

## Is Indonesia Colonize East Timor? An Examination of Meaning

### ABSTRACT

*The problem integration of Timor Portuguese became part territory of Indonesia on 1976 open debatable in many parties. Pro and contra occurred in the event. Indonesia was regard of doing colonization over Timor Portuguese. This research examined the truth of colonization which carried on by Indonesia Government over East Timor. The research method uses historical method. The result of paper is Indonesia didn't colonize, but develop East Timor which was proven through infrastructure, education, training, and economic numbers. However, political narration significantly influences than social facts.*

**Keyword:** Colonization, East Timor, Development, Australia, Indonesia

### INTRODUCTION

The integration of Timor Portuguese become part of Indonesia in 1976 trigger polemic in Indonesia's history. This problem became controversy throughout several decade. Since Flower Revolution in 1974 that replacing status quo power in Portuguese, new history from Timor Portuguese was started.

As a part of Portuguese territory in Europe, Timor Portuguese people was facing on several option: 1) under part of Portuguese; 2) achieved fully independence; 3) integrated with Indonesia. This many option was accommodated by many political parties (Kurniadi, 2018). Internal political dynamics in Timor territory was very dynamics. There were occurred disputes among several group of political parties.

General speaking, those political dynamics finally consist of 2 interest: integrated to Indonesia or fully independence. The competition among two interest groups resulted conflict. Fretilin (Frente Revolucionaria de Timor-Leste

Independente) Party which represented behalf of independence made declaration just only their side that resulting many protests. Because didn't wanna lose, integration group build rival declaration as Declaration of Balibo that dreaming integration to Indonesia. This declaration was supported by several political parties such as UDT (Timorese Democratic Union), Kota (Klibur Oan Timor Aswain), Apodeti, and Trabalistha. conflict between two groups triggered huge civil war in Timor Portuguese territory.

Indonesia was involved on the domestic affair. Indonesia's national interest which was supported by 'West' finally influenced the Government of Indonesia to make intervention in the conflict—indirectly impacted to political stability in East Indonesia territory. The result is the government of Indonesia announced '*Operasi Seroja*' in 1975 for occupying Timor Portuguese. *Operasi Seroja* wouldn't be executed without excuse from United States of America (USA). President Soeharto had given operation planning to President USA, Gerald Ford, and Ministry of foreign, Henry Kissinger, who visiting to Jakarta (Kurniadi, 2018).

*Operasi Seroja* was successful. The Fretilin group exiled to the forests caused by operation from Indonesian military. Thought success, this operation effected to new problem chapter, namely as international law problem. The international law regard Indonesia made 'invasion' toward Timor Portuguese. Those labeling then develop to narration 'colonization' over Timor where finally became classic problem until triggering to self-determination discourse.

The main problem on that things is polemic of 'colonization' which create political narration impacting for many parties sensitively and tendensius. For group of integration supporter, narration of 'colonization' is political attack. However, for group of independence supporter, that narration is the truth which proper to be pursued.

According to the explanation, the writer will deeply understand and examine the truth over narration of 'colonization'. Is 'colonization' said proper or not, this thing need to be understood in the context of meaning deeply. This paper tries to scrutinize on problem of the word 'colonization' seriously.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The research method used is historical, consisting of heuristics, verification, interpretation, and historiography. Heuristics is the search for historical sources related to the topic. Heuristics is the initial step in writing history. Verification is the examination or assessment of the historical sources examined. Verification includes criticism that emphasizes source criticism (Wasino & Hartatik, 2018). Interpretation is the stage of interpreting facts derived from historical sources. Historiography is the stage of writing a reconstruction of the facts contained in the historical sources found (Herlina, 2008).

In this research, the author also examines the topic with a broad understanding of "colonialism." This paper examines the validity of the labeling that occurred towards Indonesia in the context of the history of relations between Indonesia and East Timor during the integration period. While it is stated that Indonesia was considered to have "colonized" East Timor, this view remains biased due to the conflicting interpretations between facts, assumptions, and political propaganda. The author's understanding of "colonialism" is an important benchmark in understanding the facts that actually happened.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Colonialism Meaning**

Colonialism is general terminology by domination of society in certain territory by society who occupied it. The word of 'colonialism' was definitely connected through the doctrine of economy, geopolitics, and culture which is from expansion of West Europe capitalism. This word of 'colony' refers to outside settlement territory of society. This is expansive and dominant.

