

The 1959 Rebellion in East Timor: Unresolved Tensions and an Unwritten History

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Almost exactly 50 years ago, the two-week-long ‘1959 Rebellion’ - sometimes called the ‘Viqueque Rebellion’, broke out in Portuguese Timor. Up to several hundred Timorese were reportedly killed, scores imprisoned and 64 were exiled - to Lisbon and Africa. No Portuguese are known to have been killed or injured in the uprising.

In 2005, the ‘*Chega !*’ report by the CAVR stated that background to the 1959 uprising ‘remains largely unexplained’ (CAVR 2005, 28). The report added that ‘the extent of official Indonesian involvement in the 1959 Rebellion is still disputed’ (64). Further, the official website of the Timor-Leste Government makes no mention at all of the Rebellion in its brief section on ‘History’.

So – what happened? How should the Rebellion be treated in the writing and teaching of Timor-Leste’s history - by Timorese academics and educators? What are some of the principal sources of information, and are there questions still outstanding? This short article describes the Rebellion and identifies some of the still contentious issues associated with that uprising and its aftermath.

The Rebellion

Inspired by the independence of neighbouring Indonesia, the aims of the Rebellion in 1959 reportedly sought to break with Portuguese rule – and to integrate with the Republic of Indonesia. The involvement of a small number of Indonesians in the Rebellion – ie the Indonesian Consul in Dili and a small group of then recently-arrived exiles, has been a sensitive, contentious and complicating issue. The 1959 Rebellion was quelled without any clashes or bloodshed in Dili – but the violence and repression in the Viqueque area exacerbated ethno-linguistic tensions (Gunter 2007, p.29) that linked to later violence in that area in 1975-1978, 1999-2002, mid-2007 and, most recently, in early 2009.

In the mid-1950s, there was growing discontent in Portuguese Timor. The poorer class of *mestiço* – those of mixed race, were dissatisfied with their economic position – with most employed in the insufficiently-paid lower categories of the civil service. Human rights abuses were common-place in Portuguese Timor – including physical (ie corporal) punishment by whipping, by both government officials and landowners. The Timorese also suffered under an increasing tax burden – a head tax, conscription for labour, and the forced sale of their produce at low prices. In 1956, the Portuguese Under-Secretary of State for Overseas Affairs visited Portuguese Timor and was appalled at such abuses. Before his departure from Dili, Sr Carlos Abecassis passed a 17-page instruction to Governor César Serpa Rosa directing that abuses and social injustices be corrected – including the ‘immediate abolition of corporal punishment used to compel natives to work or to increase their pace of work’ by ‘overseers, *Posto* chiefs or anyone else’ (Barata 1998, 202-203). However, little changed in Portuguese Timor.

A small group of Timorese in Dili and Baucau were inspired by Indonesia’s independence and were particularly encouraged by the Afro-Asian Conference hosted by Indonesia in Bandung in 1955. The young Timorese activists increased their contact with the Indonesian Consul in Dili – and the Portuguese authorities, alert to discontent, increased censorship and warnings.

By late 1958, the Timorese anti-colonial activists – though still small in number, had reportedly established small cells in several towns outside Dili – in Aileu, Ermera, Same, Manufahi, Manatuto, Baucau, Viqueque, Uatolari and Lospalos. However, a little earlier in March 1958, an event occurred that was to impact significantly on the nascent anti-colonial movement. Indonesian West Timor had been under the fragile control of a Sulawesi-based separatist group - the *Permesta*, for about a year until it was defeated by Jakarta’s forces in March 1958. A small party of *Permesta* followers – 13 soldiers and a civilian, fled from West Timor to the Portuguese enclave of Oecussi and sought political asylum. Accepted by the Portuguese, the ‘*Permesta 14*’ were moved to Baucau – and resided in a guest house, the *Estalagem de Santiago* - nowadays the *Pousada de Baucau*.

In Dili, the small group of Timorese activists increased their still-limited activity – receiving enthusiastic support from the Indonesian Consul, Nazwar Sutan Jacob Indra - a Sumatran. At first, the Consul appeared to avoid the ‘*Permesta 14*’ – but, by December 1958, had met with them in Baucau. In late December 1958, eight months after their arrival - and following an internal dispute, five of the Indonesians in Baucau were moved south to live in Viqueque. There, the Indonesians also attracted the attention and admiration of Timorese youth – including by their skilled participation in local football matches.

