

David Webster

# Self-fulfilling prophecies and human rights in Canada's foreign policy

*Lessons from East Timor*

Canadians talk a good game on international human rights, but a vast gap too often exists between rhetoric and actions. Canadian policy towards East Timor, which spent 24 years under a brutal Indonesian military occupation before finally achieving its independence, is a case in point. Canadian governments of both major parties failed during those years to live up to their high-minded words on human rights, choosing instead complicity with Indonesian policies.<sup>1</sup>

A former Portuguese colony invaded by Indonesia in 1975, East Timor was little known internationally until the 1990s. Its emergence as a global

*David Webster is assistant professor of international studies at the University of Regina. He is the author of *Fire and the Full Moon: Canada and Indonesia in a Decolonizing World* and the collection editor of *East Timor Testimony*.*

<sup>1</sup> This thesis is presented in Sharon Scharfe, *Complicity: Human Rights in Canadian Foreign Policy, The Case of East Timor* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1996). It also informs David Webster, *Fire and the Full Moon: Canada and Indonesia in a Decolonizing World* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), upon which this article is based.

issue was perhaps best symbolized by the award of the 1996 Nobel peace prize to East Timorese activists José Ramos Horta and Bishop Carlos Belo. Yet the Nobel prize provided no cause to celebrate and no new hope, wrote Marcus Gee of the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's national newspaper. The winners "are by all accounts brave and honourable men. But they are linked to a lost cause: the independence of East Timor." He acknowledged that the Timorese had suffered injustice, that they had "as much claim to independent nationhood as many existing countries." But that did not negate his claim that independence was impossible for this "small place in a little-known part of the world, with no allies and an implacable opponent." In his view, the activists' cause was hopeless: neither their actions nor the award of a Nobel prize could change that. Nor could the fall in 1998 of the Indonesian dictator Suharto. There were hopes (realized soon afterwards) that Suharto's successors might take a less implacable line on East Timor, "[b]ut experts say the separatists are fooling themselves if they expect the new government in Jakarta to set the former Portuguese colony free in the near future," Gee wrote. He was similarly unmoved when Indonesia's new president conceded a referendum on independence within the year. In the days leading up to the vote, Gee continued to preach the hopelessness of Timorese aspirations. Despite having been victims of a quarter century of Indonesian military violence, he advised that they vote for union with Indonesia. Independence would be "a leap in the dark. The independent nation of East Timor would be a flyspeck on the world map." Unable to stand on its own, "East Timor would have to throw itself on the mercy of the international community."<sup>2</sup> The Timorese voted overwhelmingly in favour of independence on 30 August 1999. They remain independent today.

I do not mean to single out one columnist, and in any case others have analyzed media coverage of East Timor's independence struggle.<sup>3</sup> I have selected this example precisely because Gee is *not* one of the pro-business "Indonesia lobby" in the press. He often writes passionately about human rights outside Canada and he described the violence of 1999 as a deliberate

2 Marcus Gee, "Nobel prize is no help to East Timor," *Globe and Mail*, 16 October 1996, A13; Marcus Gee, "East Timor hopes for independence premature, experts say," *Globe and Mail*, 3 June 1998, A13; Marcus Gee, "East Timor would be wise to stay," *Globe and Mail*, 25 August 1999, A11.

3 Peter Eglin, "East Timor, the *Globe and Mail*, and propaganda: The 1990s—saving Indonesia from East Timor with 'Maoist shields' and 'tragic destiny,'" *Portuguese Studies Review* 11 no. 1 (2003): 67-84.

campaign of brutality by the Indonesian army. Gee is simply among the more prolific commentators who assumed that East Timor was a lost cause.