It can be said that colonialism was total system which purposed to colony, at least on political economy and social institution. In political economy, colonialism created process of structural change which was important: 1) transfer

of colonial values; 2) effect of devastation. Firstly, it related with transfer of natural resources from the colony to mother colony such as mineral, silver, gold, and many natural resources. Secondly, it related by increasing global economic position of West Europe which effected devastation of resources in the colonial territory (Borocz & Sarkar, 2012).

By social institution, colonialism resulting hegemony, as philosopher Antonio Gramsci said. Hegemony refer to obvious transformation on education, law, religion, politic, and culture institution, including structure of society and private space. Ths hegemony change many practices of social culture which ever follow the territory of mother colony that make benefit before.

The important thing of colonialism at least connected with economic interest. The main purpose of economic colonialism is maximalization economic profit toward mother colony in the range of lowest price. The desire of colonialism is desire to integrate colonialism by controlling production upper course to lower course.

According to historian Angus Maddison, between years 1000 until 1500, it could be said that Africa and Asia contributed 75% to 80% of economic result toward human kind; in contrast, Europe only contributed between 9% and 18%. In Europe colonialism era, noted that in 1820, join result economy of Africa and Asia decrease to 64%, meanwhile the growth of Europe increased almost 23% (Borocz & Sarkar, 2012).

In study colonialism in Africa, state of colonial was 'dwarfing' local economy in their colony by restricting commerce tightly. It aimed for weakening local power so that making Europe economy stronger. Then, colonialism integrated Africa to the economic system in the world fully. However, African was made inequal in international commerce and economy, which made position of African being as slaves (Settles, 1996).

From explanation above, it can be understood that colonialism is exploitation all of resources in colonial territory for be brought to mother colony. The exploitation effected devastation and disparity which occurred in the colonial territory. In colonialism, local power was weakened so that made the exploitation

success. This reveal that colonialism made mother colony got huge profit by destroying local human rights who should got, so that make them suffered.

### **Geography of Timor**

The relations between colonialism and natural resource is very strong. Colonialism is never released of the interest of exploitation of natural resources in some territory. Thus, ambition of colonialism is monitoring how far natural resources in the territory is huge or not.

Timor territory is located in East of 'Nusa Tenggara' with wide range 14.989,375 square kilometer. Timor territory consists of part of Timor Island and 2 islands namely Jaco and Atauro Islands. The territory has totally 31 mountains which spread out from west to east. the mountains unfold rivers and valleys (Kurniadi, *Dinamika Politik Timor Timur Masa Transisi: Pengaruh terhadap Indonesia (1999-2002)*, 2018).

The important thing in geography of East Timor is extreme weather. Timor has climate which contrast each other: wet and dry climates. In west of Timor territory, the climate is wet because was influenced by tropic with hot season in short time; in contrast, east part, the climate is dry with rain season with short time. Differentiation of rain pouring always influences dryness and erosion in the Timor territory (Gunn, 2005).

The condition of land in Timor territory has composition of lime sediment, coral, red land. In Timor, dry land is everywhere, followed with bald hill. This caused land rare absorb water. The effect of extreme weather is creating condition of bad land.

Meanwhile in economic products, Timorese still work in cultivation of coffee. In coffee production, farmers also planted some of crops such as soybean and grasses for many various benefits, including value added of economy. The other natural resources which was gotten in Timor territory is sandalwood. Historically, these sandalwood resources made Portuguese nations have interest

to visit Timor, then made this territory as colony. Besides that, cotton and grasses such as savannah and steppe were profit.

In historical progress, new resource was invented which was in Timor Gap. Timor Gap could be said as dispute in Timor Sea between Timor Portuguese when became part of Portugal, Indonesia, and Australia in context maritime border. When Timor Portuguese being as East Timor—integrated with Indonesia, that dispute continue between Indonesia and Australia. In this territory, there is Greater Sunrise invented in 1974. Greater Sunrise is oil and natural gas field predicted gas reserve as amount 5,13 cubic trillion. This resource became capture resources for big state such as Australia.

### **Development or Colonization?**

Controversy about colonization of East Timor exist since integrated with Indonesia. Timor Portuguese replace name to be East Timor, a youngest province in Indonesia at that time, since 1976. Since that, East Timor became part of Indonesia officially.

However, the discussion of East Timor integration opens a new problem. This was caused because Indonesia was regarded violating international law. East Timor was called as part of 'invasion' Indonesia. This labeling grow to become narration of Timor 'colonization'. The government of Indonesia was narrated 'colonizing' East Timor so that created international polemic.

