

Timor Leste: A Case-Study in Fractured Parliamentary Democracy

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, MAY 17 2023

On 21 May 2023, Timor Leste goes to the polls for parliamentary elections that follow last year's presidential elections. I worked for the UN in Timor between 1999–2001 and have returned as an international election observer for every major election since this tiny island statelet voted by referendum for its independence in 1999. In May 2023, I found myself again on this enchanting isolated territory, surrounded by the fast-growing traffic of a newly energised metropolis. Dili has become a genuine capital. There are improved public housing, shopping malls a new central business district blissfully only minutes away from the wind-swept beaches of the Indian Ocean and Timor Sea.

Since 1999, while both Indonesian and Portuguese influences remain strong, Timor had gained an authentic ethos of independence. The current governing coalition is a four-party government comprising Fretilin–PLP–KHUNTO–PD. CNRT are now Timor's official opposition. This uneasy coalition has momentarily mitigated the intra-party strife which has characterized Timorese politics in recent years. That (earlier) political tension had been characterised by accompanying low levels of political violence which followed the failure of the previous Fretilin–AMP coalition during the first few months of 2020, and which in turn gave way to the current governing coalition or four-party government on 12 May 2020.

The singular problem encountered by the Fretilin–AMP pact was its fractious nature. Pitted against one another, and yet supposedly in partnership, they could not garner together enough public support. Even the most tolerant of voters cannot accept that their political leaders engage in continuous fratricide. Now that the coalition parties have expanded, the tension has subsided but genuine power-sharing remains contentious. Predictably, when I asked her view of prospects for the upcoming election, a Fretilin spokesperson was evasive: “No-one can predict how the May elections will go or who will be in power or who might hobble together some form of power-sharing arrangements...we are all at sea and there is no obvious captain...there is only a rudder...that is to say there are political rules...but it is everyone for themselves...”

In short, Timor is a captain-less ship and it is likely to take quite a period after the May election for a sufficient coalition of interests to come together to create some kind of parliamentary stability. As one of President Ramos-Horta's special advisers told me:

We are still in so many ways living with the politics of the past. It is as if Jakarta and Lisbon, in their own inimitable and yet never openly spoken way, are still ghosting our past and stopping us from moving forward. We are still lacking something like a genuinely Timorese political culture and tradition. Our own politics focus on personalities or are still only about what we are against, and less about what a new Timorese could be for....We both hate and love the Portuguese, we mostly despise the Indonesians, we feel deserted by the international community as they scale back their operations, and no party really knows where it is going....

By comparison, if fragmented coalition politics are a fact of life in Timor, its Presidential elections are more of a decretory blood sport. In the Presidential elections held on 19 March 2022, incumbent Francisco Guterres had sought election to a second term. Dubbed the “Kingmaker of Timor Leste, the election proved a shock for him. With no presidential nominee securing 50% of the cast votes, a runoff was held on 19 April 2022, between the top two

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candidates, José Ramos-Horta and Guterres. Ramos-Horta won the runoff with 62.1% of the total votes cast. This was the first time that someone had been re-elected to the East Timorese presidency, and the second time that an incumbent president had been defeated – after the 2012 election, when Ramos-Horta (himself) had been eliminated in the first round. Former President José Ramos-Horta ostentatiously “came out of retirement” as he stated that incumbent president Francisco “Lú-Olo” Guterres had violated the constitution.

During his Presidency, Guterres had refused to swear in ministers from Ramos-Horta’s party. The grounds he cited was that they were currently undergoing legal investigations over corruption, but Guterres appeared leaden-footed, if not biased. Whatever rumours of dodgy deals by political representatives, “normal politics” continued. No party in Timor was free of members who had not been so scrutinized at one time or another. Ultimately Guterres went too far in a targeted sanitation. His predecessor, Ramos-Horta, seeking re-instatement, pledged that in the event of winning the presidential election, he would dissolve parliament, call for new elections, and promote reconciliation. Ramos-Horta, a more flexible political dealer than Guterres, ran on a platform of poverty reduction, increasing healthcare services and job creation. He also stated that he wanted to improve communication across the governing political parties to enhance co-operation and governmental stability. This in turn, signalled that he would be a better broker with the highly fluid coalition politics acclimated to Timor. In addition, Ramos-Horta also had better plans for COVID-19 recovery. After his victory over incumbent Guterres, Ramos-Horta declared that he would support the VIII government until the end of its mandate.

