

# A Timorese triumph

by [Dean Peerman](#) in the [September 12, 2001](#) issue

After more than 400 years of foreign occupation and domination, East Timor is getting a taste of freedom and self-rule. On August 30 the people of this long-beleaguered island—the only predominantly Christian region in the Indonesian archipelago—joyfully waited in long lines in the hot sun to select an 88-member assembly that will write the new nation’s constitution and become its first parliament. (The first presidential election is planned for early next year.) Although 16 political parties were in contention on the assembly ballot, anticipated clashes did not occur; the voting was without incident.

Voter turnout was estimated at 93 percent. (By comparison, voter turnout in the close U.S. election of 2000 was about 51.2 percent—a bit better than in 1996, but nothing to brag about.)

Praising the East Timorese, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan declared that their “spirit of peace, maturity and tolerance” shown both during the campaign and on election day “provides a glowing example to the world community.”

Independent nationhood has not come easily for East Timor. Portuguese colonial rule got under way there in 1520 and continued until 1975. Taking advantage of the civil strife and confusion that ensued when Portugal abandoned the island, Indonesia under dictator Suharto moved in quickly and brutally, officially annexing it in 1976. Though the invasion was unprovoked and in violation of international law, it had the support of the Ford administration—and of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in particular.

Under Indonesia’s repressive 24-year occupation, East Timor lost almost a third of its people—more than 200,000—either in massacres or by enforced starvation, with an equal number tortured or imprisoned. The Indonesian forces that carried out the repression were funded and trained in part by the U.S.

The historic August 30 balloting marked the second anniversary of another historic event—the UN-administered referendum in which the East Timorese, despite large-

scale intimidation by the Indonesian military and local militias, voted overwhelmingly in favor of independence. But that vote, unlike this year's peaceful polling, sparked a vengeful reign of terror. Anti-independence militias, aided by Indonesia, killed several thousand people, deported thousands more and destroyed or damaged 80 percent of the region's buildings.

Eventually other nations, headed by Australia, intervened to restore order and disarm the militias—a task impeded at times by Indonesia's footdragging and minimal cooperation. For the past two years East Timor has been governed by a UN transitional administration that hopes to cede full sovereignty to the East Timorese once a president is elected.

The East Timorese certainly deserve their long-sought self-rule. Of course, whether they will be able to sustain their remarkably strong enthusiasm for democracy remains to be seen. And with most of their country still in ruins, their new government will have to tackle the colossal task of rebuilding. The U.S. should help with the rebuilding as a way of making amends.

José Alexandre Gusmão, the popular hero of East Timor's independence movement, has announced that he will seek the presidency. It is a virtual certainty that he will win it handily. Unfortunately, Gusmão is so popular that he could probably get away with indefinite one-man rule if he wanted to. Let us hope he is aware that uncontested rule, however benign, is incompatible with—indeed, is anathema to—democracy. According to the *New York Times*, on election day a crowd spotted Gusmão and began chanting “Viva Xanana!”—his nickname during the days of struggle. He asked them to shout instead, “Viva freedom and liberty!” A good sign.