This problem needed historical examination how far the truth. Since occurred integration of East Timor, Indonesia's government was executing huge development over East Timor. Government executed the development in consist of as follow: 1) economy, finance, and industry (*Ekuin*); 2) prosperity of people; and 3) politic of security. In *Ekuin*, the government of Indonesia was prioritizing main needs; in prosperity prioritizing sector of education, social, health, religion, employment, and women roles. Then, in politic of security, government executed collaboration between local government and military-civil institution in territory of East Timor (Soemarmi, 1995).

Narration of development was often regarded as ‘Indonesianization’ of East Timor. This narration connected with process of Indonesia whereas Bahasa (Indonesia language) was learned in all over territory. Government develop education facilities throughout one decade hugely. Noted, Indonesia’s government build 565 junior school, 90 middle school; and 14 senior-high school in 1988. One year later, the government of Indonesia established University of East Timor with three faculties: Faculty of Socio-Politic, Faculty of Agriculture, and Faculty of Teaching and Education (Kurniadi & Tangkilisan, Reaching Development in East Timor; A Reobservation, 2017).

Beside that, the development also included many facilities such as infrastructure and religion facility. Building the main road occurred in East Timor territory which have quality equal with toll road. In religion, Indonesia government also created Statue King of Christ in East Timor as well as in Rio de Janeiro. In other thing, government developed agriculture training so that impacted to economic income (Purwanti, 2017).

Cost of East Timor was taken by local income which consist of two things: local genuine income (pendapatan asli daerah) and income subsidies by government (Soemarmi, 1995). Local genuine income consists of local tax, local retribution, local company, and other local income which was legal. While income subsidies by government consists of government’s contribution; other contributions which was ruled by the law. For example, the capture of subsidies budget (*anggaran*) which was given by Indonesia government to East Timor in 1980s as follows:

Table 1: Regular budget (Anggaran Rutin) of East Timor province

No.	Tahun Anggaran	Jumlah Biaya
1.	Anggaran 1980/1981	Rp7.118.476.644
2.	Anggaran 1981/1982	Rp9.240.065.000
3.	Anggaran 1982/1983	Rp8.803.101.400
4.	Anggaran 1983/1984	Rp9.189.824.000
5.	Anggaran 1984/1985	Rp20.015.062.350
	<b>Total</b>	<b>Rp54.366.529.394</b>

Source: (Kurniadi & Tangkilisan, Reaching Development in East Timor; A Reobservation, 2017)

The table is regular budget given by the government of Indonesia to East Timor province. As a part of Indonesia territory at that time, East Timor got subsidies from government to improve the territory. Year to year, it could be seen that subsidies budget lean increased, though fluctuative. This is form of affective owned by Indonesia government toward East Timor which was very big.

The third president of Indonesia, BJ Habibie, said, “there is less 93 percent of budget development of East Timor from APBN (budget of income and expense State), while left 7 percent from local genuine income (Habibie, 2006). Habibie’s statement reveals that attention from Indonesia government to East Timor is too big. Apparently, The Government of Indonesia maximized development in East Timor. Left from weakness, effort to make the territory more progress is obvious.

In various data report territorial, it depicted how progression of East Timor grow up from year to year. Data of financial notes and APBN (states budget) planning 1997/1998 explained many income data (*pendapatan asli daerah*, *pajak daerah*, *retribusi daerah*, *laba perusahaan daerah*) in East Timor province since 1989/1999 until 1995/1996. The data is described as follows (Departemen Keuangan Republik Indonesia, 1998).

Table 2: Report Income of East Timor Province

(in million rupiah)

No.	Keterangan	Repelita V		Repelita VI		Pertumbuhan rata-rata (%)
		1989/1990	1993/1994	1994/1995	1995/1996	
1.	Pendapatan asli daerah	1.377,76	4.511,70	5.598,35	5.443,58	25,70%
2.	Penerimaan pajak daerah	626,1	2.104,98	2.662,63	2.859,29	28,80%
3.	Penerimaan retribusi daerah	43	343,5	513,88	701,5	59,30%
4.	Penerimaan laba perusahaan daerah	224,14	302,09	538,36	417,1	10,90%

Sumber: (Departemen Keuangan Republik Indonesia, 1998)

*Managed by writer*

According to the data, it can be understood that in economic number, East Timor was processing development which was grow up throughout years. Annual growth which in side of *pendapatan asli daerah* (original income territorial)



since 1989/1990 until 1995/1996 grow amount 25,7%. *Pendapatan asli daerah* of East Timor growth good from period to period, though there was a bit decreasing in period 1995/1996. However, the thing is didn't impact to East timor income significantly.

Similar with annual growth of *penerimaan pajak daerah* (tax income territorial) was increasing from period to period, as showed on the table. By increasing *penerimaan pajak daerah*, it signed that there was occurred increasing standard of living toward East Timor society so that they could pay taxes.

