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Humility and compassion: The pre-requisites of moral leadership

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HUMILITY AND COMPASSION: the pre-requisites of moral leadership

The Nobel Peace Laureate and former President of Timor-Leste, Dr. José Ramos-Horta talks about ethical leadership and Timor-Leste's post-independence development in this interview with Havovi Joshi.



What people want after independence—jobs, security and education—is far more complex. It requires vision, planning and execution.

From 1975 to 1999, almost a quarter of a century, you were exiled from your country and lived overseas, fighting for its independence. Then in 2002, Timor-Leste gained independence, and you were appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation. In 2006, you were sworn in as the Prime Minister of Timor-Leste and, within a year, elected President of the country. How did you work through the transition from an independence activist to head of state?

There is a lot of difference. When you fight for independence or for a cause, you don't have responsibilities of any kind in delivering results, stability, peace, security or jobs to people. You just talk, advocate and shout. But as head of state or minister in your own country after independence, you can no longer shout for independence—that is

done, you have achieved it, and now it is time to build the nation, deliver, and meet the expectations of the people. What people want after independence—jobs, security and education—is far more complex. It requires vision, planning and execution. And execution means you need dedicated and qualified people, who are not always available. And if you don't deliver, the people protest.

When I became Prime Minister in 2006, I had to deliver on what was the need of that time, safety and security. And when I became President just a year later, my main priority then was to build bridges, bring people together, and heal the wounds. I saw my role as the conciliator and the bridge builder to restore tranquillity and faith in the people, and to create conditions for the government to be able to govern. That's what I did, and I was proud and happy that when I handed over power to my successor, the country was dramatically different from what it had been in 2006-2007. My conscience was completely at ease.

In 2006, when there was an internal crisis with rebel soldiers, why did you believe that you had to resign as Foreign Minister?

This has to do with the core attribute of leadership, or what I call ethical leadership. When you have a problem in your country or your organisation, you should always first look inwards to understand the cause of the problem rather than blame others outside. You should take responsibility for your problems, as that is what leadership is about. You take credit for what is good, and accept that you are responsible if it goes wrong. It takes courage and real statesmanship to acknowledge your own faults, your own failings. It took courage in 2006 to say that we alone were at fault, not anyone else. It was our collective failure.

I was soon after called back to serve as Prime Minister, which I did for about a year. I made every effort to reconcile the differences and calm the tension. And then we had elections, and I was compelled to run for President. I felt that I had to continue the process of healing the wounds, since you need peace and security for the government to run well. And for that to happen, I had to engage in a dialogue with everybody—because I believe that leadership is all about being humble and compassionate.

Leaders should never forget that countries are not statistics and economics. Countries are people with feelings. Humility and compassion are the two greatest qualities of a leader.

I recollect that in 2003, just six months after we achieved independence, there was a government retreat and I told my leadership compatriots, "When we are in power, we should show humility and descend from the mountains to the valleys and talk and listen to those on the fringes of the privileges of power. Because often, you can be a competent technocrat and deliver results, but if you are perceived to be arrogant, you will go down one day. You don't win by being arrogant." And the second quality of a leader is compassion, which goes hand in hand with humility.

When I look at say the explosive situation in the Middle East—I believe it all goes back to failure of ethical leadership, failure of dialogue, and failure of humility. Regimes that are entrenched for decades assume for themselves messianic powers and create situations where there is a complete absence of dialogue and place for people to voice their grievances. So what can they do? They take to the streets.

Hence those who have been in leadership for many years tend to lose touch with the people. Leaders have to make a conscious effort to be accessible. They should never forget that countries are not statistics and economics. Countries are people with feelings. Humility and compassion are the two greatest qualities of a leader.

Talking about compassion, in 2008, you were wounded in an assassination attempt. And you extended a personal pardon to all of them. And similarly, when we look around us and see the wounds of history where nations and people cannot forgive one another, the cordial relationship between Indonesia and Timor-Leste is truly unusual and impressive. How did you manage this, and what else does it tell us about the qualities of leadership?

I think what happened in 2008 was just an extension of the leadership crisis of 2006. We as leaders had failed. So was I going to condemn them?

Two days after I was shot, the attackers, who had at that time fled, said they would surrender to me and no one else. After the surrender, they went through the legal process and were sentenced to many years in prison. That was when I exercised my presidential prerogative and pardoned them. It was a political decision. I was aware why the incident took place in the first place, and so I set them free. And Timor-Leste has been free of unrest since then. And while I have been accused by some of pardoning too easily, the truth is that I understand the difficulties

of post-conflict societies. I believe that justice cannot be so blind that you ignore the social and political complexities in a given society, because that exacerbates conflict in the society and deepens polarisation. That was my philosophy as President.

