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Balancing the Scales of Legitimacy: The Sulawesi Regional Development Project

by Sam Maltby

More than 180 suspected government opponents were prisoners of conscience... At least 300 other political prisoners continued to serve lengthy sentences after unfair trials... Hundreds of others were arrested and held without trial for up to two years as suspected opponents of the government and scores were feared to have "disappeared". Government forces extra-judicially executed scores of alleged supporters of independence in Aceh and East Timor...

Amnesty International, 1993
Annual Report: Indonesia & East Timor.

Indonesia is not a repressive military regime... It is one of the most progressive governments in the world... It's really not that bad; Indonesians aren't lining up at the Canadian embassy trying to get out like they are in places like China or the former Soviet states... Some criticism of Indonesia in my mind is not justified. I submit that it is due to examining the situation with the wrong lens.

Tim Babcock; Director, Sulawesi Regional Development Project.

Introduction

It scarcely requires argument to assert that, at times, the desire to invoke positive change can exceed, and therefore compromise the very reasons that initially laid behind the desire. Unfortunately, the advocacy of change in initiatives like the Sulawesi Regional Development Project (SRDP) in Indonesia, involves the risk of compounding avarice rather than helping to alleviate it. The balance of this risk, referred to as the "Principle of Proportionality" is critically fragile when considering the potential ramifications of this project, run jointly by the Government of Indonesia, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and the University of Guelph. Such involvement with a particularly repressive military regime, (characterization that Indonesia most certainly exemplifies (pers. comm. Nov. 23, 1993) requires examination to ascertain whether or not the delicate balance between "development" and legitimization has been, intentionally or otherwise, tipped in favour of the latter effect. This analysis seeks to inherit as it's focus, the position that the SRDP has indeed occupied, and continues to occupy the role of legitimizer of genocidal behaviour on the part of the Government of Indonesia (GOI).

A brief examination of the Project itself is necessary to illustrate the lack of consideration mentioned above, as well as the potential damage to the people of Indonesia through assisting the GOI in its dictatorial repression. It is for this reason that the Technical Assistance branch of the project (located at the University of Guelph) will be our focus. It is important however, to mention that an independent report of the project has been completed and will be released to the public sometime in the near future. It would therefore be highly presumptuous to attempt any detailed analysis of the SRDP.

Rather, this analysis will principally seek to illustrate several hypocrisies evident between the University of Guelph's policy on involvement in international activities, and project director Tim Babcock's convictions about "his project" (ibid. These views will be extrapolated from personal communication with Dr. Babcock and various literature generated by himself and the members of his staff. Furthermore, we will examine the current "controversy" surrounding the project as a microcosm of the balance involved in the aforementioned principle of proportionality. By doing so, this discussion hopes to illustrate an enigma that surrounds the notion of "Development Anthropology" in areas where repressive force control the domestic population.

The Project

The Sulawesi Regional Development Project...
is CIDA's second largest international development initiative currently running. It has been in operation since 1984, when it began in response to a development study undertaken between 1976 and 1979. Since then, the project has passed through its first phase (1984-1990) and is currently in the middle of phase two. The end of the project is schedule for 1995, however Dr. Babcock anticipates an extension of at least one year (ibid.).