This “lost cause” rhetoric was more than just a way of writing and talking about East Timor. It was also an explanatory factor that affected policy. Indonesian rule over East Timor was never inevitable. Knowing this is not a matter of mere hindsight. East Timorese independence from Portugal was not only plausible in 1975, but was in fact declared that year. Indonesian rule looked well entrenched afterwards, but only as a result of the active diplomatic, economic, and military support given the Suharto regime by its patrons in the west. Yet that was not how policymakers from Washington to Tokyo to Canberra portrayed it. To them, the cause of East Timorese independence was “hopeless” and therefore it was folly to support it. Yet if the cause was hopeless, it was largely because Indonesia was so entrenched, thanks to overseas support for its government. The logic was circular, the prophecy self-fulfilling. Once policymakers and press pundits started to argue the lost-cause thesis, they shaped their actions accordingly. Rhetoric, in other words, helped determine policy, and policy never shifted until the East Timorese demonstrated convincingly that their cause was far from lost. There is a lesson here for contemporary analysts and policymakers: in East Timor, a false assumption led to poor policy decisions. More specifically, assuming that the case for independence was hopeless encouraged rhetorical assertions that defined the limits of the possible—limits that were then reified and used to excuse lacklustre policy decisions. “It won’t work, so we shouldn’t try” became the cry of all too many policymakers and policy leaders. This defeatist attitude, founded too often on the weakest of premises, continues to pervade strategic thinking in world affairs. Canadians would be wrong to assume that they are immune.

Present-day East Timor provides a case in point. In Canada, as in other countries, lost-cause rhetoric justified a policy of complicity for more than two decades. East Timorese diplomats in exile raised insistent cries that the cause was not, after all, completely hopeless. They did not fully convince dominant groups in Canada but they were able to disrupt the lost-cause rhetoric enough to effect change. Indeed, for a short period in 1999, Canadian policymakers even allied with nonstate movements advocating East Timorese self-determination. Too soon, however, a new rhetoric of hopelessness emerged, which wrongly characterizes East Timor as a “failed state.” It too has influenced Canadian policy for the worse.

The historical context for Canadian policy begins in the Trudeau era. In 1970, in power for less than two years, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau

declared that in the future, “Pacific countries shall be referred to not as the Far East, but as our New West.” It was a call to refocus attention across the Pacific, seizing upon the age-old idea of oriental riches. Canadian recognition of the People’s Republic of China in 1970 symbolized a new engagement with the region. The Trudeau government highlighted Suharto’s Indonesia as “a nascent power among the non-Communist nations because of its position and population, and the development potential of its natural resources.”<sup>4</sup> When Ottawa contemplated specific bilateral partners in Asia, it identified Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the five countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—a neutral but implicitly pro-western group in southeast Asia. As Trudeau acknowledged, the decision meant devoting special attention to Indonesia, ASEAN’s largest member by far.

Although Canada had provided meagre assistance to Indonesia previously—an average of less than \$350,000 a year between 1950 and 1965—the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) selected Indonesia as the only “country of concentration” outside the Commonwealth and former French empire, and pledged to increase aid to \$8.75-million annually. Canada’s motivations were never entirely altruistic. Initially, calls for aid to Asia made clear that financial support would “prime the pump” for capitalist development, combat the temptations of communism, and restore the multilateral trading system disrupted by the Second World War. More specifically, as one government briefing note explained, it would “facilitate Indonesia’s transformation from aid recipient to trading partner.” Accordingly, investment began to rise. Inco, a Toronto-based mining company, boasted the second-largest foreign investment in Indonesia with its operation in Sulawesi, placing Canada fourth among foreign investors. When Suharto made his first official visit to Ottawa in 1975, an innovative \$200 million line of credit from Ottawa and the major Canadian banks became “the centrepiece of the visit.” Two-way trade quickly soared from \$30-million to \$300-million a year. The following year, Foreign Investment Board Chairman Mohammad Sadli, with his eyes “round as saucers,” told Canada’s ambassador that “Indonesia has never seen so much money.”<sup>5</sup>

4 “Foreign policy for Canadians: Pacific booklet,” Department of External Affairs, Ottawa, 1970, 7.

5 Allan MacEachen speech in Jakarta, 25 August 1976, External Affairs, *Statements and Speeches* 76/25; Canadian embassy in Jakarta confidential memorandum on Inco operations, 22 June 1971, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG25, vol. 10861, file 20-INDON-2-2.

Although one bank blocked its share of the credit line over the 1975 Pertamina debt crisis, Ottawa maintained its faith and its credit. Even indications that the Suharto government might collapse, with the president himself sending large sums out of the country, did not shake Trudeau's determination to back the Indonesian regime.

