

Election aftermath in Timor-Leste

Dili is burning, once again. Or so we thought, as we followed the international media coverage in early August. The images of angry young men throwing stones and burning tyres, houses going up in flames and UN vehicles with broken windshields cleaving their way through dark smoke seemed all too familiar.

Gilles
Bouché

Carole
Reckinger

Timor-Leste has known many critical moments in the last decades. In 1999, days before withdrawing after a 24 year long illegal and often brutal occupation, the Indonesian army and the pro-Indonesian militias sacked the whole country, killing, burning, and looting on their way out. The Timorese who were not forcefully removed to refugee camps in the Indonesian province of West Timor witnessed the destruction of 70% of their infrastructure. Even school benches were carried off to Indonesia. In the capital, whole neighbourhoods were flattened to the ground, the scars of which can still be seen today.

When Timor-Leste regained its long awaited independence, these pictures of violence and destruction seemed a black shadow from the past, thoroughly confined to the archives of the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (CAVR). But in April last year, the hope for a peaceful future was dealt a first severe blow. The capital went up in flames after the dismissal of 600 soldiers – nearly a third of the military – who protested against discrimination within the ranks of the newly formed Timorese army. In the ensuing chaos, at least 37 people were killed and 150,000 were left homeless.

Many people who fled the violence of April-May 2006 remain lingering in camps for internally displaced people. Clusters of colourful tents are spread all over Dili and have turned into a permanent sight. Even today, the events which shook

the country continue to haunt the Timorese as “the crisis”. For many, the crisis never ended.

The latest outburst of violence was triggered on August 6th by President Ramos-Horta’s announcement of a new government. Most of the unrest erupted in the eastern districts of Baucau and Viqueque where, according to a UN report, 323 houses were torched and 4,000 people displaced. President José Ramos-Horta hastened to blame the media for “once again doing a great job in exaggerating” and to praise the international police forces for doing “a great job in controlling the violence”, which he described as “sporadic and isolated”.

The fragile optimism which re-emerged in the last months has given way to disappointment and anxiety. Timor-Leste seemed to be on the right track after the intervention of an Australian-led international stabilisation force brought the civil unrest under control. Disaffected youths organised in so called martial arts gangs and armed with rocks and *rama ambon* (short iron darts) continued to pose a threat, but seemed largely contained after a massive crackdown in February. Above all, the presidential and parliamentary elections held

Gilles Bouché, a postgraduate student in philosophy in Melbourne, acted as an election observer for the Victorian Local Governance Association in the parliamentary elections 2007 in Timor-Leste.

Carole Reckinger is a postgraduate student at the SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies).

between April and June and intensively monitored by local and international observer groups were predominantly peaceful and transparent. The successful conduct of the national elections – the first managed by Timorese authorities – was seen as an important stepping stone in consolidating Timor Leste's young and fragile democracy. So what went wrong?

As widely predicted, the parliamentary elections marked the transition from the dominance of the former liberation party to a more even distribution of votes and political power – a typical development in post-colonial states. While Fretilin remained the strongest party winning 21 of 65 seats, it fell far short of preserving its absolute majority. Three other strong political groups emerged: the social-democrat coalition of PSD and ASDT (11 seats), the Partido Democrático (PD, 8 seats) and Gusmão's newly founded Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução Timorense (CNRT, 18 seats). In the wake of the elections, they formed the aptly named Alliance with a Parliamentary Majority (AMP).

Unwilling to accept their defeat, the leaders of the Fretilin party invoke an ambiguous passage of the Timorese constitution. The constitution demands that the government be formed by "the most voted party or alliance with parliamentary majority". Interpreted as the Fretilin party intends, this would not require the support of an absolute majority.

Even if Fretilin's legal interpretation were accepted, a Fretilin-led minority government would not find the approval of the parliament, thus leading to new elections. Uniting representatives of Fretilin and AMP in a government of national unity seemed a more probable alternative advocated by President Ramos-Horta. However, when the negotiations between the political rivals failed, AMP emerged as the only stable coalition backed by an absolute majority.

The decision to invite Gusmão to form a coalition infuriated Fretilin General-Secretary, Mari Alkatiri, who rejected it as "completely illegal and against our constitution". Fretilin members walked out of parliament in protest and refused to attend the Prime Minister's swearing-in ceremony. Groups of young Fretilin supporters took the protest to the streets, erecting roadblocks, throwing rocks and burning houses. The reaction of the Fretilin leadership has been ambivalent: while strongly condemning the violence, Alkatiri has endorsed the frustration of his supporters and thus has risked to be seen to legitimise their illegal actions. There is however no evidence suggesting that the violent protests are orchestrated by the Fretilin party.