The current program entails the Institutional Development (ID) aspect of the initiative. It is perhaps the most significant feature for this discourse, as it pertains to the direct involvement of policy formulation with the GOI. The rationale of this focus is that target rural areas (Integrated Area Development sites IADs) will act as models for development programs to be undertaken presumably by the government of Indonesia upon the project's completion. Their successes or failures will be measures of direction for future initiatives. This approach makes the correct assumption that development projects must undergo, to the greatest extent as possible, a testing level prior to implementation. What the project fails to do however, is to subject it's own rationale to the same test. This is not to suggest that developers must backtrack systematically to some absolute ideology upon which their project is based, yet it is necessary to examine in detail the possible negative effects that the project may have; particularly when dealing with hostile forces like the GOI. The report where such examinations should be carried out (SRDP IDP: Objectives, Outputs and Indicators) leaves them absolutely untouched. The nature of Guelph's involvement in the project makes this lack of attention suspect to criticism. "The Guelph component of the Sulawesi Project consists solely of providing advice on improved technical quality and management of the development process" (Kirby 1993). As such, it is imperative that the project realize that this advice may be used for actions other than rural development. In an ideal situation, the project could assume the benevolence of the host country, however the government of Indonesia is not an institution to which the benefit of the doubt may be bestowed. Additionally, the scope of the project entails extensive research in a multitude of areas "consisting of over 1000 documents containing sectoral studies, statistics, maps and consultancy reports," (Kirby 1991:3) not to mention computer databases and satellite links. The project planners have evidently assumed such benevolence with regard to the use of this information; an assumption that cannot be made of an administration that has massacred over 200,000 people in East Timor alone, not to mention being responsible for countless acts of torture and repression (see Amnesty International 1993a, and 1993b, 1993c)

Of equal concern is the project's move to a greater level of abstraction from the rural village (DESA) level. Evidently, the greater the distance between the SRDP and rural target areas, the greater the involvement with the GOI's bureaucracy. Throughout the SRDP documents, their is continued reverence for "bottom-up-planning" (Kirby 1993) and participatory development, yet the project is clearly proceeding in a negative relationship with this philosophy. The "Interventions" section of the Institutional Development Program describes this abstraction from the DESA level: Given the diminution of Small Project Funds to support Integrated Area Development and the possibility of phasing out Project assistance in (certain areas), it is now deemed an appropriate time to transfer the skills and capability to the Kabupaten (provincial district) level (SRDP 1993).

In personal communication, Dr. Babcock illuminated reasons beyond these for the move to greater political involvement for the project. His experience illustrated that the projects that work the best are those that try to sell and promote plans at the national level. We must use salesmanship to improve national policy. Much of the early going of the project were building up trust within the corridors of power (pers. comm. 1993). Of even greater interest is the fact that the activities planned for the ID program are concerned exclusively with strategic planning and management training of government staff at the Kabupaten level. It is somewhat peculiar that the training of government officials for a dictatorial military regime of 25 years is viewed as a positive initiative that should be undertaken with Canadian financial and technical assistance. The only assumptions made by the project with regard to the training are that: (1) The Rural Development Agencies will remain in their respective areas until the completion of the project, and (2) that the sectoral staff are willing and able to participate fully in the development (SRDP 1993).

It is necessary to examine such idealation concerns when considering the possible ramifications of Canadian assistance to Indonesian. These two particular aspects of the project, the lack of concern for potential misuse of project-generated data and the increasing abstraction from the village level, are but a few in a multitude of concerns regarding the Sulawesi Regional Development Program. As was previously mentioned, an in-depth study into similar sphere has been completed by Meyer Brownstone et al. and is currently being reviewed by the University of Guelph's Senate Committee on International Activities. Although the information in this report is as yet unreleased, Mr. Brownstone did comment that he "was shocked at the depth of the oppression and the sophistication of terror" (from pers. comm..."
Conflict Between Policy and Project

As the SRDP technical assistance branch is located at the University of Guelph, it is obviously subject to the institution's policy on involvement in international activities. Given thus, it is necessary to examine the goals and interventions of the project and its director, with regard to their conformity to university policy. This is by no means intended to ascribe an infallibility to Guelph's policy, yet it does examine to what extent the project is accountable to a larger body (namely the Senate Committee on International Affairs). Upon communication with Dr. Babcock and analysis of project documents, it is evident that such accountability has little de facto presence.

The rationale of Guelph's policy is essentially based on two broad ethical guidelines which all international activities must follow. Examined in turn, it is blatantly evident that Dr. Tim Babcock, and the Sulawesi Project are in violation of several principles of Guelph's policy.

Section A: General Ethics

The first of such guiding principles delineates the need for activities to improve mutual understanding and ease world tensions (University of Guelph 1991:1). The project does so, yet in a manner which is obviously not in the spirit of the policy's mandate. By co-operating with President Suharto's forces, "mutual understanding" takes the form of condoning government actions, whereby Indonesia's understanding of the Canadian position vis a vis their behaviour, is one of tolerance and apathy. As far as "easing world tensions" is concerned, perhaps the project directors have taken this too literally, interpreting it to mean that international pressure on Indonesia should be undermined by direct involvement with the government. Interpretations aside, this is certainly the outcome of their initiative.

