

Indonesia votes to hand over East Timor to UN control

By Peter Symonds
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Indonesia's People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) voted in the early hours of Wednesday to endorse the results of the UN-organised referendum on East Timor and to rescind the body's 1978 decree declaring the former Portuguese colony to be the country's 27th province.

The vote was a foregone conclusion after the 11 parliamentary factions indicated earlier in the week that they would support the vote to relinquish control of the territory seized by the Indonesian military in 1975. The MPR committee charged with considering the issue dropped proposals to make the endorsement conditional upon Portugal formally renouncing any rights in East Timor, and on a UN investigation of alleged voting irregularities during the referendum.

The MPR resolution nevertheless reflected the hostility expressed by Indonesian politicians and parties to President B.J. Habibie's decision to permit the referendum on East Timor's future to go ahead. It noted in part that "the agreement [to hold the ballot] was done by the government without the permission from the House of Representatives".

On Tuesday, a majority in the MPR rejected Habibie's accountability speech delivered last Thursday, and he withdrew his candidacy for a second term as president only hours later.

The next president, due to be chosen by the MPR on Wednesday, is charged with overseeing the handover of East Timor to a UN administration. The UN Security Council is due to meet on Friday to formally decide on the mandate for a UN body to govern East Timor. The administrative details, however, have already been worked out by the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and were released on October 4.

An interim administration known as the United Nations Transitional Administration for East Timor (UNTAET) will assume control for at least two to three years.

Responsibility for all aspects of the administration, policing, judiciary, security forces, infrastructure and services will be vested in a single administrator—the Special Representative of the Secretary General—who will report to Annan and the UN Security Council. Annan will only name his Special Representative after Friday's Security Council session.

An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, a newspaper supportive of the UN intervention, noted: "If, as expected, the Security Council accepts Mr Annan's recommendations on Friday, the administrator will effectively become a benign dictator with extraordinary powers at his or her disposal to make, repeal and amend any laws necessary to ease the path to independence."

The overwhelming majority of the East Timorese voted in the August 30 referendum against a plan for the province to have greater autonomy within Indonesia and thus signalled their support for independence. For a lengthy period, however, the UN Special Representative will wield all powers in conjunction with a handful of appointed officials, including two deputies, a chief-of-staff and a force commander in charge of UN peacekeeping troops. The UN is already recruiting 500 senior officials from around the world to run the new administration.

The UN administration will retain the system of districts established under Portuguese colonial rule and continued by the Indonesian junta. A UN controller, who will report directly to the Special Representative, will supervise each of the 13 districts.

The UN has set as one of its top priorities the rapid establishment of courts and a police force. Annan has recommended a UN-sponsored force of 1,600 civilian police, including two armed rapid reaction units of 120 officers each to "provide specialised capabilities for crowd control and operational support". UN plans to have a judicial system operating by the end of the month, and

jails operating within days of assuming responsibility.

The proposals also provide for the replacement of the current Australian-led Interfet military force by a UN peacekeeping force in December or January. Annan has called for a force of 9,000 troops but has been opposed by the US administration, which is pushing for a reduction to 8,000 to cut costs.

Jockeying is already taking place for the leading positions in the UN administration. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has announced that his country should lead the new UN military force. Mahathir has been critical of the international pressure put on Indonesia to hold the referendum in the first place, and of the role of the Australian government in dispatching troops to the territory after the ballot.

The Australian government is pressing for one of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), other than Malaysia, to take control of the UN mission. Canberra has already made overtures to Thailand to step into the role. Last Friday, however, East Timorese leader Jose Ramos Horta opposed the appointment of an administrator from one of the ASEAN states, saying they had been “accomplices of Indonesia”. Horta and National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT) leader Xanana Gusmao have close relations with Portugal, which is keen to play a major role in its former colony.

The rivalry for key positions in the new UN administration is over will exert a dominant influence in the new established statelet in the lead up to formal independence. East Timor has important oil reserves and other resources as well as being in a strategic position in the Indonesian archipelago and the South East Asian region.

Earlier in the week Australian Trade Minister Mark Vaile organised a forum of more than 450 company representatives in Canberra to urge them to take advantages of business opportunities that were likely to open up in East Timor. He called on companies to register with the UN in order to cash in on its reconstruction program, and pointed to more long-term prospects in the coffee and tourism industries.

In East Timor, aid agencies are struggling to cope with thousands of refugees who are returning to their home towns after fleeing either to the hills, or to Indonesian West Timor. If all the refugees return from camps in West Timor it is estimated that there will be 260,000 homeless out of a total population of about 850,000. Many of those who have been displaced are without adequate food or water and face the threat of epidemics. At least 6,000

people crossed into East Timor at the border town of Maliana on Tuesday alone.

East Timor also faces the danger of a protracted civil war. Three clashes have already taken place between pro-Indonesian militia groups and Australian-led Interfet troops. The most recent occurred last Saturday when a patrol of five Australian soldiers allegedly came under attack from 20 or so militia members, some armed with automatic weapons. The Australian force claimed to have killed three militia members and injured three more in the hour-long battle before being lifted to safety by helicopter.

In a *Sydney Morning Herald* article, James Dunn, former Australian consul in Portuguese East Timor, observed: “Timorese pro-integration and militia leaders are unlikely to fade away. It appears that their ranks are being swelled by hundreds of soldiers who served in the two Timorese territorial units, Battalions 744 and 745, which have been withdrawn from East Timor, an arrangement assisted, if not organised, by TNI [Indonesian Armed Forces] officers. Their transfer will enhance the professional calibre of the militia. With TNI backing, the reformed militia are likely to attempt to set up a destabilising guerilla presence, at least in the western districts of East Timor.”

Retired Australian general Alan Stretton, who served as former chief-of-staff during the Vietnam war, warned in a television interview last Sunday that Australian soldiers would be killed and the province would become a “festering sore” for years to come. He said that Interfet, now numbering about 6,000 troops from 15 countries, was too small and that a force of 20,000 or 30,000 troops was needed to secure control of East Timor.

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