Similarly, today no two countries in Asia have as good a relationship as Indonesia and Timor-Leste. How did this come about? We never fell into the temptation of demonising the Indonesian people or their religion. After independence, the leaders of the two countries said that we must look forward, we must build bridges. And we in Timor-Leste opposed the idea of a War Tribunal that was being hypocritically forced on us by the United States and the United Nations. We refused because we felt that Indonesia was itself in a difficult position, trying to build its democracy in the post-Suharto era. And Indonesia appreciated our stance. And they too showed great maturity and statesmanship, and managed their humiliation at being pushed out of a small country like Timor-Leste. After all, it is easier to show humility as a victor, and far more difficult to be humble when you are defeated.

When you are developing a new country or have just gained independence, as in the case of Timor-Leste, there are certain institutions, sectors and decisions that you have to prioritise. What sort of decisions did you feel were important and how did you prioritise in these contexts?

Well, in our country, because of the way it was totally destroyed, everything was a priority. But in practical terms, you cannot make everything a priority because the money is not there. Can you imagine our budget in 2002-2003? It was US\$68 million. We did have money for development projects that was separate from the budget, but we had to pay the salaries of civil servants, teachers, the army and the police; and at the same time invest in infrastructure and job creation. But our desire, as also of the people, was that education should be the number one priority, followed by health. So that's what we did. And as we generated more income from our oil and gas, we spent more on education and health. Now a lot more is being spent on infrastructure development. Roads are being built, or those that are built are being improved. There is some beautification of the towns and cities, with monuments built to honour the victims of the past.

The decision-making process on priority always starts with the Council of Ministers, where each minister puts forward his or her priorities based on their respective portfolios. Then it goes to the Parliament, and there is debate in the Parliament because the government has published a limit and you cannot go beyond that. We do have a lot of consultation with the people... sometimes too much. After all, do we really need a consultation to understand that education should be a priority?

Don't we know that illiteracy is high? Don't we know that without the best quality of educated people, the country is doomed? But we are doing it anyway. People want to be part of it, people want to be heard. And that is what a good leader does. A successful leader

is one who really connects with his people. But while leadership is to be sensitive to opinion, it must be remembered that leadership is not to follow—leadership is to lead. If you have a vision and you believe this is what is for the best of the country, even when it's against the sentiment of a lot of people, you have to do it. And that is what we did. And time has proved that we were right.

Looking ahead, what are the long-term plans to develop the Timor-Leste economy?

The government drafted, adopted and submitted for consultations throughout the country, a Strategic Development Plan that ran from 2011 to 2030. The vision is that by 2030, Timor-Leste will be an upper-middle income country, with a per capita income of US\$10,000, where illiteracy has disappeared, child and infant mortality has ended, life expectancy is up, and so on. That is the plan, and many parts of the strategic development plan are being pursued, and some milestones have been achieved. We have expanded enormously in medical coverage. Electricity too. So many of the goals in the strategic development plan have been achieved, although we still have a lot to do. I think we can do far better in education and health. I am generally very critical of ourselves, but then when I think of what we inherited in 2002, I would say we have achieved far more than most countries in similar circumstances.

I hope that Timor-Leste remains stable, peaceful and a model of solidarity. I tell the security people and the local police that, if from anywhere in the world a human being flees extreme poverty or war and lands on our shores, we must welcome them, shelter

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them, look after them, with no questions asked. In my country, we do have quite a few illegal migrants, but I tell my people that these individuals had to leave their country to come here, and each one of them, like you, must have been attached to their country, their villages, their family. People have to be really desperate and helpless to leave their country. So we cannot mistreat them, we cannot abuse them—we should welcome them.

What is your view on ASEAN and the AEC? What does it mean for Timor-Leste?

Joining ASEAN is Timor-Leste's birth right, in the sense that we are a part of Southeast Asia, so the geography gives us this right to join ASEAN. And, in fact, member ASEAN countries, including Singapore, have done their best to train and prepare us to better live up to the privileges and responsibility of being part of ASEAN. I think ASEAN membership will happen, maybe in 2016–2017, I hope. We were hoping for it to have happened many years ago, but that is also our fault and not entirely the fault of the members as we had a lot of challenges and difficulties to have our economy and other conditions improve to a minimal level of preparedness.

I don't know if it will have any economic financial benefit or impact, but yes, it will matter politically. We will become part of a larger group that is unified, that has prestige internationally, and eventually, as part of ASEAN, we might see more mobility for the Timorese,

who may benefit in terms of opportunities to study and travel in the region.

To conclude, based on your long experience, what advice would you give other leaders today, not just in Asia but across the world?

I would say that many conflicts that are happening now would have not happened if those in power had done more to listen to their people, connect with them, and invite those who disagree with them for round table conversations, asking, "What do you want me to do that can change your perception of me or my policies?" Because leaders are supposed to set examples and inspire people to respect each other. But some leaders just cannot resist the temptation of taking sides. They support one faction over another. I would say avoid getting entangled at any cost. Be an honest broker. And when you are able to do that, your people will welcome you.

And for the leaders in my country, I would hope and advise them to never fall prey to arrogance, corruption and the trappings of power. Also, don't overstay your time in office. Leave gracefully when you can. Don't wait to be chased out of office. If you leave gracefully with humility, you are respected.

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