

Transcript

Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Peter Bartu, and I'm going to talk to you about my experiences working with the United Nations in East Timor in 1999 helping prepare the popular consultation by which the East Timorese people would decide through referendum whether or not they would remain a part of Indonesia or would seek to become independent.

I came into this experience having already worked with the UN in Cambodia for two years, 1991 to 1993, with the political transition I've seen by the UN, which included a multi party election that was central to that. The experience in East Timor in 1999 was different in the sense that the referendums as essentially zero sum games, and, you know, someone wins and someone loses.

And in the East Timorese context, you had circumstances where the country had been under Indonesian occupation since 1975, and many East Timorese had benefited from those circumstances, had worked for the Indonesian administration, had business ties in Indonesia and also within East Timor itself. And so if the pro-independence camp won the referendum, as it were, which they eventually did, it would mean that the people who were pro-Indonesia would lose out, or lose everything, or that's how they perceived what a loss would bring.

So what this meant was that there were people and groups, and militia groups specifically, who rallied behind the pro-integration cause based on the fear that they'll lose everything. These militia groups were created out of everyday East Timorese. Young men behind them were Indonesian military and special forces, and they were designed to try and secure an outcome in the referendum that was in their favor. So this, everyone was broadly aware of this prior to going into East Timor in '99, and we knew, we knew that the, you know, the prospect for political violence was very high, that was going to be a very difficult exercise.

And, you know, we didn't have much time. We had an electoral calendar of about three months that had been hastily devised after an agreement on the fifth of May between the government of Portugal and the United Nations and the Indonesian government. And according to the agreement between these three parties, Portugal, being their former colonial power, all of the security throughout the referendum would be in the hands of the Indonesian police.

The UN would have no responsibility for security. However, in terms of the UN teams that deployed to the field, there would be an electoral component that would made up of a couple of electoral professionals, but also including a large UN volunteer contingent. There would be a head of political affairs, which was my role, more or less in a leadership position for all of the UN in the district Maliana, Bobonaro, there was a small UN military observer presence which was to liaise with the Indonesian military, which had a presence at the sub district level across the area, and there was a UN Police contingent that was liaising with the Indonesian police to help advise them on providing security throughout the process, what made maliana In all our combined strength would grow to about 60 internationals and about 100 locally engaged staff to help deliver the electoral registration and the ballot referendum on the day.

So when I arrived in Maliana and Bobonaro district, Maliana being the capital, it was very clear to me that Bobonaro was important for a number of reasons. One was it was right on the border with West Timor, the adjacent province in Indonesia.

Maliana was, in fact, the capital or the headquarters of all the militia groups, and the man called Joao Tavares was their leader. And the militia groups had representation all across East Timor at the district level, but with their headquarters in Maliana, they were particularly, you know, visible and so forth. So we had Indonesian police, Indonesian military. We had the East Timorese militia. We had a pro-Indonesian local administration, largely staffed by East Timorese. And in the backdrop, and in the background, you had a number of other constituencies.

One was a student movement, very vocal and visible, which was very pro-independence and was agitating for independence, and, you know, socializing the idea with the population. You had the population themselves, who were caught between the two sides, as it were, who had to go through the process of being registered and then casting their vote. And you had up in the mountains, and the hills behind Maliana and the jungles of East Timor hold out remnants of what was called Falintil which was the indigenous guerilla organization which had been fighting the Indonesian occupation since 1975.

And, you know, the atmosphere when I arrived was very highly charged. On a daily basis. I had to deal with all of these different constituencies. My days usually ran for about 14 hours and would invariably involve, you know, touching base with the military, Indonesian military, or the police, about incidents that had happened, often responding in like an emergency services, like a firefighter, to acts of political environments that had happened across the district, and also trying, spending a great deal of my time trying to keep the UN team, as it were, coherent, working together and trying to allay their fears. And you know, as a process slowly unfolded, the tension just rose dramatically, exponentially, and UN staff began to be very concerned about their own safety for very obvious reasons.

We'd had a number of incidents of political violence directly outside the doors of the UN compound. The UN compound in Maliana itself had been attacked very early in the process, where militia groups had attacked pro-independence demonstrators outside the doors of the UN compound, and in the melee that ensued, they had thrown stones and which had, you know, caused a number of injuries, including among the UN staff. Later on, they would almost batter down the doors of the compound as well.

UN staff deploying into the field, going out on a daily basis, would be these, mainly the UN volunteers working with their UN East Timorese, locally engaged staff doing the voter registration and so forth, of course, are on the front line of this process, and would often, you know, with very little training, have to deal with the very volatile situations or in just in a routine circumstances, East Timorese fearful for their lives, coming forward and presenting

information to them about militia activities in the local area and so forth. So again, a very highly charged environment.

There's one other constituency also had to deal with, which is the Indonesian Foreign Ministry had two liaison officers in Maliana, also with whom I had a great deal to do with, who were keeping an eye on the UN and making sure that it was doing...following its own mandate, but also trying to help de-conflict with the different institutions in the Indonesian government that were present in Maliana. It's important to understand at this time that Indonesia itself was going through its own extraordinary transition after President Suharto had been forced to step down in nationwide demonstrations in 1998, and so it was going through its own transition. And even the different institutions within its security apparatus, the Indonesian military and the police and so forth, were in a process of transition. So there was nobody really fully in charge on the Indonesian side. And as I said earlier, their police were the ones who are responsible for security.