Additionally, policy dictates that "all international activities will require some form of intensive review, monitoring and evaluation through the life of the agreement" (ibid. p.2) Although the project does have means of self-evaluation, albeit limited to "plausibility links" due to "the difficulty in finding a causal relationship between the project activities and welfare changes," (Kirby 1991:4) there has been no attempt until this year to subject the project to independent scrutiny. Even this out-of-house study received, and continues to receive forceful opposition from the University of Guelph and the Canadian International Development Agency (Mcmurtry 1993). In fact, until recently it appeared as if the report would never be released to the public at all. According to a personal communication with the Senate Committee on International Activities: "The SCIA is currently discussing the issue of access to the full report" (ibid.). One is forced to wonder, as the First Chair of the Senate Committee commented, "Is there something they're trying to hide?" (ibid.) It appears as if the Project is surrounded by an "aura of secrecy and furtiveness" as Graf noted in the Presentation to the President's Advisory Committee in 1988 (ibid.).

On a more general level, the policy deems it important to determine whether its involvement could be construed as aiding and abetting regimes whose purposes and methods are in conflict with the university's constitutional objectives or accepted international standards (U of G 1991:3). Of these standards, the denial of basic human rights is most certainly contradictory to acceptable international parameters. The policy further defines these rights as,

1. Freedom from extrajudicial execution.
2. Freedom from detention without trial
3. Freedom from torture (ibid.)

As was mentioned above, Amnesty International has established that President Suharto's regime has executed scores of individuals extra judicially, including over 270 people in November of 1991 in the Timorese region of Santa Cruz (ETAN 1993:11). Further, on April 3rd of this year, Ma'Huno (the new leader of the Maubere resistance in East Timor) was arrested and is still being held without charges. He took control of the Timorese independence movement after Xanana Gusmao was jailed for life on May 21 for "rebellion and possession of firearms" (ibid. p. 4) With regard to the third basic human right of freedom from torture, the Indonesian government falls well short of maintaining such liberty. In a New York Times article this April, the Roman Catholic Bishop of East Timor was quoted as saying that "the Indonesian government routinely tortures political prisoners" (Montreal Gazette 1993). This is not to suggest, obviously, that the Sulawesi project has a direct causal relationship with these actions, however it becomes extremely difficult to condemn this pattern of genocide when Canada as a nation has contributed nearly $30,000,000 for this project alone (U of G 1993a). Can the SRDP ensure that none of these funds were related to funding operations that contributed even indirectly to the denial of basic human rights? If it cannot, then the project is in breach not only of University policy, but of National and International Law.

The policy goes on ambitiously to state that it is "the institution's moral responsibility to assure itself to the best of it's ability that such abuse not take place" (U of G 1993b). Not only does
the project ignore such behaviour as it is occurring, it publicly denies its existence. According to Dr. Babcock, "the government of Indonesia is one of the most progressive governments in the world." His predecessor Harry Cummings echoes such praise, stating that "the GOI is doing very innovative and exciting things" and that "Indonesia is a free and open country." Similarly, Dr. Babcock illustrates his bias in his written work. He feels that ...despite the existence of a government that has been called repressive and autocratic, and where concepts of liberty and liberation are not high on the political agenda, meaningful development in people's welfare and well-being can and does exist (Babcock 1989:1). One sincerely hopes that Dr. Babcock is correct in his claim, however what is at issue is his denial of Indonesia as a repressive regime and therefore his inability to address the policy's requirement that the project "should inform in an even more explicit manner every ethical deliberation related to the institutions involvement in international activities" (U OF G 1991:5).