Meanwhile back in Dili, a plan for an uprising was being developed by the group of Timorese activists – led by Luís da Costa Rego, a Sino-Timorese *mestiço* who was employed as a civil servant (see Chamberlain 2009, Annex E for ‘pen pictures’ of 68 rebels). The Timorese conspirators – most civil servants, originally planned the uprising for 28 May 1959 – when the two major Portuguese recreational clubs in Dili would be holding functions to celebrate the anniversary of their founding. However, in the first days of May 1959, the date for the Rebellion was delayed until 31 December 1959 – ie to New Year’s Eve.

The rebel’s plan - an attack to seize control of Dili, was later described by the Governor of Portuguese Timor - Filipe Barata (Barata, 1998, p.59). In essence, a group including nine of the *Permesta* Indonesians would march from Baucau to Dili and begin the uprising. Seizing installations - and concurrent with an uprising in Aileu: ‘All would be completed in an hour, and Indonesian flags then flown at all the seized locations.’

However, the plan had been already been compromised to the Portuguese authorities in early 1959. There are several versions of this betrayal, but it appears that one of the Timorese activists passed information to the Bishop of Dili – who informed the authorities (Chamberlain 2009, 51).

In early June, the acting Governor directed that the conspirators in Dili - and two in Baucau, be arrested. In the first days of June, the Administrator of Viqueque, Artur Marques Ramos, was told of the planned uprising and the arrests of the failed rebels in Dili and Baucau. However, Administrator Ramos found reports of involvement by the Indonesian exiles to be ‘not believable’ (Barata 1998, 63).

With the plan exposed and the arrests in Dili and Baucau, the plotters in Viqueque decided to take action. On the afternoon of Sunday 7 June, the rebel leadership in Viqueque ordered an attack on the government *Posto* at Uatolari northeast of Viqueque town - an area populated principally by the Naueti ethnic group – which was successful. Back in Viqueque town - very late on Sunday evening and after a period of *tuak*-drinking, about 30 rebels attacked the offices and residence of the Portuguese Administrator in Viqueque Town – but Administrator Ramos escaped north to the *Posto* of Ossu. The rebels next seized Uato-Carabau east of Uatolari – the ‘heartland’ of the Naueti people. After a three-day delay forced by heavy rain, the rebels then moved north and attacked the small fort at Baguia – but were repulsed and withdrew to the Uatolari/Uato-Carabau area.

The Portuguese assembled a strong force to defeat the rebels – mobilizing Timorese *arraiais* (warriors) from Baucau, Venilale and Ossu. A further force moved on the rebels from the east – from Lautem, with *arraiais* from the Fataluku and Makalero ethnic groups. On 17 June, Administrator Ramos and Captain Barreiros summarily executed seven rebels at the Bebui River in Uatolari (da Costa Lopes 1959, 1-2). The campaign against the rebels in Viqueque and southeast Baucau reportedly ended on 18 June and the ‘*arraiais* returned to their areas’.

Up to several hundred people were probably killed by the Portuguese-led forces. Estimates vary widely from an unbelievable ‘40,000’ to a less than a hundred (Chamberlain 2009, 54-55). No figures on casualties are known to have been published by Portuguese authorities.

The rebel leadership in Viqueque was captured and taken to Dili – together with four of the five Indonesians. One of the Indonesians had been killed in Uatolari – Jobert Moniaga from Manado. The nine Indonesians in Baucau were also arrested.

Into Exile

However, before the arrival in Dili of the captured Viqueque rebels, the first group of rebels who had been arrested in early June (in Dili, Baucau, Aileu and Letefoho) – totaling 11, had already been sent to Lisbon aboard the passenger vessel *N/M India*, departing Dili on 8 June. Interestingly, the Indonesian Consul, Nazwar Jacob, also left Dili – as scheduled, on the vessel *India* on that day.

About 12 weeks later - on 4 October 1959, 57 of the rebel prisoners to be sent into exile left Dili on the *India* enroute to Lisbon via the Suez Canal. These prisoners comprised: 52 Timorese – including four of ‘Arab descent’; the four Indonesian ‘ringleaders’; and one ‘special status’ Timorese prisoner – Francisco de Araújo, who had been a member of the *Conselho de Governo* in Dili.

Enroute to Lisbon – the four Indonesians briefly escaped from the *India* as the vessel was entering Singapore – by jumping overboard in the darkness, but they were later returned to the ship by the Singaporean authorities.

