

Indonesia's elite has too much to lose from addressing its actions in East Timor

While defenders of the country's bloody history remain in positions of power, justice for the slain Australian journalists will be slow in coming, says **Eric Ellis**

A friend, recently visiting Jakarta for the first time, surveyed this ugly, chaotic and most inappropriate of metropolises. As we edged our way through the gridlock clogging the fetid sepia dusk, begging mothers with scrawny babes-in-arms pawed at oligarchs' BMWs and Ferraris circling the downtown 'Welcome Monument' fountain, which was dry again. A hawkler pushing a *sate* trolley disappeared into a pothole, emerging bleeding with his cart broken. Someone grabbed at loose notes through the driver's window, while on the broken footpath in front of a monster mall touting designer accoutrements, a sad man was prodding a sadder monkey with a stick to perform for high-heeled passers-by who didn't care. 'I don't know Indonesia at all,' my friend said, 'but I've always felt there's a darkness over it.'

His remark betrays an Australian mindset about our northern neighbour. Australians are suspicious of Indonesia. They don't much know what goes on here, but whatever it is, it happens in the shadows and that can't be good. Maybe, its because no two sovereign neighbours are as dissimilar. Australia is temperate, liberal, mostly white and Christian, lightly populated and wealthy. Equatorial Indonesia is mostly Muslim, poor, overcrowded, socially conservative, brown. It is one of the world's most corrupt nations, with a history of brutal dictatorship, while Australia is one of the least corrupt, and among the most secure democracies. That they are neighbours is an accident of history. Each can behave as if it would rather the other not be there. From Schapelle Corby on, it's a relationship pregnant with suspicions and misunderstandings, wilful and bumbling.

And now there's another one: the Balibo Five, the Australian Federal Police investigation into the massacre of five journalists from Australia in a tiny East Timorese hamlet, killed chronicling an invasion Jakarta insisted it wasn't making in 1975. It follows the findings of a Sydney coroner's hearing, which ruled the deaths were a breach of the Geneva Convention, and therefore a war crime.

It would be correct and just, if the world were so, for Jakarta to offer up the

military officers who murdered the defenceless Balibo Five, the biggest single-incident killing of media personnel in any war anywhere, killed because they were journalists and not simply because they were in the right place at the wrong time. But it's not going to happen. To the Indonesian establishment, the unpunished deaths of the five doesn't matter. Jakarta effects bemusement to anger when asked about them, steadfastly rejecting half-hearted Australian entreaties. To Indonesia, it's that inexplicable Australian media obsession with East Timor again; the Balibo Five are history, denied, gone and forgotten, their remains buried in a single grave in a suburban Jakarta cemetery. And if you want them, says Jakarta, you can have them, but you *bules* must ask nicely and not take any Indonesian with you.

The reaction reveals a deep-seated difficulty with due legal process. Indonesia

palace, the more lawful. Eleven wobbly years of 'reformasi' since has done little to secure and insulate institutions. Indonesians joke they have the best legal system money can buy — the law is bought and sold by the corrupt, the wealthy and the powerful, mostly the same people.

Which makes it tricky for the Rudd government and those which follow it because momentum for justice inexorably gathers from those demanding closure for the Balibo Five, notably their long-grieving families, the media and, now, the Australian legal system. Canberra's representative in Jakarta is the hail-fellow-well-met Bill Farmer. It's his job to explain to his hosts that Australian justice must be done and he can't do much about it. That is, when he's not cracking gags officiating at the annual AFL Grand Final bash put on by an expat Aussie Rules football club — his finest hours as ambassador, say many Australians here.

Over the years, it has often seemed the job of the Australian ambassador is to hope for a quiet life, almost apologising for our feistiness.

But Balibo agitators will be disappointed if they expect Indonesia to offer up the five's killers. The massacre is just not something Indonesians, even important ones, know much about. Headlines that scream across the Australian media are reduced here, if anything runs at all, to a haughty brief noting Jakarta's outrage at Australian rudeness. This is the same Australia, mind, that locks up Indonesian fishermen whose boats may or may not have strayed into Australia's more bountiful fishing grounds. Jakarta couldn't care two hoots about the deaths of five Australian journalists it has never heard of during an operation it struggles to see as a mistake.

But the real reasons Indonesia won't revisit the matter have little to do with the Balibo Five. There are bigger, more alarming demons lurking deep within the national psyche. Balibo might open an angst-ridden Pandora's box of domestic dramas that scar Indonesia's past, indeed challenge its very ethos as a nation.

Not least of these is the CIA-approved massacres across central Java and Bali by the late dictator Suharto of as many as one million suspected 'communists' through 1965 and 1967. These were the infamous Years of Living Dangerously that eclipsed



believes Canberra is able to shut down the judicial investigations because, through Jakarta's prism, that's what governments do. That powers and institutions are separate and independent in a democracy is simply not much understood here. It may come, as Indonesia struggles to become one itself, but the problem is understandable in this fragmented artifice of a nation ruled in its first 60 years of independence by two charismatic dictators, where the rule of law were edicts from the top, filtered by scheming aides and cronies; the closer to the