Section B: The Ethics of Intervention

Obviously the ethical considerations involved in deciding whether to undertake a project in a repressive host environment, are enormous in the extreme. This analysis does not wish to present the complexity of such a procedure as a black and white issue. However, with regards to Guelph's "Principle of Proportionality", it is difficult not to point out the obvious limitations inherent in their depiction of the ethical considerations. Notwithstanding such limitations, the Sulawesi Project members have the responsibility to address such issues as members of an active global community. As the policy itself concedes, "No policy paper can or should eliminate the considerations there has emerged two opposing blocks. The proximity of the oppression to the project is the principle consideration:

The closer the connection between the University's activity and the offensive practices, and the greater the likelihood that the activity lends legitimacy to the offending agency, the greater must be the compulsion to decide against University involvement (Babcock 1993).

This regulation begs the question: "How does one measure the level of legitimacy leant to the repressive agent and its actions?" The broad lines that the policy draws are analogous to other contractual constitutions, which are retroactively applied when a breach has occurred. This is relatively simple when all parties involved are accountable to the constitutional arrangement, yet the government of Indonesia is not such a party in this case. Therefore, I would argue that it falls upon the University to not only weigh the proximity of the project to the regime, but also to weigh the likelihood that the host institution will use the services to the detriment of its own, or other peoples. Is there not a need to ensure such compliance from a government condemned by every member of the United Nations except Canada and the United States?

Again, the University's oversight cannot exempt the Project members from guilt with regards to this matter. One can only assume their lack of consideration to be attributable to ignorance or arrogance. The ignorance of Indonesian genocide has been made obvious, yet this is compounded by the project's naiveté in their approach to "subversion from within" (ibid). Perhaps this is simply an extension of a Western ethnocentric superiority complex, but it defies logic to consider their efforts' weight as being worth the risk of aiding a power as utterly reprehensible as the Suharto regime.

Conclusion

In light of recent debate surrounding these concerns there has emerged two opposing blocks, corresponding as it were, to the two spheres of thought outlined in the afore-mentioned balance between legitimation and subversion from within. As it is with many discussions of this type, each side has inherited as it's guiding principle, a superlative ideology to which it's members have gravitated. Generally, these may be referred to as libertarian and interventionist. If one approaches the field of Anthropology with the idea of "The Prime Directive" (a la Gene Roddenberry) that is, the respect for cultural autonomy and self-determinism, then one must view the inherent paradox of these two camps as Development Anthropologists.

In the left corner are those individuals, like John McMurtry (professor at the University of Guelph) and Elaine Briere (founder of the East Timor Alert Network), who believe that involvement with the government of Indonesia legitimizes its genocidal actions. In the right corner are the supporters of the Sulawesi project who feel that change is possible through the interna subversion of sympathetic elements of the Suharto regime. The libertarian view to which the former group ascribes, advocate for the withdrawal of Canadian initiatives in Indonesia so that
International pressure can be carried out in hopes of changing the behaviour of this repressive dictatorship. By doing so these individuals are not Anthropologists, but rather, political activists. As such, they seek to influence a particular sector into altering its ideology to a "better" alternative. Although in my view this is admirable and certainly desirable in this circumstance, it is inherently non-Anthropological. The interventionist perspective desires change in the country through diplomatic negotiation and internal "salesmanship," the merits of which are highly skeptical. Tim Babcock's Institutional Development program has removed the project from Development per se, and bestowed upon itself the status of internal structural janitor. It's job is to change Indonesian policy so that rural citizens may obtain the same quality of life allowed for the wealthier Indonesian peoples. It has, however, neglected to ask the question, "why would a genocidal military dictatorship seek to raise the standard of living for its rural inhabitants?" The possible answers to such questions have been discussed, yet it is the inability to ask the question that is of particular interest. Babcock et al. have isolated themselves from the reality of the situation in Indonesia, to the extent that they have created the possibility of worsening the depravity they sought to relieve. Although they may employ Anthropological methods of analysis, their entwinement with the bureaucratic weed of diplomacy has essentially strangled their ability to invoke any kind of positive change. As far as their "Anthropological" nature is concerned, if their goal is to make reparation for an effect caused by an essentially parallel ideology of positivist control, then one can be certain of little respect for the self-determination of a people.

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