This was the context for East Timor's appearance on Ottawa's foreign affairs agenda. East Timor saw rapid movement towards self-government after the fall of Portugal's Salazar-Caetano dictatorship in 1974, which set the country's colonies on the road to independence. Timorese nationalism coalesced around two parties that differed over the speed of the self-determination process. A small third party seeking integration into neighbouring Indonesia drew little support. In 1975, Indonesian destabilization efforts split the two larger parties, resulting in a brief civil war that August. One of the parties, Fretilin, emerged in control and declared independence in November. Ten days later, Indonesian troops launched a full-scale invasion. During the subsequent quarter century of military rule, one person in three perished in East Timor.

By the time the decolonization of Portuguese Timor appeared on the agenda, many Canadian observers hoped that the Timorese could be persuaded to accept integration into Indonesia. If that meant an invasion, Ottawa suggested that it would maintain "some sympathy for Indonesia's dilemma." Indeed, aid in 1975-76 reached a record \$36.7 million, putting Indonesia third among Canada's development partners. The Department of External Affairs argued against "taking up every lost cause in the world" and against United Nations resolutions that preserved "false hopes and a false issue."<sup>6</sup> Government documents make it fairly clear that the concept of falsehood reinforced existing inclinations to side with pro-western Indonesia against a third-world nationalist struggle. The Timorese claim to form a nation was, in the eyes of Canadian officials, what Marxists call "false consciousness." There was in this process little space for Timorese voices, which tended to be ignored even when heard. Lost-cause rhetoric, in other words, was forming and affecting policy. From 1980 onwards, Canada's UN mission sided with Indonesia, voting against resolutions affirming East Timor's right to self-determination. Human rights advocacy was not absent,

6 R.L. Rogers memorandum, 3 December 1975, LAC, RG25, vol. 8586, file 20-TIMOR-2; Asia Pacific division memorandum, 9 October 1979, LAC, RG25, vol. 8664, file 20-TIMOR-6; Memorandum for the minister, Department of External Affairs, 27 October 1980, document obtained through access to information request.

but it was deflected towards less controversial causes. Canadian officials, like the Carter administration in the United States, concentrated their human rights talk on the release of political prisoners, an issue that did not directly challenge the regime. Advocating prisoner releases allowed a focus on the “abuses” of an authoritarian regime; support for human rights in East Timor would have required a more fundamental critique of the basis of Indonesia’s military-dominated government and wrecked Canadian hopes for increased trade in an emerging Asian market. Visiting Jakarta in 1983, Trudeau said that East Timor “raised the problem of self-determination of peoples,” but his government had “decided that stability of the region should be the foremost concern and thus had supported Indon[esia].”<sup>7</sup> With no Timorese diaspora in Canada and no preexisting missionary ties, media coverage in the Canadian press was close to nil.

When Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservatives won power in 1984, Canadian foreign policy reoriented itself towards better relations with the United States. The Mulroney government’s talk of human rights was mainly a Cold War club with which to beat the Soviet Union. Canadian and US governments embraced Suharto’s regime as a “little tiger” in economics, a reliable voice in international politics, and a stabilizing factor in oft-chaotic southeast Asia. True, it was no respecter of human rights, but the fashionable thinking of the day was that “soft authoritarian” governments were delivering an “economic miracle” that would eventually bring about democratization.

Nevertheless, the situation in East Timor was becoming an issue for the Canadian public. Reports from the Department of External Affairs reveal growing criticism of government policy, especially with the launch of Amnesty International’s 1985 global campaign for human rights in East Timor. In the 1980s, Canadian churches funded the creation of two organizations centred on raising public awareness of East Timor: the Indonesia East Timor Programme in Ontario, and then the East Timor Alert Network in British Columbia. The latter would in time become a national network, supported with core funding by the Catholic, Anglican, United, and Presbyterian churches. The Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace joined with others in the church-sponsored Asia Partnership for Human Development to call for international pressure for human rights in East Timor. Canadian Catholic bishops’ calls for a more

7 “Twenty years in East Timor: A chronological overview,” undated Foreign Affairs memorandum, access to information request.

human-centred development in northern Canada aligned well with critiques of Indonesian state-led “development” (*pembangunan*) from Bishop Belo and others in East Timor.

The Department of External Affairs acknowledged severe human rights problems, but claimed that the situation was improving. “Like most other nations,” Foreign Minister Joe Clark wrote in 1989, “Canada believes that the situation has become irreversible.” Given these beliefs, the goal was to build “an environment conducive to the awareness and promotion of human rights.”<sup>8</sup> Once more, the rhetoric of hopelessness was deployed to justify a policy of complicity on East Timor.

