

Timor-Leste's Veterans' Pension Scheme: Who are the Beneficiaries and Who is Missing Out?



Australian
National
University

LIA KENT & JOANNE WALLIS

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Introduction

Since the security crisis of 2006–07, the East Timorese government has increasingly relied upon cash payment schemes to mitigate further conflict and to provide a form of social security. A series of schemes have provided payments to different groups, including: people displaced by the crisis, the military officers that helped inflame the crisis, the elderly and disabled, and female-headed households with school-aged children. By far the most significant — and expensive — scheme provides pensions to veterans of the resistance struggle against the Indonesian occupation. This paper highlights who is benefiting from the veterans' pension scheme and who is missing out, and examines some of the potential long-term ramifications.

Who is Benefiting?

The veterans' pensions are part of a veterans' valourisation scheme established by the government in 2006 to provide symbolic recognition and material benefits to veterans. The beneficiaries are East Timorese citizens who are able to prove their participation in the independence struggle as part of the 'structures or organisations of the Resistance'. A 'survival pension' has also been established to support widows, orphans, elderly parents or siblings of veterans.¹

Pension payments vary according to the number of years a veteran 'exclusively dedicated' themselves to the resistance struggle, and their rank. Pensions range from between US\$276 and US\$575 per month for veterans who participated in the resistance for at least eight years or who 'are incapable of work due to physical or mental disabilities resulting from their participation', and US\$230 and US\$287.50 per month for surviving family members. A small number of 'leading' resistance figures receive a pension of US\$750 per month for their 'outstanding contribution to the struggle'. One-off payments have also been made to veterans who took part in the resistance for between four to seven years and do not qualify for pensions, and scholarships provided to children of veterans and orphans of deceased veterans.

In practice, because pensions are linked to a person's 'rank' within resistance structures, and the

number of years they were 'exclusively dedicated' to the struggle, veterans of the Armed Front (FALINTIL) are the primary beneficiaries. Those who participated in the Clandestine Front (the network of thousands of civilians based in the villages and towns who supported, and far outnumbered, combatants) are marginalised. Because they often concealed their activities behind study and work, many find it difficult to tally the requisite years of exclusive dedication.

Women are also being marginalised. Most women are not receiving pensions for their *own* contributions to the resistance, but are instead receiving the 'survival pension' as widows and children of deceased male veterans. This is because, although they played critical roles as couriers, cooks, and carers for the wounded, women were less likely than men to take up arms or to hold designated 'ranks' within resistance structures (Kent and Kinsella 2014).

The scheme's narrow definition of a veteran has led to tensions between the Clandestine and Armed Fronts, as former *Clandestinos* have protested the unfairness of the scheme. Other tensions have emerged due to the difficulties of verifying who is a legitimate veteran for the purpose of the scheme. Despite the establishment of special commissions to register and verify eligible veterans, complaints that veterans have made false claims about the duration of their time in the resistance or that individuals' periods of service have been under-recognised, are common. There have been cases of disputes over payments resulting in violent incidents.

Rising Pension Amounts

Over the past few years, veterans' pension amounts and the number of beneficiaries have risen steadily. Between 2008 and 2012, 37,707 people received some form of veterans' pension or payment — totalling \$US199 million. During the 2012 election campaign, it was announced that pensions would be paid to an additional 27,000 veterans. Veterans' payments of \$US96 million absorbed 14 per cent of the \$US1.6 billion 2013 budget, and represents 19.5 per cent of the projected US\$1.5 billion 2014 budget.

The lowest veterans' pension of US\$276 per month is many times higher than the average Timor-

ese income; in 2010, 41 per cent of the population lived on less than US\$38 per month. And although the pension scheme currently only benefits one per cent of Timor-Leste's population, more money is now spent on veterans than on health, education, or any sector except infrastructure. The veterans' scheme also dwarfs the small amounts of social assistance available to other groups, including the elderly and female-headed households. For instance, the neediest female-headed households receive a monthly subsidy of between US\$5 and US\$30 for each child to assist with education needs (depending on the education level of the child). The elderly and disabled receive only US\$30 per month.

The priority accorded to veterans over other groups in society, and the rising pension amounts, reveals a great deal about politics and society in contemporary Timor-Leste. It suggests that the veterans' scheme is a means of placating a powerful interest group who contributed to the escalation of the 2006–07 crisis, and who could become potential threats to the state. It also reflects, and further entrenches, an influential national narrative, enshrined in the constitution, which valorises the 24-year resistance struggle (Wallis 2013).

Long-Term Consequences

While the veterans' pension scheme may have 'bought peace' in the short term, it also potentially has negative long-term consequences. First, given the power of the veterans lobby, should the government choose to reduce pension amounts (for instance, if they become economically unsustainable,) this could be a source of instability and conflict.

A second, related risk is that the current (and former Parliamentary Majority Alliance) government has sought to create a sort of clientelist loyalty between itself and veterans, who have assumed a vocal role in state affairs and exercise considerable influence in parliament. Recent expansions in the pension scheme have largely been due to pressure from veterans.

Third, there is the risk that the scheme will have intergenerational impacts as, in addition to the scholarships provided under the scheme, veterans who receive pensions will be better able to educate their children. This kind of long-term impact is evi-

dent in Guinea-Bissau, where similar schemes have created intergenerational advantage for the descendants of veterans.

Fourth, there is a risk that the scheme will generate a degree of dependence and expectation of further payment schemes. More veterans will likely register for pensions if the eligibility criteria for pensions expand. If the veterans' pensions continue to rise, Timor-Leste could face a challenge similar to Guinea-Bissau, where commitments to veterans have impeded the government's ability to address other social issues.

A fifth and related risk is that, by entrenching the economic and political power of a group of militarised, and predominantly male, former combatants, the veterans' scheme may undermine the development of an inclusive national identity. Because the veterans' scheme promotes a view of citizenship that is linked to a person's role in the (armed) resistance struggle, those who cannot claim this status (among them women, *Clandestinos*, members of the younger generation, the diaspora, and those who were 'pro-integration' supporters) are marginalised.

Given the high levels of poverty and underdevelopment in Timor-Leste, it would seem that a long-term, inclusive, approach to providing social security and mitigating societal conflict, might give more attention to targeting the neediest households, perhaps through the provision of a needs-based social safety net system.

Notes on Authors

Lia Kent is a research fellow with the State, Society and Governance Program at the ANU. Joanne Wallis is a lecturer with the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the ANU.

References

- Kent, L. and Kinsella, N. 2014. *A Luta Continua* (the Struggle Continues): The Marginalisation of East Timorese Women in the Veterans' Valorisation Scheme. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* (forthcoming May 2014).
- Wallis, J. 2013. Victors, Villains and Victims: Capitalizing on Memory in Timor-Leste. *Ethnopolitics* 12(2): 133–60.

Endnote

- 1 Statute of the National Liberation Combatants No. 3/2006; Decree Law on the Pensions of the Combatants and Martyrs of the National Liberation No. 15/2008, online at <<http://www.jornal.gov.tl/lawsTL/RDTL-Law/index-e.htm>>.