While the *India* was in the southern Atlantic, authorities in Lisbon decided that 52 of the Timorese would be detained in Angola - where they were disembarked at Lobito on 26 November 1959. They were then moved to the Bié penal colony on Angola’s central highlands plateau. However, the four Indonesians – and the ‘special status’ prisoner, Francisco de Araújo, remained aboard the *India* and were imprisoned in Lisbon.

In Angola, the exiled rebels appear to have been well-treated – with rebels later commenting that, unlike Dili, there was no torture. In late May 1960, the 11 Timorese, four Indonesians and Francisco de Araújo – ie who had been imprisoned in Lisbon, were transferred to Angola. Investigations and trials were conducted – and after 15 months of imprisonment in Angola, 32 of the deportees – essentially those ‘not considered guilty’, were released in February 1961 – with *liberdade condicional*, but were required to reside and seek employment in the Bié province capital, Silva Porto. Interestingly, those ‘not considered guilty’ and released conditionally included those from Aileu, Baucau, Letefoho – and most of those from Dili. On 27 May 1961, a further group of 31 – ‘the most responsible for the incident’, were similarly released. In August 1961, half of the rebels (31) were sent from Angola to southern Mozambique - to the *Colonato do Limpopo*, where they became ‘restricted transmigrants’. Over the next several decades, rebels were progressively allowed to leave Angola and Mozambique – with most returning to Timor, although many elected to live in Portugal.

The 1970s

In Portuguese Timor in 1974 - following Portugal’s Carnation Revolution, several of the returned rebel exiles were among the 36 founders of the Apodeti political party. These former rebels arranged for the publication of a booklet that included a six-page ‘*Memorandum*’ written by Amaro de Araújo in exile in Angola in 1960 describing the Rebellion and its causes (Araújo 1974). In 1976, following the Indonesian occupation, Apodeti followers – including ex-rebels, were favoured by the Indonesian administration. Some ex-rebels became officials and others became members of the local parliaments and businessmen. However, a small number of the returned ex-rebels were pro-Fretilin – and some of their children and close relatives were active in the armed and clandestine resistance movements.

As mentioned earlier, after 1959 in Viqueque District, many villagers – principally Naueti, had lost land and livestock that was appropriated by Timorese loyal to the Portuguese regime – principally to Makassae speakers. During the Indonesian *Timor Timur* period, the Naueti recovered many of these losses - and the Naueti appear to have been ‘advantaged’ by the Indonesian administration.

In the early 1990s, official Indonesian history texts for primary and secondary schools included sections on the ‘Viqueque Rebellion of 1959’ (Gonggong & Zuhdi 1992, 42-45). This began a period during which Indonesia more actively sought to ‘valorize’ the Rebellion as the early struggle of the Timorese people to integrate into the Republic of Indonesia (Gusmão 1995; Rohi 1995; Gunter 2007; Chamberlain 2009, 81-85) - and ‘Integration Pioneer’ medals were presented to former 1959 rebels.

In Dili in November 1992, the former rebel José Manuel Duarte announced at a press conference that he was preparing a case against Portugal on ‘human rights abuses in East Timor’ – and that this initiative was supported by his nephew, the Governor. This action appears to have been precipitated by a statement made by the Portuguese President, Mário Soares (over *Radio Nederland* on 30 October 1992) to the effect that no human rights violations had occurred in Timor during Portuguese rule.

In Viqueque Town on 10 November 1995, the East Timor Governor - Abílio Soares, laid the foundation stone for the ‘Viqueque Struggle’ monument in the Town’s ‘Freedom Square’. The monument, a tall column topped by a large metal Garuda (a mythical Hindu bird, Indonesia’s national symbol) was completed in early 1999 - but panels and engraving were not finished before the departure of the Indonesian administration later that year. Since the withdrawal of the Indonesian forces in late 1999, the base of the monument has been covered with graffiti.

Continuing Ethnic Violence in Viqueque: 1999-2009

In 1999, many of the former rebels and their families supported the autonomy option in the Popular Consultation – and several later moved to West Timor. With the withdrawal of the Indonesian administration, inter-ethnic disputes became more tense in northeastern Viqueque as pro-independence villagers - principally Makassae from the villages of Makadiki and Matahoi, sought to recover land and property from Naueti who had been advantaged during the Indonesian occupation period. UNTAET established a ‘Mediation Council’ in June 2000, but little progress was made on the over 130 registered disputes (Oliveira 2002, 6). However, Timorese authorities in Dili have appeared at times reluctant to support those who they see as having benefited during Indonesian rule.