The end of the Cold War kicked away the ideological moorings for western support of anticommunist dictatorships. Hoping to position Canada as a leading voice for human rights, Mulroney made passionate declarations at 1991 summit meetings of the Commonwealth and *la francophonie* that Canada would “no longer subsidize repression and the stifling of democracy.” Less than a month after Mulroney uttered those words in Harare, East Timor provided the first test case. Indonesian soldiers opened fire on a pro-independence march in Dili on 12 November 1991, with film footage of the killings broadcast around the world. (The massacre, for instance, received full-episode coverage on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s nightly television newsmagazine *The Journal*.) The massacre led to a global upsurge in activism and a new stage for the solidarity movement, with a host of new East Timor Alert Network groups forming in Canada. The Canadian ambassador in Jakarta was ordered to pass along the rising public concern to her hosts. The Mulroney government froze three major aid projects worth a collective \$30 million. Foreign Minister Barbara McDougall added an unofficial ban on any arms export permits. Nevertheless, existing aid and export promotion continued unhampered. The Mulroney government’s response, like its previous response to the Tiananmen square killings in Beijing, aimed at expressing disapproval through careful targeting of sanctions in such a way that the core of trade and investment ties would not be harmed. Indonesia remained a Canadian trade priority, with two-way trade up 47 percent in 1992. Indonesian officials exempted Ottawa from the angry reprisals that it directed at the Netherlands when the Dutch government linked aid to human rights. In Canada, rumours that frozen aid would be restored were never fulfilled, apparently for fear of public reaction.

<sup>8</sup> Foreign Minister Joe Clark letter to Christine Stewart, MP, 13 October 1989, access to information request.

Strong voices in Canadian civil society had raised the political cost of doing business with the Suharto regime. Thus the aid freeze remained in place until the fall of the Progressive Conservative government in 1993.

One of the underlying themes of the new Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's foreign policy was the tireless promotion of Canadian exports. Chrétien's enormous "Team Canada" trips responded to the prevailing admiration in the 1990s of Asian "miracle" economies, amid talk of "Pacific destiny" and "constructive engagement" with the governments presiding over a menagerie of "tigers," "little dragons," and "flying geese." By 1994, Canadian investment in Indonesia stood at \$3 billion and rising; more than 50 companies reported exports to Indonesia in excess of \$50 million. "Indonesia offers the best fit for Canadian economic interests I have seen," Canada's ambassador declared.<sup>9</sup> CIDA meanwhile funded two Development and Peace projects, strengthening the Dili diocese's ability to reach and involve more lay people—a radio station and a peace and justice commission. Ottawa was looking for ways to involve Canada in East Timor without raising thorny human rights issues that could affect trade prospects. Visiting Jakarta that same year for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, Chrétien argued that increased trade would give Canada more leverage to promote human rights.

East Timorese diplomats were making great strides in international public opinion. Their key accomplishment was to disrupt and eventually disprove the lost-cause rhetoric in western capitals. They did this partly by continuing guerrilla operations and nonviolent protests aimed at demonstrating the persistence of Timorese nationalism, based on Xanana's dictum: "To resist is to win." Their overseas diplomatic and nongovernmental networks, makeshift as they were, succeeded in bringing their cause to global public opinion. In Canada, the Alert Network was increasingly effective in raising awareness, especially with the arrival of three Timorese in Canada as students-turned-refugees. Abé Barreto Soares and Bella Galhos became representatives for the Timorese diplomatic network. Catholic bishops became more willing to speak out in support of East Timor, asking the Canadian government to promote peace talks and ban arms sales to Indonesia. The Alert Network was also able to gain the backing of the Canadian labour movement, especially for its arms embargo campaign. All of this made it harder for Canadian government representatives to carry on business as usual with Indonesian counterparts. "We continue to seem to be prepared to have our

9 "Indonesia: A guide for Canadian business, 1995-96," Ottawa, 1995.



