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Looking to the Future: Timor-Leste and Indonesia 10 years after separation

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Timor Leste and Indonesia have had a troubled past in their bilateral relations. Both are however determined to build a shared future without the baggage of history. Can this new chapter in ties be based on their own unique approach to relations?

DECADES AFTER their conflicts have ended, several nations in Asia and beyond still have strained relations that all too often erupt into serious incidents. In the space of less than a decade since their brutal separation, Timor-Leste and Indonesia have built a surprisingly cordial and amicable relationship. This success has its roots in two main factors: first, a unique Southeast Asian approach to the issue of justice and reconciliation, highly influenced by some very similar elements within Timorese and Indonesian cultures. Second, a mature and forward looking leadership on both sides also played a central role.

Soon after separation from Indonesia in 1999 current Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao initiated a discreet, but steady rapprochement towards Indonesia, a gesture that was duly reciprocated by moderate leaders in Indonesia. From the very beginning both Gusmao and current President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Ramos Horta resisted international and domestic pressure to take the Indonesian leadership to justice.

A Non-Western Approach to Rebuilding Ties

Instead of adopting the Western approach to justice by settling the issues at an international court, both countries decided instead to create a Truth and Friendship Commission. The commission is a forum in which the two parties, particularly Indonesia, can reveal the truth about the most sensitive issues such as mass murder, rape and deportation. In exchange for the truth there will be no prosecutions and both nations would put the bitter past behind them. All Timor asked was the truth -- which it got from a democratic Indonesia trying to come to terms with its own domestic past of oppression.

The Timorese leadership never asked for compensation or even an apology, as is usually the case in most Western-based approaches, just the truth. In 2005 President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono visited

Timor-Leste. While laying a wreath at the site of the 1992 Santa Cruz Massacre committed by the army he once served, President Yudhoyono apologised for past mistakes. The Indonesian leader received a hero's welcome upon leaving the cemetery, with thousands of people trying to get near him. Unlike certain other nations, the issue of an apology was never raised by Dili; Indonesia apologised out of its own free will. As the Timorese saying goes, an apology is never genuine if demanded.

International Tribunal?

Despite international pressure on the Timorese authorities to demand the establishment of an international tribunal, the Timorese leadership refused and followed its own free will. It is worth noting the hypocrisy of certain Western nations. While demanding that the Timorese establish a tribunal, none of the major powers was willing to take the first step. None of them has to date demanded the United Nations Security Council to create such tribunal for fear of jeopardising their relations with a strategically important country like Indonesia.

Instead the international community gave the rather cynical excuse that it was the Timorese who did not want justice and were undermining their efforts to bring justice to the victims. What the international community wanted was for the Timorese to take the brunt of Indonesia's retaliation while they watched. Had Timor followed the Western-inspired approach, its relations today with Indonesia would be quite strenuous.

Justice would be incomplete if only the Indonesian military was to be put on trial. How about the various Western powers who supplied the Indonesian military with the means of oppression? It would be rather unfair to blame only Indonesia for what happened. What about Australia and other powers that made great profit while Suharto was in power?

Indonesia has reciprocated Timor's gesture by abstaining from interfering in the domestic affairs of the fragile nation, containing the more nationalistic elements within Indonesia and by being a staunch supporter of Timor-Leste's admission into ASEAN.

Personal Ties

Personal relations have also played a strong influence in achieving reconciliation, particularly the close friendship between Presidents Yudhoyono and Ramos Horta. Personal ties have on various occasions prevented conservative groups within Indonesia from destabilising Timor and undermining the process of reconciliation. In 2005, while a student at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, I was a classmate of Captain Agus Yudhoyono. Since then, we have remained close friends, just like our fathers. In 2006 when mass unrest engulfed Timor, my friend Agus visited me at my NTU apartment to console me and give me support. Just a few years ago, I could not even dream of this.

While the evolution of Indonesian-Timorese ties is remarkable, there are still some minor irritants. One of these is Indonesia's inability to prevent some of its citizens on international arrest warrants from entering Timor-Leste. Last month an Indonesian citizen accused of war crimes was arrested in the village of Suai by the United Nations Police (UNPOL) who had an international mandate for his arrest. Morteno Bera was arrested in Suia, the same village where he had raped and murdered several people, including nuns.

The fact that an international criminal was allowed to cross into Timor-Leste by the Indonesian authorities created resentment among the Timorese leadership who felt insulted by the act. To prevent such incidents, Jakarta should put on notice its citizens with international warrants to limit their movements, while improving its security at the border. It would be regrettable to have individuals who are an embarrassment to both states to undermine the progress they have been making in rebuilding relations.

Despite this incident and against all expectations, Indonesian-Timorese ties have evolved in a very positive direction. Some Indonesian journalists even used the term “brotherly relations”. Discreet diplomacy, mature leadership and an approach suited to unique cultural and historic realities have allowed once-bitter enemies to emerge as close friends in less than a decade. Perhaps the example of Timor and Indonesia could offer valuable lessons to other nations in Asia and beyond.

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