

## Timor-Leste on the Brink: A New Way Forward

Rebecca Engel

*Columbia University's Center for International Conflict Resolution (CICR)*

With weeks to go before a historic runoff presidential election, Timor-Leste is at war with itself. Since liberation in 1999 and its declaration of independence in May 2002, the country has staggered under the weight of extreme poverty, regional divisions, and internecine fighting between and among political party actors that has manifested with severe social consequences.

The crisis that began in late April 2006, once limited primarily to Dili, is showing alarming signs of spreading into the country's remote, isolated districts, as political maneuvering has increased dramatically. One of the key instruments in last year's violence, the disenfranchised military police commander, Major Alfredo Reinado, continues to elude Australian special forces in Timor-Leste's southern mountains. He enjoys considerable support across the western districts, and particularly among the frustrated, hopeless youth in Dili. His small rebellion has severely limited UN, government, and civil society efforts to register voters, conduct voter education, and ensure adequate monitoring of violence and ballot irregularities – all of which has been apparent in analysing the shortcomings of the first round of voting.

Current Prime Minister and Nobel Laureate, Jose Ramos-Horta, having survived the first ballot in a crowded field of seven others, hopes to rally the opposition to his cause as he enters the second round of voting with Francisco 'Lu Olo' Guterres from the ruling Fretilin party. Meanwhile, outgoing President and former resistance leader, Xanana Gusmao, is in the throes of an existential battle with Fretilin's leader, former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, and parliamentary elections scheduled for June 30 will be the proving ground. With Fretilin's internal movement for change (*Mudansa*) threatening to splinter the institution, Xanana hopes to drive a wedge through the party, and triumphantly claim legislative power under the banner of the renamed and newly-constituted National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT).

In doing so, it is difficult to imagine that Timor-Leste's already torn social fabric will not be damaged further. As Fretilin enjoys considerable support in all districts, particularly the three eastern districts – Baucau, Lautem, and Viqueque – it is probable that '*militantes*' across many parties will exploit the east-west divisions still festering from last year's violent crisis. *Emas Lorosae* (people from the east), have borne the brunt of the suffering in the last year, as more than one hundred thousand men, women, and children were driven from their homes by youth gangs closely aligned with political elements operating in the country. Centres for internally-displaced persons (IDPs) continue to dominate the landscape in Dili, and the recent appearance of new streetlights belies Timor's massive developmental retreat.

Seven years after Indonesia's violent departure, five years since independence, and billions of dollars of bilateral and UN support later, Timor-Leste remains the poorest country in Asia, and one of the most destitute in the world. With the latest turmoil, the country has backtracked significantly despite government, civil society and international efforts designed to meet the people's most basic needs – access to clean water, education, and health services. Where the state has been unable to guarantee the most fundamental human right, security, the international community has once again been forced to intervene on Timor's behalf. Australian and New Zealand Defence Forces continue to provide critical military support, while also being asked to shoulder urban policing functions with the Portuguese Republican National Guard (GNR).

The bureaucratically challenged UN is still struggling to get up and running, yet again. It seems that the Security Council has not caught up with the emerging consensus within the international community that peacekeeping and post-conflict development will require years of consistent support.

As legions of UN and international NGO 'experts' and advisors pour back into the country with hastily conceived quick-impact and other projects aimed at contributing to Timor's development, it is important to step back and take a hard look at what was done previously that may have contributed to the crisis, and what was not done to prevent it. Hundreds of actors and institutions are working to strengthen national capacity and to support rural development. Despite multiple opportunities to talk, there are no policy fora to determine national priorities and strategies for how to achieve these.

Whereas there have been efforts to prevent duplication, there are no processes to systematically determine national approaches to youth employment, agricultural development, or income generation. Rather, individual actors and institutions promote their own agendas according to funds available and donor-imposed timelines for implementation. Ultimately, bilateral donors must revisit their methodological approaches, and stop throwing good money after bad. It is time to move away from 1-2 year project cycles towards a more holistic, long-term paradigm, learning from past experiences and applying the lessons in action to strengthen the state and mitigate further escalation of violence.

For its part, no incoming government will be able to succeed quickly or alone, and public expectations are high. Whichever party dominates at the polls – and it is likely that this time around no one party will hold a clear majority – it will behoove any new Prime Minister to form a government of national unity inclusive of the diverse political perspectives within society. Such a government must listen and respond thoughtfully to the challenges faced by the population. Genuine engagement rather than false promises will have a good chance to garner the patience that is needed to see real progress in service delivery and economic development, restoring the lost confidence of Timor's beleaguered citizenry. The government must prioritise accountability and build bridges with civil society actors towards achieving the common goals of development.

What is needed now is a renewed push for high-level dialogue, with pressure exerted bilaterally by concerned governments and by the UN. The EU, America and Australia should proactively support the peacemakers in resolving this conflict constructively. These efforts, coupled with a concentrated push by East Timorese civil society could be the catalysts for change so desperately needed by the UN's poster child. Absent discourse, the Timorese people will continue to suffer.

The international community must act soon and responsibly to ensure that the modest development gains made since independence are not further setback, and that the world's most recent post-conflict 'success story' does not become just another failed state.

***Rebecca E. Engel and Brian D. Hanley***

The authors work with Columbia University's Center for International Conflict Resolution (CICR), implementing a USAID-funded NGO Sector Strengthening Programme, and a Peace Strengthening Programme in Timor-Leste. Rebecca Engel is the author of "The Crisis of Timor-Leste: Restoring National Unity Through State Institutions, Culture, and Civil Society", Working Paper nº 25, August 2006, FRIDE, available at [www.fride.org](http://www.fride.org)

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Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior  
C/ Goya, 5-7, Pasaje 2º, 28001 MADRID. Tel. +34 91 244 47 40 Fax +34 91 244 47 41 e-mail: [fride@fride.org](mailto:fride@fride.org)  
[www.fride.org](http://www.fride.org)