To some extent, the outside observer might be forgiven for viewing the politics of Timor Leste as inherently chaotic. The fact is that this former colonial possession found it difficult to generate a strong indigenous political culture of positivity and vision. Its politics, such as they were, had been forged in opposition to colonial domination, rather than in forward-looking policy. There are numerous parties, none with decisive influence. All of Timor’s major political parties eschewed a rhetoric of anti-colonialism, while articulating only the weakest of visions for Timor’s future. Fretilin–PLP–KHUNTO–PD and CNRT collectively exhibit a paucity of genuine political ideology. For this reason, Timor’s Presidential leaders have appeared more credible and coherent. They have (without exception) been capable of statesmanship and even idealism. Thus, by comparison with the gestation of fragile coalitions, Presidential elections have proven smoother. These have, invariably produced a clear result and the country has rallied behind the successful candidate. By comparison, in face of such political fragmentation and desperate coalition-formation, the public have found their workaday representatives lack authority.

The Presidential campaign in 2022 was described as, “largely peaceful and competitive” by EU electoral observer Ruiz Devesa. Younger voters, with less strong regional convictions and party affiliations, were considered a pivotal voter bloc during the election, being seen as contributing to the third-place finish of KHUNTO candidate Armanda Berta dos Santos. Timor’s politicians do not seem to recognize the salience of an increasingly youthful electorate. It is the parliamentary system which generates uncertainty because there are no decisive parties or personalities. Somehow Timorese political leaders need to forge better, more sustainable alliances. The necessary deal-making should be done ahead of election-day not in a sordid scramble to gain power when the votes are cast. They should also espouse a zero tolerance of political violence during the 2023 parliamentary elections. One hopes that the May parliamentary elections may be able to emulate the largely violence-free atmosphere of the Timorese Presidential elections.

In regard to Timor’s electoral system for its 2023 parliamentary polls, the 65 members of the National Parliament are elected from a single nationwide constituency, by closed list proportional representation. Parties are required to have a woman in at least every third position in their list. Seats are allocated using the d’Hondt method with an electoral threshold of four percent. Traditionally, voters cast their ballots in their home municipality, which meant that many guest-workers resident in the capital travelled back to their villages on election day. Following experience in the last presidential elections, a voting centre has opened in Dili for each East Timorese municipality, so that this arduous journey is no longer compulsory.

These new polling options are likely to increase voter turn-out and ease the cost and hardship of turning out to vote in this still largely impoverished nation. The Secretariado Técnico de Administração Eleitoral (STAE) runs some 1880 polling stations in the country. They appear well prepared for the election. A senior member of STAE told me

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unofficially:

I am confident that we have learned many lessons from past elections here. We have worked on improving the voter's register, the new stations in Dili for out of country voting will be a great help and save many poor people from having to return home to their villages, and security is undoubtedly the best we have had since 1999. It has also been a record year for training of polling station staff, and we have never had such a large team before, not even for the referendum in 1999.

It is an election and parliamentary system which is at one and the same time, forward and also backward. It promises much in the way of potential coalition-building, and a protected gender quota, but in so many other ways is bogged down in the realities of Timor's tribal politics of the past. So much, and yet so little, has changed since 1999, and the poltergeists of the post-referendum civil war are as manifest today as the shiny new state limos parked outside parliament house. And yet one senses the slow zeitgeist of change in modern Timor Leste. I spoke to a group of young voters outside Dili's main college. One of the student union chiefs told me:

As students we hope that the old generation of Timorese politicians would give way for people with new ideas and a better sense of what would lift the economic lives of the ordinary people and give them prosperity. They praised a few of the parliamentary candidates.

Even so, Timor's future parliamentary destiny is still on a stormy sea, without any obvious coherent vision of a political future. Like so many young democracies its progress is characterised by steps simultaneously progressive and regressive, and to many observers May 2023 is characterised by a sense of déjà vu, of lessons not learned and a parochialism which threatens to stymie its future prosperity.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.