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Conditions and Attitudes in East Nusatenggara

Mr. James Fox, an American anthropologist who has lived for the past year and a half on the island of Roti near Timor in East Nusatenggara, and his wife recently called at the Embassy on their way to Oxford University in England. Mr. Fox, assisted by his wife, gave the reporting officer an unusually perceptive and coherent account of political events and attitudes in East Nusatenggara. While some of Mr. Fox's observations apply only to East Nusatenggara, his account may also be regarded in many respects as a kaleidoscope of events in provincial Indonesia during the last tumultuous year. His observations on the suppression of the PKI, the killings and local attitudes toward the Army probably are applicable to much of the country.

Aftermath of the September 30 Movement. In Roti, where the Foxes actually lived, communist influence was strong only on the western end of the island. A few weeks before September 30, a Javanese communist named Sukirno arrived from Djakarta to take charge of the local Party. It is widely believed that Sukirno brought some kind of instructions for a local follow-up to impending developments in Djakarta and the Army has reportedly discovered a list of intended anti-communist victims in the area.

A small Army detachment arrived in Roti only in January or February to investigate "Gestapu" activities but limited their punitive actions to execution of Sukirno and the local PKI leader on Roti. The Army then withdrew but returned in mid-March. This visit resulted in the execution in Roti of between 40 and 50 local Roti communists plus another 30 communists from the nearby island

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A-65 Djakarta

of Sawu. A third Army visit occurred in June resulting in the execution of one or two additional PKI members who had earlier evaded capture but had been apprehended in the interim.

These visits, especially the second (March) visit, gave rise to a feeling of great tension in the population and rumors were rife of executions far in excess of those that actually occurred. Rumors of widespread killings were rife throughout East Nusatenggara, in fact. Mr. Fox heard one western missionary from Timor report that some 30,000 people had been executed in that island. Since he felt that this figure was unreasonable, Fox traveled through Timor talking to as many people as possible and also sought information on executions in other islands of East Nusatenggara. He feels that approximately 800 persons, or at a maximum 1,000 persons, were executed in Timor, Sumba, Alor, Roti, Sawu and in other smaller islands comprising all of East Nusatenggara other than Flores. Mr. Fox had no reliable information on executions in Flores which, however, has several times the population of all the other islands of East Nusatenggara combined. Mr. Fox said that the PKI was better established in Alor than some of the other islands and that 105 communists were executed there, which was a higher proportion of the population than elsewhere. He said that the top communist in East Nusatenggara, Tobias Paulinus Rissi, is still alive and being held at the prison in Kupang. Rissi was First Secretary of the East Nusatenggara CDB and a member of the PKI Central Committee.

Attitudes Toward the Army. The image of the Indonesian Army has declined radically in East Nusatenggara since September 30. The area is largely Christian and contains a diverse assortment of non-Javanese peoples. The Army units that moved into the area since September 30 are composed of Moslems from Java and have seemed to the local population to be a foreign occupation force. The Army has apparently done little to overcome this initial liability and has acted in a heavy-handed manner without much regard for local sensibilities. According to Mr. Fox the Army engaged in sumptuous feasts day after day at the expense of the local population, resulting especially in a substantial depletion in the island's livestock (goat) population. In the provincial capital of Kupang, corruption was estimated to have increased ten-fold since September 30 and the Army, which no longer faced restraints from other power factors, was largely responsible. Several shiploads of rice from abroad that were unloaded in Kupang went into Army hands and could be purchased by the population only at exorbitant prices. Since periods of famine occur from time to time in different areas, the contrast between the high-living Javanese military forces and the local population was marked. The Army visit to Roti in March that took the lives of some 70 or 80 communists was followed, for example, by a period in April of considerable hunger.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

A-65 Djakarta

Attitudes Toward Portuguese Timor. Mr. Fox said there was considerable speculation before September 30 about a likely Indonesian invasion of Portuguese Timor within the not so distant future, that is, within the year. Mr. Fox emphasized that this was low-level speculation among junior officers and enlisted men and equivalent layers of the civilian bureaucracy rather than statements by responsible senior officials.

People in Indonesian Timor generally regard Portuguese Timor as a kind of paradise. This view is based primarily on the lack of consumer goods in Indonesian Timor and a considerable amount of smuggling between the two areas. Goods brought in from Portuguese Timor not only include superior versions of such everyday necessities as soap but also included cattle, which for some reason are plentiful in the Portuguese half of the island but not in the Indonesian half.

American Built Harbor. The harbor development near Kupang being constructed under an AID contract by an American firm was nearly completed when Mr. Fox left. Although the project was greatly admired by the local inhabitants because of the superior quality of the materials and facilities, it would probably not be usable since the harbor was located several miles from town and had neither drinking water nor adequate road connections with Kupang. Indonesian attempts to drill wells had failed due to a lack of modern equipment and little had been done to build an adequate road to the city. Both of these tasks were outside the scope of the AID project but the Indonesian Government had not been able to fulfill its side of the bargain. Mr. Fox observed that, prior to September 30, it was widely believed by the Indonesian population that the port was intended to be a staging base for an invasion of Portuguese Timor. (Mr. Fox was describing popular attitudes, and not necessarily official intentions, as he himself emphasized.)

Other Political Attitudes. Mr. Fox said that Protestant groups in East Nusatenggara had a lingering nostalgia for the old RMS or Republic of the South Moluccas that had rejected accession to the Indonesian Republic in 1950. Although this sentiment for separation from Indonesia and union with the Moluccas was an underlying attitude, there was no organized effort to pursue these aims as far as he knew. Protestants are concentrated in the western parts of Indonesian Timor and in Roti, incidentally, while the areas nearer to Portuguese Timor are Catholic. (Fox considered the eastern Catholic people near Portuguese Timor to be highly intelligent while the central group which was also Protestant was rather backward and "stupid.") In spite of the lingering RMS sympathy, Protestants in East Nusatenggara paradoxically tended to cooperate closely with the PKI because of their overriding fear of an Islamic state. The Catholics tended to cooperate with the Moslem parties and in general were much more reconciled to Indonesian nationalism.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

A-65 Djakarta

Although the Timorese hinterland is Christian, Kupang itself is composed largely of Javanese bureaucrats, most of whom are either genuinely or nominally Moslem. The FNI is still strong among Javanese or other non-Christian groups and, in Fox's opinion, was even more radical than the PKI before September 30. Fox believed that the reason for this phenomenon was that the PKI had consciously chosen to infiltrate its more radical members into the FNI while the regular PKI machine was handled as a more routine and bureaucratic operation. The FNI has not been purged since the September 30 affair and its organization remains largely intact including its more radical leaders, he said.

Miscellaneous. In discussing the area in more general terms, Fox said that the large island of Sumba was dry and very lightly populated. Timor too is not particularly fertile and has a relatively low population density. Flores is the most fertile, most heavily populated and most developed island in East Nusatenggara. Although it has three times the population of all the rest of the province, it could support a much higher population yet. In Dutch times, Flores lagged behind the rest of the area in education and population skills but this trend has more than been reversed in recent years.

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