, was fired upon, but managed to return to Dili. Next, the Timorese occupied the command headquarters of the Maubisse sector. The platoon of Portuguese riflemen stationed there did not put up any resistance and was disarmed. The skipper of the coaster “Musi”, which was fired upon at night (when coffee was unloaded from it to make room for the soldiers), terminated the charter contract and departed for Singapore. The Portuguese were left only with their own vessels.

At the same time, civilian refugees began to arrive in Dili. Nobody was prepared for this. The Muslims and the Chinese, who were like-minded in this particular situation, demanded to be evacuated to Ataúro. There was an orgy of plunder, arson, rapes, lynching and meting out “people’s justice”. On 22 August, the landing craft “Comoro” was directed to Baucau to evacuate a facility cut off by a FRETILIN blockade from the only coastal road. In the evening, the Norwegian freighter “Lloyd Bakke” (a general cargo ship with passenger seats, capacity 9.745, length 152.4 m) chartered by the Governor’s office in Macau, arrived at the roadstead. She took 1.505, mostly Chinese, refugees to Darwin (they embarked from landing boats in the roadstead). This sparked a rumour that the evacuation trip had been financed by Chinese entrepreneurs from Macau. Interestingly, the costs of the second trip were covered by the Singapore government, which was also mainly interested in the evacuation of the Chinese diaspora.

31 On 23 April 1973, the coaster “Arbid” was lost (built in 1962, load capacity 485 tons). The vessel, manned by 18 seamen led by a Portuguese Navy boatswain sank in the Flores Sea on its way from Bangkok to Dili in a typhoon storm. The entire crew and five passengers died in the catastrophe.

32 José Leiria Pinto, “Timor 1973/75”, 35–26.

About 1,000 people embarked on the ship and departed for Darwin. In this situation, Muslims asked the consul of Indonesia for protection. The next vessel to evacuate the refugees was the already mentioned Malaysian ship “Mac Dili”. The last group of Portuguese military personnel, including the Governor, boarded at dawn on 27 August. Timor remained in the hands of the fighting militias³³.

FRETILIN was successful in the armed confrontation. The UDT militia was forced out of Dili, and its members fled to the west of the island. Indonesia was preparing itself for various scenarios, treating the refugees as a special “political capital”. The military forces on the island were strengthened, which was not surprising given the then circumstances. At the same time, however, during the meeting of the ambassadors of Portugal and Indonesia in Rome on 1 November 1975, the latter assured that his country was not interested in the annexation of East Timor. On the other hand, Portugal was entering the most severe political crisis since the Carnation Revolution, and so a declaration like that, made towards a deeply unstable state, did not have much binding force³⁴.

In mid-September, FRETILIN had full control over the eastern part of Timor. The island was then visited by a delegation of Australian Labour Party MPs led by the Aboriginal Australian senator Neville Bonner. A communication presented later to the media stated that the party was successfully building its administration by pursuing a moderate and balanced policy. This was an overly optimistic picture. The organisation, quite predictably, failed to cope with the deep economic and social collapse. The inhabitants’ newly-awakened ambitions could not be satisfied, and this aroused frustration and fuelled resistance, which was crushed by force. At the same time, guerrilla actions conducted by exiles operating, with Indonesian consent, from the western part of the island, were intensifying. On 10 October, FRETILIN was ousted from its outposts in Batuge and five other border towns. UDT and KOTA, supported by the Indonesian army, sought and liquidated members and supporters of FRETILIN. On 24 November, the leadership of the movement called on the United Nations to intervene, but no action followed.

Departure from Ataúro

The Portuguese staying on the island of Ataúro were almost completely cut off from the world at that time. The civilian radio station and the naval communications centre had been left behind in Dili. The evacuees had taken some of the equipment from the

33 Leiria Pinto, 37.

34 Daves, *The Indonesian Army*, vol. 2, 404–405.

centre but did not manage to put it into operation. In such a situation, they communicated with the world via Macau using two medium-power shortwave radio stations. Communication was often interrupted, and it was impossible to pass on longer messages. The situation on the island was the worse for the lack of a marina. Having nowhere to be moored at, the unit's boats had to remain at anchor, and their survival in the coming monsoon period was uncertain, to say the least. Meanwhile, Lisbon could not do much.

On 3 September, the frigate "Afonso de Cerqueira" (F 488, Baptista de Andrade type) departed from Lisbon to Timor. The operation was burdened with a significant technical risk, as it was a new ship, received from the Spanish shipyard Bazan de Construcciones only in July which had not yet passed full technical tests and whose crew had not completed their training. However, Portugal did not have any other "measures". The main task of the frigate after arriving at Ataúro was to use the ship's radio station to restore stable communication between this cut-off post and Lisbon. Moreover, she was supposed to transport marine subunits. The voyage was improvised in great haste. A hundred and twenty *fuzileiros* (fusiliers) embarked on the ship, making it incredibly crowded. Suffice it to say that some of the canned food was secured and stored on the landing pad (the ship did not have a hangar)³⁵. On 11 September, the vessel passed through the Suez Canal. The lines were dropped at Darwin on 1 October. The commander of the naval forces in Timor, Lieutenant Commander Leira Pinto, who was also to act as a pilot, joined the crew there. The ship arrived on the island on 6 October. On 24 November, "Afonso de Cerqueira" was joined by a twin vessel "João Roby" (F 487) with another 120 marines on board³⁶.

