

“Lost causes” and non-state actions against impunity

Abstract

Western governments argued for many years that any effort to free East Timor was a “lost cause.” This rhetoric flowed from government decisions to oppose self-determination for East Timor, but it also reinforced those decisions. Nothing could be done, the rhetoric went. Therefore, nothing *should* be done. State rhetoric led to an effort at silencing the issue. This was opposed by an East Timor non-state movement made up of Timorese non-state diplomats and an overseas support network grounded in international civil society. The East Timor non-state network’s major accomplishment was to disrupt and disprove the “lost cause” rhetoric in ways that made self-determination possible. It achieved this task using common languages of human rights and a “boomerang” strategy in which the network mobilized international pressure on a national government. Since East Timor’s independence, state rhetoric has argued that any campaign against impunity is hopeless, and reparative justice must therefore be sacrificed for restorative justice (truth commissions). A new East Timor non-state network may be merging, and its major task will be to disrupt and disprove the new “lost cause” rhetoric.