

Timor-Leste's Dangerous Political Union

Ironically, a peaceful transition of power is threatening to undermine democracy in Timor-Leste.

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Uniformed polling staff counting votes during Timor-Leste's general elections in 2012.

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In Timor-Leste, a peaceful transition of power is ironically threatening to undermine democracy. The small half-island has been a rare post-conflict state-building success story since achieving independence in 2002 and become a model for UN-led state-building. While there have been notable bouts of instability, its advances toward democracy and the rule of law have been remarkable given the country's staggering political, economic, and social changes. These gains occurred in an environment where the major political parties, the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) party, and the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT), were often fiercely, and occasionally violently, opposed to each other. Yet, with little fanfare, Timor-Leste has changed dramatically over the last two years. Political cooperation between parties rather than conflict now threatens to unravel Timor-Leste's admirable progress.

An Unlikely Alliance

A popular, sitting prime minister stepping down voluntarily would be a landmark development anywhere. In Timor-Leste, Asia's smallest and newest nation, with a history of political instability, the decision was monumental. In February 2015, Xanana Gusmão [left](#) the premiership.

Gusmão, a hero of the independence movement and the leader of the largest parliamentary party, the CNRT, had served as prime minister since 2007. Timor-Leste has both an elected president and separate unicameral national assembly from which the prime minister is selected. However, as the Constitution heavily circumscribes the president's authority, the real power lies with the prime minister and the cabinet.

Even more strikingly, at Gusmão's behest, Rui de Araújo, a well-respected technocrat from the opposition Fretilin party, became prime minister of a unity government between CNRT, Fretilin, and the two other parties in parliament. The new government [promised](#) "to converge ideas, policies, actions, and priorities around the common cause of consolidating and developing Timor-Leste." Unfortunately, while convergence seemingly promises stability, it risks undermining Timor-Leste's hard won democratic gains.

There is a common bond between the two major parties. Fretilin and the CNRT share deep roots in the independence struggle. Fretilin was the party that declared independence in 1975 from Portugal, Timor-Leste's longtime colonial overseer, and it initially led the struggle against Indonesia's brutal 25 year occupation. Gusmão emerged as the independence movement's most prominent leader from the mid-1980s onward.

Yet, examined more closely, the creation of a unity government was a bizarre turn of events. Fretilin's longtime secretary general minister and first prime minister, Mari Alkatiri, and Gusmão had been bitter rivals for decades. Timor-Leste politics had been highly contentious since independence. During the 2006 political crisis, clashes linked to major political figures resulted in 36 deaths, the displacement of 150,000 people, and the destruction of over 1,600 homes. International peacekeeping forces returned to restore order and stayed through 2012. While tensions never reached violence again, the intense rivalry between Alkatiri and Gusmão remained the defining feature of Timorese politics through the 2012 election. Then last year in a major U-turn, they started working together.

Even here, however, the transition of power is illusion rather than reality. Gusmão became the powerful minister of planning and strategic investment, a post he created, and which controls vast sums of capital. He even determined the composition of Araújo's cabinet. While today Gusmão lacks the prime minister's formal powers, he is widely seen as retaining ultimate authority, albeit behind the scenes and without formal accountability.

Unexpected Progress

Despite the rocky road, Timor-Leste is no basket case. Timorese politics have been notable for their vibrant political competition, not bloodshed. Timor-Leste has had three sets of highly competitive elections since 2002 that have been universally recognized as free and fair. Fretilin won the first parliamentary elections, while Gusmão was elected president. Tensions were high in the wake of the 2006 crisis, yet presidential and parliamentary elections were held in 2007. In the parliamentary poll, Fretilin, again, secured the largest percentage of seats though it fell short of a majority. Despite Fretilin's strenuous objections, Gusmão formed a coalition government in alliance with smaller parties. All major political parties eventually accepted the results. The 2007 elections marked Timor-Leste's first peaceful transfer of power. Movement toward democratic consolidation continued with the 2012 national elections, which were overseen by domestic

election bodies without significant external support. Gusmão returned to office, but a coalition was required. Fretilin again formed a strong, vocal opposition; that is, until it joined the government.

Regular elections were a big step forward. As no one party could fully claim the mantle of independence, space existed for vibrant competition. There has been no overwhelmingly dominant independence party such as the African National Congress in South Africa, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front in Zimbabwe, or the Congress party in India. There has been a peaceful change of power in both the parliament and the presidency, and two distinct governing coalitions with the opposition increasingly eschewing violence and respecting poll results. Timor-Leste’s success is in part rooted in the fact all the major political parties have meaningful links to the independence struggle. The existence of multiple, credible political parties have helped lay the foundations for multi-party democracy because no one group has sole claim to the independence struggle’s legacy. Meaningful competition between political parties plays a vital role in establishing, consolidating, and sustaining democracy. They offer an institutionalized mechanism for accountable governance as well as the representation and mobilization of diverse societal interests.

A Radical New Political Landscape

While the political party system has the potential to promote accountability, there is now a lack of robust parliamentary scrutiny at a crucial time even with the recent departure of one small party from the coalition. There has been increasing state hostility toward NGOs and very significant [concerns](#) have been raised about a restrictive media law. These restrictions are not merely abstract. The government is currently pursuing defamation charges against two prominent journalists, which is a public crime under the penal code. Timor-Leste’s economy is overwhelmingly dependent on a limited set of oil reserves under state control and this has sparked allegations of [corruption](#) in Gusmão’s previous governments. This dependence has been further challenged by the low price of oil. At the same time, as Timor-Leste’s oil revenues increased, successive governments faced ever-growing allegations that corruption had increased substantially, while dissent is viewed more skeptically. Even the president, Taur Matan Ruak himself, a hero of the independence struggle, has raised [complaints](#) that the families of Gusmão and Alkatari have unfairly benefited from lucrative state contracts. Fretilin, which was previously a strong critic of perceived government corruption, has unsurprisingly fallen silent.

Yet presidential power is heavily circumscribed under the constitution. The coalition government has a firm grasp on parliament. The president has even found himself the target of growing calls for [impeachment](#), albeit on an ostensibly unrelated matter. After tensions flared a compromise candidate was approved on April 15, 2016, but the major structural disagreements between the government and the president remain. Indeed, the prevalence of impeachment chatter cannot be separated from an overt hostility toward criticism of the governing regime. Fretilin party president, Francisco “Lu-Olo” Gueterres, recently took to national television to chide Ruak for criticizing Gusmão and Alkatari and ominously raised the prospect of “instability” if it continued.

The two major parties have entered an era of unprecedented cooperation, but dangers to democracy abound. Messy vibrant political competition is essential for entrenching representative government. While political unity sounds ideal, it can be a mortal threat to democracy. The danger is particularly grave where the institutions of representative government are still being

consolidated and the political class is insular enough to construct an exclusive governing clique. At the very least, voters deserve a real choice.

International actors have played a constructive role in supporting Timor-Leste's nascent democracy. Elections are overwhelmingly a domestic matter but the UN and states such as Australia and the United States, and particularly neighboring Indonesia, must stand firmly in favor of press freedom, open civil society, and vibrant election competition during the 2017 elections and beyond. Otherwise, the international community risks seeing Timor-Leste's success unravel and a success story become another cautionary tale.

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