NGO community dictate our actions,” Canada’s ambassador complained, adding that there were no concessions made to lobbyists on Vietnam and other countries. Indonesian foreign minister Ali Alatas similarly claimed that “Canadian NGOs are the most ferociously anti-Indonesian in the world.”<sup>10</sup> Yet Canadian government shifts to accommodate public opinion were primarily rhetorical, with no halt to trade or investment. As in the 1970s, rights advocacy tended to be diverted into safer channels. Chrétien’s foreign ministers, André Ouellet and then Lloyd Axworthy, refused to ban arms sales to Indonesia or to take a lead on the East Timor file. Axworthy, an exponent of “human security” and niche diplomacy, diverted rights advocacy into a closed-door “bilateral human rights dialogue” and pointed to that as evidence of Canadian quiet diplomacy for human rights.

Canadian rights groups hotly contested government assertions that trade advanced rights. The clash of views was best symbolized by the 1997 APEC summit, held at the University of British Columbia. When the East Timor Alert Network posted pictures of Suharto captioned “Wanted: For crimes against humanity,” enraged Indonesian officials made the group an issue in bilateral relations. Suharto threatened to boycott the APEC summit, a vital symbol of the Chrétien government’s Asia trade strategy. Axworthy pleaded with him, saying, “We did not want ETAN to win a victory and they would claim victory if the president did not come.”<sup>11</sup> Canadian authorities agreed to ensure that Suharto would not be confronted by protesters. Police officers then controversially used pepper spray to let the APEC motorcade pass undisturbed by signs of dissent. No longer was Canada the wealthy donor and Indonesia the supplicant. Canadian wheat exporters, for instance, looked to companies controlled by business cronies of Suharto as leading customers.

That changed when a financial crisis swept through Asia in 1998, toppling Suharto from the Indonesian presidency he had occupied since the mid-1960s. Timorese activists stepped up their independence campaign and looked to Canada as a potential supporter. East Timor’s cause no longer seemed lost. With the sense of hopelessness gone, Canadian officials proved capable of strong and effective diplomacy. The end of the Cold War

10 Canadian embassy in Jakarta to Foreign Affairs, 7 March 1995; Embassy in Jakarta to Foreign Affairs, 3 November 1998, access to information request.

11 Memoranda on Axworthy meetings in Jakarta, July 1997, University of British Columbia archives, British Columbia Civil Liberties Association papers, APEC inquiry exhibits, box 1.

had removed the strategic reasons to back Indonesia. The financial crisis removed some of the economic motivation. Thus Secretary of State for Asia Pacific Raymond Chan met Xanana Gusmão in his Jakarta prison, and Lloyd Axworthy became the first cabinet minister to meet Ramos-Horta in October 1998. Chan went beyond his briefing notes to state government support for East Timor's self-determination a month later. When new Indonesian President B.J. Habibie agreed to let Timorese voters choose autonomy or independence, Xanana Gusmão wrote to Axworthy saying that Canada, as a new United Nations security council member, was "in a unique position to play a lead role during the upcoming transition in East Timor, which I believe is inevitable."<sup>12</sup> The irony of the rhetorical assertion of inevitability likely went unnoticed.

More than 98 percent of registered voters turned out for the UN-sponsored referendum. More than 78 percent of those voters opted for independence. The Indonesian army rejected that result and sent pro-Indonesian militia groups into action. For the first two weeks of September 1999, militia violence engulfed East Timor, dominating international headlines. In Ottawa, reports to the minister updated the situation more than daily. Axworthy arranged a meeting on East Timor on the sidelines of the APEC summit in Auckland, winning the support of his New Zealand counterpart. Canadian officials lobbied hard to have other APEC members attend. Chrétien set the wheels in motion for a joint G7 ambassadors' *démarche* to Habibie, implicitly raising the possibility of affecting Indonesian financial sources. The disruption of Indonesia's diplomatic and economic support networks, achieved at the APEC meeting, was one of the keys to the Indonesian government's agreement to accept an Australian-led intervention force. Once Axworthy and his officials freed themselves of the lost-cause thesis, they were able to make valuable, creative contributions. Crucially, however, it took the debunking of the rhetoric of hopelessness to open the window to such action.