So in this environment, the UN deployed, the UNV's (UN volunteers) would go out on a daily basis and do their work.

We successfully got through the voter registration process, and it became very clear after, in this three month process, after he got to the the end of the second month, the end of July, that essentially the mood among the population and the reading of the outcome was essentially becoming clear to most of the stakeholders, that is, that the pro-independence groups were most likely going to win the referendum on the 30th of August.

And so this led to a great deal of introspection, initially among the different parts of the Indonesian government, and a great deal of anger on the part of the pro-militia groups, pro-Indonesian militia groups, who realized that in fact, they were perhaps going to lose everything, which is essentially what transpired.

And so they devised this plan by which, in the event of a loss in the referendum, they would evacuate all of their supporters into West Timor, and they would essentially destroy all the infrastructure that was left behind. And so as part of these plans, it also meant that anyone who was supporting the pro-integration and pro-Indonesian movement began the process of evacuating all of their livestock and all of their earthly positions from the town of Maliana and its surrounding districts in the days actually leading up to the referendum.

So this is quite an unnerving side, as you can probably appreciate. Here you are, you know, conducting a referendum about the future of a country, and you know, the peak the town in which you're moving and operating is slowly becoming a ghost town, and its industries are shutting down. And you can see clearly people on the sides of the road preparing themselves for the violence afterwards, in terms of manufacturing homemade firearms, homemade swords and spears and so forth. So this didn't help group morale by any means. And we had some very

difficult discussions internally among the UN staff within Maliana about what we could do, and what we should do. And of course, these kinds of discussions were happening in Dili, in the capital, and in UN headquarters in New York.

And you know, when the evidence of the impending violence became too clear, or, you know, could no longer be ignored, we've been communicating this information to Dili and higher for some time. The UN sought guidance from Xanana Gusmao, the leader of the pro-independence movement, the East Timorese leader, and they said, look, the conditions are not right for this referendum. We know that if we proceed, most likely the pro-independence group will win. And we have, you know, evidence of these plans that everything will be destroyed. Perhaps we should stop and wait for the right environment to be created by which we can proceed.

And Xanan Gusmao was very clear, and he said, look, we will never get this historic opportunity again. You have to proceed and do whatever it takes to make sure this act of self determination happens. And so with that very clear direction, the UN went right off. We're going to proceed. And so we did.

And on the you know, in the campaigning, the final campaign period during August, leading up to the vote itself, the political violence just slowly increased. There were actually days, a couple of days in particular, where I, as the political officer outside the compound in Maliana, was running a triage service where, literally, people with, you know, stab wounds and broken heads from machete wounds and samurai sword attacks would be descending onto the UN compound expecting help, which we couldn't provide, and I didn't have to send them off to the local police station where they could file their reports, knowing that very little could be done. But the intensity of this only increased and became an aspect of our daily lives, almost again, in very dramatic circumstances.

And then finally, on the day, August, the 30th referendum day the, you know, East Timorese people turned out to vote. They came down from the mountains, from the valleys. They traveled long distances, and as we knew subsequently, after the count, the country voted 78% to become an independent country.

No sooner had the votes been counted at the... No sooner had the ballots been cast on the 30th of August, then, even before the vote was actually announced, then the militia put in their plan to seal the district with checkpoints across the road, complete the evacuation process, and then begin actively targeting the pro-independence supporters student movement, Falintil members, and community people who had not come forth in support of the pro-integration independence movement. It was in these circumstances that there was a major massacre of about 50 people at the local police station by the militia. There were increasing attacks on the UN staff, and then the UN eventually withdrew after a couple of days back into Dili because the situation had become untenable.

And so basically, just by way of conclusion, I want to say that, you know, the UN successfully delivered the vote. It was unable to prevent the violence afterwards.

I, as you know, practitioner in the field who experienced this and have been in other operational environments, have rarely encountered, you know, such a such an intense experience, and I've been in a number of them, but I was able, in 2019, to return to East Timor as part of the 20th anniversary celebrations of that vote for independence. And I was able to meet a number of East Timorese that I'd worked with at that time, one in particular, Dulce de Jesus Suarez, who was a local bureaucrat in the Maliana office in 1999, she was actually the Education Minister for the independent East Timor. And you know, we had a marvelous experience sharing that, that extraordinary experience from 1999 together. And me feeling some vindication and being heartily received and congratulated by almost all Tomprese for what we had done, and I was able to go back to Maliana and Bobinaro district and meet the communities there as well.

And then one final person I got to meet was a man called Fidelis Marghalaen, who had a prominent role in government in 1999 and probably a future Prime Minister of the country. I'd worked closely with his father, who was a pro-independence leader in 1999 in Maliana, who was one of those who was killed in the violence after the ballot. And it was nice to meet him and be able to share with him some memories of his father, which he had not been able to do, you know, understand through that particularly difficult period.

So without doubt, one of the most remarkable experiences I've had with the UN, a genuine historical moment. And, you know, it doesn't change the underlying aspect in terms of, you know, electoral support and electoral administration referendums are zero sum games, and they're extraordinarily difficult. Someone's always going to lose.

Thank you.