

We'll need a lot of luck to beat the odds in East Timor

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Australia has ended up with a responsibility that may yet prove overwhelming, writes Hugh White.

Last week we sent the Australian Defence Forces to East Timor to help the Government in Dili, but now we seem to be trying to replace that Government instead. In the process we have ended up taking responsibility for the security of 800,000 East Timorese. This was not what our Government intended, and we may live to regret it.

We have accepted a big job, and it is not clear that we can either manage it ourselves, or shift it onto others.

How did this happen? Simple enough: events took control of policy, rather than the other way round. The initial idea was to send troops to help the Government in Dili deal with unruly soldiers. But the biggest threat is posed by soldiers aligned with the Government itself, so our aim became to disarm all of East Timor's soldiers and police. Meanwhile, mob violence flared in Dili, and the Government was consumed by a constitutional crisis.

Naturally, by rounding up East Timor's own security forces, we have become responsible for stopping the violence ourselves. We cannot hand that responsibility back until there is a stable, trustworthy and effective government to accept it. So we find ourselves committed to fostering fundamental political reform. That will take time. Ministers have started to talk of the deployment lasting until new elections next year.

Perhaps we will get lucky. Perhaps, within a few weeks, peace will have been restored to Dili's streets. The political crisis will have been resolved by installing a more broadly accepted government.

The police and military may have started to take up their proper functions again. The UN will have come back in to pick up the pieces and mobilise international help. And perhaps East Timor's people and leaders, having confronted squarely their failure to build a just and workable political system, will try again in a new spirit of selfless co-operation.

So far, things are not going that way. Our Government apparently expected that the mere presence of our troops would restore peace in Dili. If so, it has been disappointed. Some of the reports from Dili suggest a degree of impatience that our forces have not moved faster to impose peace and stop the immediate problem of mob violence.

This is a little unfair. We should wait a few days more before passing judgement on how well they are doing this initial job. But it does show how hard the task we have taken on is. Soldiers in the end must rely on lethal force, or the threat of it, to impose order in a situation like this. So there are limits to what can be achieved when the Australian forces are rightly reluctant to start shooting.

Disarming East Timor's police and military might not be easy either, when it is so unclear what happens next. No one will want to be caught without a gun when the Australians leave. How much force do we use to persuade them otherwise?

The problems of the security forces in East Timor are mostly the fault of a deeply dysfunctional political system afflicted by communal divisions, personal ambition and a ruthless political culture of violence and intimidation. And the worst of East Timor's politicians include the Prime Minister.

Mari Alkatiri himself may be moved aside, but that won't fix the political system. That will need a longer, deeper process of reform. Until that happens, it will be hard for Australia to shift the burden of security in East Timor onto others' shoulders.

But it is far from clear that Australia has the mandate or legitimacy to manage East Timor's security for a period of many months or even years, let alone supervise a process of political reform.

In short, things might go badly for us in East Timor. We might find it hard to pacify Dili. We might find it hard to make the army and police factions give up their guns.

We might find it hard to shift responsibility for security back to the East Timorese. We might find it hard to bring the UN in to take over the mess. And we might find it hard to work with whatever East Timorese government emerges from the political chaos in Dili this week.

It's hardly a case study of tidy strategic policy-making, but in a sense it is not all the Government's fault. It is only trying to do what we expect of it.

Most Australians now seem to accept that Australia is responsible for making sure that our neighbours - at least the smaller ones - are well-governed. There are good strategic and humanitarian reasons we should try to help.

But, as we have found in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, this is easier said than done. Deep political reform is hard to impose from outside. Now we find ourselves, somewhat unintentionally, trying to do the same thing in East Timor.

Do not assume we will succeed.

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