In late October 2002, inter-group violence and theft of livestock broke out in Uatolari. Clementino dos Reis Amaral, a KOTA parliamentarian from Viqueque stated: ‘The events in Uatolari are an inheritance from our forefathers that is difficult to eradicate. The culture of violence in the area where the majority are Makasae and Nau-Oti [*sic*] speakers, has occurred over three periods (Portuguese, Indonesian and Independence). ... The culture of violence in Viqueque occurs in the areas of Ossu, Uatolari and Viqueque – while the Sub-Districts of Uato-Kerbau and Lacluta are invariably secure and peaceful. ... The incidents at Uatolari are an expression of the hatred, enmity and revenge related to the events of 1959-1974 (the Portuguese period) and 1975-1999 (the Indonesian occupation).’ (*Suara Timor Lorosae* 2002).

In following years, attempts were made by the Timor-Leste Government, UNTAET (and subsequent UN missions) and parliamentarians to resolve these long-standing disputes – but with limited success, and there were occasional outbreaks of violence (Tilman & Pereira 2002).

In Viqueque in late March 2007 - in the lead-up to the first round of the 9 April 2007 Presidential Election, tensions between pro-Fretilin elements (principally Makassae speakers) and Ramos-Horta/Xanana Gusmão supporters resulted in clashes. Violence escalated in mid-April, and several hundred villagers fled into the hills from the Naueti villages of Besoro, Babulo, Afaloikai and Kadilale in Uatolari Sub-District. Several Fretilin militants were subsequently arrested for ‘spreading ethnic conflict between the Makassae and Naueti’ (*Suara Timor Lorosae* 2007). In the second week of August, 110 homes in Uatolari were set on fire – and former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, in a television interview on 13 August 2007, explained that ‘the violence was a result of ethnic conflict between Uatolari Naueti and Makassae’. Hundreds of Naueti villagers from eastern Uatolari Sub-District reportedly fled eastward into the adjacent Naueti ‘heartland’ of Uato-Carabau Sub-District. Inquiries into the violence were subsequently undertaken by the National Parliament’s Committee B and the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT). In late June 2008, an element of the Timor-Leste Police Reserve Unit – ie ‘field police’, was established at ‘Webui’ in Uatolari.

Following further violence in January 2009, a traditional ‘*nahe biti bo’ot*’ (‘spreading the large mat’) meeting was held in Viqueque Town on 28 February to reduce tensions and facilitate the re-integration of displaced people. A UN report commented: ‘Conflict in Viqueque dates back to 1959 when there was an uprising against Portuguese colonialists. Rivalries between pro- and anti-independence groups during periods of Portuguese and Indonesian occupation have never been quelled.’ (UN OCHA 2009).

An Appeal from Bishop Belo

In early June 2009, Nobel Prize laureate Dom C.F.X. Belo published a six-page article – ‘*A Revolta de 1959*’, that included discussion of the ‘*causas remotas*’ and ‘*causas proximas*’ of the Rebellion. Dom Belo concluded his article (Belo 2009, 6) with:

‘To all those who lost their lives because of the so-called ‘Revolt of 1959’, I – as a Timorese who witnessed with my own eyes and ears the physical and mental violence in my hometown of Baucau, bow my head as a sign of respect and solidarity. To some extent, I take the liberty to affirm they also have contributed to the Independence of our Motherland – to them I offer my prayers and respect.’

Some Questions

Outstanding and still contentious aspects of the Rebellion require further study – including:

- Did the abuses and injustices of the Portuguese regime justify rebellion?
- Did the rebels intend a violent uprising as alleged by Portuguese officials?
- Was “Djakarta” involved in encouraging the Rebellion – or did the “disturbed” Indonesian Consul in Dili act independently in his encouragement?
- How many Timorese were killed in the *Circunscrições* of Viqueque and Baucau - (estimates range from 50 to 40,000)?
- Were the rebels and their supporters dealt with unjustly - are reparations appropriate?
- Can the Rebellion be interpreted as a legitimate step on the road to the independence of Timor-Leste - as suggested by Dom Ximenes Belo’s article of 5 June 2009?
- How should the Rebellion be treated in Timor-Leste’s history – including in teaching syllabi for schools?
- Can a ‘balanced’ treatment of Rebellion contribute to reducing

These are but some questions – and it’s appropriate that these – and other questions, be addressed by the Timorese people

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