After the arrival of the first frigate, Lieutenant Commander Leira Pinto paid an official visit to the Indonesian Governor to find out, as far as it was possible, what the situation was like. What he saw was most disturbing. There were about a dozen large freighters in the roadstead, which normally would have no reason to be there, especially in such numbers. There were plenty of Indonesian soldiers in the streets, including those from the elite formation Kopassus (*Komando Pasukan*)³⁷. Clouds were evidently gathering over East Timor. However, Portugal could not do anything about it, both due to international circumstances and its internal situation. However, Governor General Mário Lemos Pires was recalled for consultations to Lisbon. He first went to Darwin on board the frigate "Afonso de Cerqueira" on 24 October, and from there by air to

35 *Marinha afunda navio que acompanhou invasão de Timor em 1975*, accessed: 05.08.2020, <https://www.dn.pt/edicao-do-dia/04-set-2018/marinha-afunda-navio-que-acompanhou-invasao-de-timor-em-1975-9794261.html>.

36 José Leiria Pinto, "A história da presença da Marinha em Timor Por ocasião da independência do território", *Rivista da Armada* (Junho 2002): 12–13.

37 Daves, *The Indonesian Army*, vol. 2, 404–40.

Canberra, where he was able to establish stable phonic communication with Lisbon for the first time in weeks. It was there that he found out that he was to return to his home country. His duties were taken over by Lieutenant Colonel José Ângelo Teixeira de Magalhães (Commander of the Military Force), who was appointed Acting Governor. His first task was to initiate the demobilisation and withdrawal of personnel by sea to Darwin, from where the Portuguese departed in small groups to Europe.

Conclusion

In view of what, from the Indonesian point of view, were unfavourable developments in East Timor, the Indonesian authorities made a decision to launch an armed intervention in the part of the island abandoned by the Portuguese. On 12 August, Minister of Defence General Maraden Panggabean issued a decree on the formation of the Joint Operational Force Seroja (*Kogaskag Seroja*). The invasion began on 7 December 1975. Indonesian troops crossed the land border. They used BTR-50 transporters and PT-76 floating tanks. At the same time, the airport in Dili was bombed, and then a helicopter landing party took ground there. A sea landing followed. Indonesian paratroopers landed in several parts of the island. The hastily-created FRETILIN units were unable to resist the Indonesian invaders. A new stage in the history of the eastern part of the island had begun, which ended only in 1999 with the withdrawal of the Indonesians and the proclamation of independence³⁸.

Then, the remaining military personnel embarked on the Portuguese ships in accordance with previously received orders, and the vessels lifted anchors and headed for Darwin. From there “João Roby” set off to her homeland west through the Suez Canal (with evacuees on board), and “Afonso de Cerqueira” sailed east taking a course for the Panama Canal. She returned to Lisbon on 11 March 1976³⁹. It was in such an unspectacular way that the Portuguese presence in the “Seas of the South East” came to its end after almost five hundred years since their first arrival in 1498. Although Lisbon exerted control over Chinese Macau until 1999, it did so only formally.

38 Ibidem, 13.

39 Along with the frigate *Honório Barreto*, the ship took part in the celebrations of the United States Bicentennial. She visited New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Fort Lauderdale, and La Guaira.

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SUMMARY

East Timor (Port. Timor-Leste) was the most peripheral part of the territories under the authority of Lisbon in relation to the metropolis. Due to a series of turbulent historical and political events, the Portuguese had been able to retain first their influence and then power over this area for more than four centuries. The article is a study of a special case in the history of colonialism, namely, the withdrawal of Portugal from East Timor. A historical outline of Lusitanian rule over the eastern part of the island as well as the phenomena and processes that had led to the actual abandonment of this dependent territory by the metropolis are presented. In the more detailed layer, the author highlights the nautical dimensions of the conflict resulting from the location of Timor and its distance from both the metropolis and regional administrative and political centres.

Timor Wschodni 1974–1975. Koniec władzy portugalskiej

Słowa kluczowe: Timor Wschodni, Portugalia, dekolonizacja, Indonezja, inwazja

STRESZCZENIE

Timor Wschodni (port. Timor-Leste) był najbardziej peryferyjną w stosunku do metropolii częścią terytoriów pozostających pod władzą Lizbony. Na skutek szczególnego splotu okoliczności historycznych i politycznych turbulencji, Portugalczycy zdołali zachować najpierw wpływy a potem władzę nad tym obszarem przez ponad cztery stulecia. Artykuł stanowi studium szczególnego przypadku w historii kolonializmu, jakim było wycofanie się Portugalii z Timoru. Przedstawiono rys historyczny luzytańskiego władztwa nad wschodnią częścią wyspy oraz zjawiska i procesy, które doprowadziły do faktycznego porzucenia przez metropolię terytorium zależnego. W warstwie szczegółowej autor eksponuje nautyczny wymiarach konfliktu wynikający z położenia Timoru i jego oddalenia zarówno od metropolii, jak i regionalnych centrów administracyjno-politycznych.

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