



## Timor-Leste: A Fragile Peace by Loro Horta

Loro Horta ([rabino\\_azul@yahoo.com](mailto:rabino_azul@yahoo.com)) was the United Nations National Project Manager for Security Sector Reform in Timor-Leste and a former advisor to the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

After 5 years, the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT), which started in 2007 following a serious political-military crisis that led to state collapse, concluded its mission in December 2012. Australian and New Zealand forces left the territory soon after the end of UNMIT. Even though several media outlets and various observers hailed UNMIT as a success in stabilizing the country, this was not the first time the UN and the international community had declared mission accomplished in Timor-Leste. In June 2002, the UN concluded its first mission in the country after supervising the territory's transition to independence following 24 years of brutal Indonesian occupation. In 2005, the World Bank described Timor as a success story in nation building. A year later massive unrest led to the deployment of 2,000 Australian and New Zealand troops, followed by contingents from Portugal and Malaysia.

Today, the country remains vulnerable and the international community may turn out to be overly optimistic once more. There are several indicators of a fragile state in Timor-Leste that can easily become a failed state. The country possesses an extremely young population: 70 percent of its people are under the age of 30. Statistics on unemployment are difficult to come by. In 2007, the World Bank estimated that 15,000 Timorese were joining the work force every year while only 500 jobs were being created. Timor's unemployment and youth bulge problems are exacerbated by a growing number of *grupos de arts marciais*, martial arts groups, many of whom are involved in crime. An estimated 15 percent of the population is believed to be members of such groups, among them senior police officers.

In the past 3 years or so the country has begun to witness a growing gap between rich and poor as a result of oil and gas revenues. This is leading to a slow, but steady increase in crime and insecurity. The country's police force, Polícia Nacional de Timor-Leste (PNTL), is poorly trained, corrupt, and ineffective. An illustration of its problems was demonstrated in early 2013 when a member of the elite close protection unit (CSP), after being sentenced for murder, went to the Court of Appeal with gun in hand to threaten the judge who sentenced him. The military, known as the Falintil-Forças de Defesa de Timor Leste (FDTL), while more disciplined than the PNTL, is plagued by low morale due to low salaries and the fact that several former Indonesian collaborators are now in government.

Following the 2012 elections a government with 57 members was created: 17 ministers, 14 vice ministers, and 26

secretaries of state. With a population of just over 1 million, Timor's government is bigger than Germany's. This bloated bureaucracy has led to serious mismanagement and corruption. For instance in 2010, Mario Carrascalao, the then deputy prime minister, resigned in protest over corruption in his own government.

While Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao seems not to be involved in corruption, several of his close associates have been involved in scandals. According to several international media outlets, Chico Lay, the ruling party's vice president and current minister of tourism, was involved in corruption when acting as the country representative at FIFA.

The country's courts are seen as subservient to the government and a culture of impunity prevails. The most blatant example occurred in March 2013 when Prime Minister Gusmao's nephew went on a drunken rampage destroying several restaurants and seriously hurting two people. The incident was widely reported in the media and charges were filed by the victims. Several months later he remains at liberty.

With over 90 percent of the country's economy derived from gas and oil exports – the highest dependence on a single commodity in the world – Timor-Leste is quite vulnerable. Corruption and inefficiency have prevented foreign investment. On average it takes 80 days to register a company and businessmen are constantly harassed by petty officials. By making use of substantial gas and oil revenues, estimated at 2 billion a year, the government has been able to maintain a fragile stability by extending patronage networks. However, several studies indicate that the country's gas and oil reserves will last another 15 years at most. If those estimates are correct, the country runs the risk of becoming unsustainable.

For over a decade the country has received the most foreign aid per capita in the world. Despite generous commitments from the international community, corruption, mismanagement, and outright arrogance on the part of the Timorese leadership continues to make Timor-Leste a poor and unstable nation. While the international community is once more making optimistic statements about its achievements, it may have to return to the country once more to deal with another crisis. For years the Timorese have blamed their troubles on the UN or on bizarre conspiracies involving the Australian secret services and the CIA. If another crisis breaks out the Timorese leaders have themselves primarily to blame.

The country's future does not need to be one of instability and poverty. If its leaders show modesty and assume responsibility for their actions, then the struggle for the country's independence that cost more than 100,000 deaths would not have been in vain. Some Timorese officials have done a commendable job addressing these challenges, such as Vice President of the Court of Appeals Natarcia Guterres,

former Prosecutor-General Ana Pessoa, Minister of State Agio Pereira, and Minister of Education Chico Benefides. And President Taur Matan Ruak is widely respected for his honesty. In late June 2013, to his merit Prime Minister Gusmao recognized the growing disarray in the government and promised a serious reshuffling and reduction in the number of portfolios. There remains a lot of goodwill for Timor in countries like Australia, the US, and in several European countries as a result of the country's heroic struggle for independence. Timor should not take the generosity of the international community for granted.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*