Any that also occurred on *pendapatan retribusi daerah* (retribution income territorial) and *penerimaan laba perusahaan daerah* (profit income of territorial company). *Penerimaan retribusi daerah* was getting increased throughout periods of Repelita (five years development planning). Meanwhile, *penerimaan laba perusahaan daerah* also increased since period 1989/1990 until 1994/1995, but decreased in the next period. However, both of them had better development in outline. There was decreasing, but didn't have huge impact.

According to table 2, it can be understood that income report of East Timor as province having increasing and progression significantly. It means showing management of East Timor which experience the development massively. Every year, more many East Timor people could pay taxes which was signed increasement of taxes income. In other words, their standard of living increased and their life was more prosper.

In the context, apparently not too exactly if Indonesia was regarded to do colonization toward East Timor. Because, in explaining before, the government of Indonesia allocated fund to East Timor which was logically harming them. The result of providing help was increasement of income territory which intensively running from year to year so that made East Timor citizen more prosper indirectly.

Colonization is related with huge exploitation of natural resources significantly for be brought to mother colony. In East Timor, there is no natural

resources which can be exploited because condition of land is not too good. It was only Timor Gap that became the best commodity at that time. However, Timor Gap was more benefit for Australia than Indonesia, especially after East Timor people do self-determination and choose the independence way. The famous political figure, Xanana Gusmao, even was disappointed with Australia since 1991 that finally approved Timor Gap Agreement. He regarded Australia's approval running Timor Gap conference with Indonesia showing betrayal evidence from Australia to East Timor people (Qunuri, 202).

The government of Indonesia didn't make East Timor citizen weak. East Timor citizen was powered for achieving education for increasing quality of human resources. This was depicted in many education infrastructures build and various training given. They got construction by Indonesia government for the future territory.

Different with Portugal when running colonization. When Timor Portuguese became part of Portugal colony, sandalwood resources became favorite for Portugal state. Before technology growth rapidly, sandalwood has many important functions, started from medicines, perfume, religion ritual, and industry. Sandalwood commodity was brought to Portugal.

The impacted from injustice, there was many revolt which was by Timor people toward Portugal government, since 18<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The famous revolution was revolution in Viqueque in 1959. Besides, The Portugal government didn't want to develop education in East Timor. Throughout centuries, The Portugal government only build junior school which located in center of districts and build one senior high school in Liciu, Dily city. Since that, it can be realized that Portugal is actually running colonialization based on the perspective above.

When occurred internal conflict in the Portugal, in 1974, the state didn't want to defend Timor colony as part of their colony. Portugal expressly leave the Timor territory with reasoning give option toward Timorese. As a colonial state, the government of Portugal of course understood where is potentially place or not. In other words, Timor territory is not exactly place for be colonized by

Portugal. Not only because the territory is so far from the mother colony, but the territory is no potential important resources.

In outline, what is done by Indonesia government toward East Timor in integration era is not colonization, but development. It caused penetration of Indonesia to East Timor is not based on measurement of colonization which had aims to maximized huge profit. In the context, the government of Indonesia precisely provided funding to East Timor so that the territory can grow. The development become obviously when development physic and number real.

### **Political Propaganda**

Why narration of colonization can reveal in running development of Timor rapidly? Spoken word of colonization was reveal when Diplomat of Fretilin, Jose Ramos Horta, said in the front of podium when achieving peace Nobel prize in 1996.

Ramos Horta said, “In spite of the brutal Indonesian colonization and cultural repression of the past 21 years that attempted to eradicate a language and culture that reached our region almost 500 centuries ago, in East Timor this rich centuries-old language survives stubbornly (Ramos-Horta, 2025).”

Narration of colonization is related with other terms such as invasion, violence, and human rights violation that was carried on by government and military of Indonesia. This can be searched from political policy that occurred in 1975 when Operasi Seroja running. Polemic occurred because Indonesia was regarded violate humanity.

Since Operasi Seroja run, many parties mentioned Indonesia running invasion toward Timor Portugal that people conflicting among others. This political determination is not left from foreign intervention, namely USA intervention for defending communism influence. Indonesia’s action was regarded violating international law, but in early successful vague because of aid develop state.

Sentiments of violence and human rights violations resurfaced in 1991, during the Santa Cruz incident. Indonesia was accused of carrying out a "massacre" against the people of Dili, resulting in 19 deaths and 91 injuries (Kurniadi, *Dinamika Politik Timor Timur Masa Transisi: Pengaruh terhadap Indonesia (1999-2002)*, 2018).