The differences between Mari Alkatiri and Xanana Gusmão are not new but date back to the early

years of the Indonesian occupation. They flared up again during last year's crisis and resulted in open confrontation: Gusmão denounced Alkatiri's endorsement of dismissing the protesting soldiers. When the crisis unfolded Alkatiri was forced to step down from his Premiership – a decision seen by many Fretilin members as an attempted *coup d'Etat*.

The enmity between political key figures has particularly grievous effects on Timorese politics because the latter is highly personalised. In spite of the efforts of local NGOs to highlight political programs and foster public debate, personal attacks took centre-stage during the election campaign.

Supporting a political party is seen by many Timorese not merely as a matter of electing representatives likely to promote one's interests and ideas, but also as a matter of loyalty towards groups and individuals. Family ties and regional identities play an important role in determining political allegiance. Consequently, political opposition is seen as divisive and threatening rather than as an effective means of ensuring competition and accountability among politicians. Timor-Leste's dramatic history explains part of the anxiety, as political opposition has repeatedly taken violent forms in the past, leading to a civil war in 1974 and to the formation of militias in 1999.

Unsurprisingly, the idea of a government of national unity is popular among the Timorese population. Whether an inclusive government would indeed be more efficient in dealing with the pressing issues and better suited to Timorese mentalities is far from evident. Moreover, the idea

Supporting a political party is seen by many Timorese not merely as a matter of electing representatives likely to promote one's interests and ideas, but also as a matter of loyalty towards groups and individuals.

Day of election in Timor-Leste (Picture: Gilles Bouché)



risks being instrumentalised by political parties, in this instance by Fretilin, in the political power struggle – a very dangerous game, which gives parties an interest to promote the circumstances in which a government of national unity seems most desirable, namely by keeping alive a climate of insecurity.

Clearly, however, the opposition between Fretilin and the parties united in the AMP is not exclusively nourished by personal animosity. Key to the violence is the extent of poverty experienced by the majority of the population. The youth in particular has until now been frustrated by the lack of government response. Combined with boredom, lack of opportunities for constructive activity and extensive alcohol abuse, Dili's unemployment rate of a staggering 70% contributes to the volatile situation. Additionally, an estimated 70% of young men are members of martial art gangs. These groups play their own political role in the violence.

Developing the economy and raising living standards of the one million Timorese is one of the key factors for a sustainable and peaceful future. Budgetary constraints have hampered economic development in the past. For example only a little

more than US\$ 1 million annually was made available for desperately needed infrastructure development during the previous administration. Very low government salaries have compounded the problem, driving many of the most competent civil servants to work for international organizations, where drivers can earn twice the monthly salary of senior government officials. Some of this could change under the new government as this year Timor-Leste will be able to use significant revenues from the oil and gas extracted from the Timor Sea.

A major programmatic difference between Fretilin and CNRT concerns the investment of Timor-Leste's oil revenue. Fretilin favours a policy of slow but controlled economic growth, whereas CNRT has campaigned to increase public expenditure by relaxing the regulation governing the management of the Petroleum Fund. This furthermore would entail incurring foreign debt, something that the Fretilin government has until now actively avoided.

Besides foreign aid, the exploitation of oil fields located in the Timor Sea constitutes Timor-Leste's only substantial source of income. In order to prevent corruption and mismanagement, the late Timorese government has created a Petroleum Fund which is subject to strict rules of transparency and accountability. In order to assure the long-term balance of the fund, the government is prevented from withdrawing more than the "sustainable income". While the fund has already crossed the US\$ 1 billion line and will increase, the sustainable income, and hence Timor-Leste's national budget, will continue to hover at around US\$ 300 million a year (less than US\$ 300 per capita).

With the injection of public funds, Gusmão and his coalition hope to kick-start Timor-Leste's economy. Until details of CNRT's investment policy are revealed, it is impossible to predict, however, whether economic growth can be boosted substantially without risking mismanagement and high inflation.

While accelerating Timor-Leste's economic development remains a precondition for peace and stability, a range of other, maybe less tangible, issues need to be tackled. Among others, the new government has to heal the wounds of regional division and of decades of traumatising violence endured by the civilian population and has to counteract the climate of impunity and lawlessness reigning in the streets, notably by strengthening the overstressed justice system.

While Timor-Leste is far from becoming a "failed state", it will take years of resolute efforts before the Timorese may confidently hope that the pictures of looting and burning have been relinquished to the past, once and for all.

Photo: Gilles Bouché