Canadian governments from Trudeau to Chrétien had looked to Asia to meet an increasingly important foreign policy goal—the promotion of exports and trade diversification. Prosperity could be assisted, it was hoped, by hitching the Canadian wagon to Asia's rising stars. In spite of the upsurge of human rights thinking in the 1970s, the Trudeau government singled out Indonesia as a partner. The Clark and Mulroney governments noted

12 Xanana Gusmao letter to Lloyd Axworthy, 20 February 1999, East Timor Alert Network papers, private collection, Toronto.

the importance of human rights in public statements but largely accepted the economic emphasis that guided Trudeau's engagement with Indonesia. With regard to East Timor, policymakers' analysis of the situation as a hopeless cause dictated a belief that rights were best advanced by accepting Indonesian rule. Especially during the Chrétien years, trade ties were underpinned by a rhetorical conviction that more trade advanced human rights.

At no time did any Canadian government take any steps that it thought would harm Canada-Indonesia trade prospects. The Mulroney government's aid freeze was a deliberate strategy to contain any damage to the bilateral relationship to specific nontrade aspects. Yet public pressure increased the political cost of supporting Indonesian rule in East Timor. The lost-cause thesis explained, justified, and informed previous government policy. The major achievement of Timorese diplomacy and of the transnational solidarity movement was to resist that rhetoric and create a new one that turned hopes for self-determination into reality. Timorese diplomacy was the art of the impossible.

Return, then, to the *Globe and Mail's* Marcus Gee. With Indonesian troops gone and East Timor celebrating its independence, Gee offered not a *mea culpa* over his contribution to the lost-cause construct, but rather a contribution to a new narrative: that "we" in the west, who "tend to romanticize those who struggle for national liberation," were "the midwives of East Timorese independence" who had "rushed in to restore order, the sword of righteousness in our hand." The disconnect from the *very* recent past was startling. "We intervened in defence of human rights," he wrote.<sup>13</sup> If so, it was only after more than two decades of quieter intervention on the other side. The new construct fit with the narrative of those who, like US President Bill Clinton, claimed that the west had erred by looking away, rather than the more accurate story of its active complicity. The new construct describes a 24-year-long "fit of absence of mind" followed by a righteous rescue mission. It plays a part in denying calls for an international tribunal on crimes against humanity in East Timor, for any duty to make amends, or for any acknowledgement of past actions. Instead, western governments are shrouded in the glory of a brief moment in 1999, with all previous complicity consigned to the realm of forgetting. A new construct

13 Marcus Gee, "Where does East Timor head now?" *Globe and Mail*, 6 October 1999, A15.

has emerged, one every bit as inaccurate and every bit as insidious as the lost-cause thesis.

The unfortunate result is a new false assumption that risks creating more bad policy. The language of “failed state” is bandied about, reintroducing the old sense of hopelessness. Relying on the occasional media mention of East Timor, it is easy to see a nation in crisis, an Asian Somalia with few prospects, destined to become the ward of the international community. This rhetoric of hopelessness has led to such steps as the Harper government’s decision to end the Canadian bilateral aid program for East Timor. Yet East Timor is a country with a vibrant and (in the political arena) nonviolent party system, higher voting rates than Canada, and an ability to point to a peaceful transfer of power from Fretilin to its rivals. It has one of the best-managed oil heritage funds in the world. It has ratified more human rights covenants than the United States or Canada. East Timorese civil society is vibrant and better able to influence public debates than its Canadian counterpart. Without romanticizing prospects or minimizing setbacks, this is a country that can point to substantial accomplishments in just a decade of independence, and whose nongovernmental organizations are effectively holding the government to account.

Canadian governments did not, for more than 20 years, allow human rights to affect policy on East Timor. Canada was not a voice for human rights—or rather, its voice was only occasionally there, unsupported by action. This was not because no one in Ottawa cared about human rights. Rather, the lost-cause thesis made strong rights advocacy seem pointless, even counterproductive. Once freed from false constructs and mere rhetoric, the Canadian government proved capable of constructive, goal-oriented rights promotion that saw the United Nations act relatively swiftly to intervene in East Timor. Mere rhetoric, however, once again dominates the Canadian government’s international human rights policy. The lesson that Canada can contribute to the advance of human rights overseas—that not all lost causes are truly lost—has not been learned. Policymakers instead seem to have taken the lesson that empty rhetoric aimed at domestic public opinion is more useful than thoughtful and targeted human rights advocacy. If Canada is to become the effective voice for human rights it claims to be, then internationally minded Canadians will have to unlearn that lesson and stop creating self-fulfilling prophecies.