This moment became a tactical move by the Australian press to spread fake news. The Guardian journalist, Maggie O'Konue, investigated the Santa Cruz incident for three days, particularly regarding the killing of more than 100 priests and nuns by Indonesian military. However, her findings were contradictory. She declared that the mass killings that occurred during the incident were fake news. In a subsequent investigation, The Herald Sun journalist, Andrew Bolt, stated that there was no genocide and mass killings committed by the Indonesian military.

In fact, the narrative of colonialism is inseparable from the interest in seizing natural resources, particularly in relation to the Greater Sunrise in the Timor Gap. After the Cold War in the early 1990s, the global political landscape shifted from bipolar to unipolar. This reinforced the narrative of democratization and human rights as part of the United States' ideology. The Timor Gap became an ideological battleground between Indonesia which still authoritarian and United States that democratic.

Australia, as a close ally of the United States, criticized Indonesia's various violations in its administration of East Timor. Nevertheless, Australia maintained good relations with Indonesia. Over time, the Australian government, through the Labor Party, finally recognized East Timor's integration with Indonesia, announced in 1986. This was all part of Australia's strategy to secure the Timor Gap as a vital resource.

In other words, the colonial narrative promoted by various parties tends to be more political propaganda than fact. The truth behind Timor's integration into Indonesia is that development gradually advanced East Timor. This fact is evidenced by various infrastructure, education, training/mentoring, and

economic development figures. Unfortunately, social facts are often overshadowed by political narratives.

## **CONCLUSION**

The history of East Timor is often biased in distinguishing between fact and assumption. This is because East Timor's history contains numerous political tendencies imposed by foreign countries on the issue. The polemic surrounding East Timor's colonization has become a topic of ongoing historical debate.

The colonial narrative cannot be separated from its meaning, which implies that colonization is the exploitation of one nation's resources by another. Colonization weakens and harms a nation. However, the social facts that occurred in East Timor during its integration with Indonesia contradicted this established understanding of colonialism. East Timor experienced rapid development, supported by funding from the central government. East Timorese citizens experienced improved living standards, East Timorese incomes increased, and the region expanded significantly. This, of course, contradicts the context of the previously outlined meaning of colonization.

While there are social facts that East Timor's development yielded positive results, these facts can be obscured by a constructed narrative. The colonial narrative constructed by Western media far outweighs these facts. Thus, this obscures the reality of development in East Timor during its integration with Indonesia.

## REFERENCES

- Borocz, J., & Sarkar, M. (2012). *Colonialism: The Encyclopedia of Global Studies*. Sage.
- Departemen Keuangan Republik Indonesia. (1998). *Nota Keuangan dan Anggaran Pendapatan Belanja Negara Rahun Anggaran 1997/1998*. Jakarta: Departemen Keuangan Republik Indonesia.
- Gunn, G. C. (2005). *500 Tahun Timor Loro Sae*. Jakarta: Insist Press.
- Habibie, B. (2006). *Detik-Detik yang Menentukan: Jalan Panjang Indonesia Menuju Demokrasi*. Jakarta: THC Mandiri.
- Herlina, N. (2008). *Metode Sejarah*. Bandung: Satya Historika.
- Kurniadi, A. (2018). *Dinamika Politik Timor Timur Masa Transisi: Pengaruh terhadap Indonesia (1999-2002)*. Depok: FIB UI.
- Kurniadi, A., & Tangkilisan, Y. B. (2017). Reaching Development in East Timor; A Reobservation. *Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on Malaysia-Indonesia Relations (PAHMI 12)*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya.
- Purwanti, N. (2017, September 13). Wawancara Dinamika Politik Timor Timur Masa Transisi: Pengaruh terhadap Indonesia (1999-2002). (A. Kurniadi, Interviewer)
- Qunuri, R. (202). *Dinamika Kebijakan Politik Pertahanan Australia terhadap Indonesia terkait Timor Timur 1976-1991*. Depok: FIB UI.
- Ramos-Horta, J. (2025, July 3). *Nobel Prize lecture*. Retrieved from The Nobel Prize: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1996/ramos-horta/lecture/>

- Settles, J. D. (1996). *The Impact of Colonialism on African Economic Development* . Knoxville: TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange.
- Soemarmi, A. (1995). *Sekilas Tentang Pemerintahan Propinsi Daerah Tingkat I Timor-Timur*. Semarang: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Universitas Diponegoro.
- Wasino, & Hartatik, E. S. (2018). *Metode Penelitian Sejarah Dari Riset Hingga Penulisan*. Yogyakarta: Magnum Pustaka Utama.