State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

Timor-Leste's Presidential Election: Several Firsts, but no Generational Change

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Timor-Leste's presidential election on 20 March produced a number of firsts. For the first time, a candidate from a political party rather than an independent has been elected; for the first time since Timor-Leste became a nation in 2002, a candidate has won office in the first round of voting; for the first time, an election was conducted without the logistical and security support of a United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission deployed in the country; and for the first time, some out-of-country Timorese were able to vote. But in one important respect this election marks more of the same: once again, a senior figure from Timor-Leste's historical resistance movement has won the office of president.

Analysing the Firsts

Preliminary results give Francisco Guterres (Lu-Olo) from the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN) a decisive majority of 57.1 per cent of the vote, at last handing him the presidency after coming second in 2007 and 2012. This time Lu-Olo had the strong backing of Timor-Leste's kingmaker, iconic resistance leader, former president and former prime minister, Xanana Gusmão. This was a far cry from the 2012 election when Gusmão was reported in the local media as discouraging voters from supporting a partisan candidate (inferentially, Lu-olo) in the second-round vote for the presidency on the grounds that, if elected, that person could favour their own party in their exercise of presidential power.

In backing Lu-Olo this time around, Gusmão held back from fielding a candidate from the political party which he himself heads, the National Congress for the Reconstruction of Timor-Leste (CNRT). One view on the ground is that some CNRT supporters are feeling disheartened about the uncharted future of their party and without a candidate of their own did not bother to turn out on the day. The overall voter turnout of 67.9 per cent — 10 per cent down on the first round vote in the 2012 election — could bear this out.

CNRT party members may well still be carrying the bruises from February 2015 when Gusmão stepped down from the prime ministership, backing a senior FRETILIN figure to succeed him. At the time he wrote to the party executives of his own governing coalition observing unambiguously that in his opinion there was no one in the coalition block with the requisite skill-set for the job.

Runner-up to Lu-Olo, Antonio da Conceição, made a strong showing with 32.5 per cent of the vote. A senior minister in the current national unity government, Conceição comes from a minor party, the Democratic Party (PD), which won only 10.3 per cent of the vote in the 2012 parliamentary election. Conceição represents the voice of the 'new generation', and a grassroots approach to national development that focuses on the basics of water, sanitation, schools and clinics. It's a position akin to the incumbent President Taur Matan Ruak (TMR) who, additionally, has trenchantly criticised the current government's spending on costly megaprojects at the expense of pro-poor public spending. Conceição had the tacit backing of President Taur Matan Ruak and, according to the EU observer mission, he was also backed by the recently formed political party which TMR is expected to head once his term ends.

Lu-olo is the first candidate from a political party to be elected to the presidency; previous presidents had no party affiliation. Timor-Leste's first president, Xanana Gusmão, was deeply wary of partisan politics and stood in 2002 as an independent with the backing of several political parties. As president, he questioned the constitutionality of 2006 legislation providing for the inclusion of party symbols on the presidential ballot paper. While the Appeal Court upheld the legislation, the presidential elections in 2007 and 2012 nonetheless returned non-partisan candidates. Lu-olo, the president of FRETILIN from 2001, has bucked the trend, albeit on a de facto unity ticket with CNRT. Depending on the outcome of July's parliamentary election, the Lu-olo presidency may mark the end of the sometimes tense

relationship between president and prime minister that has been evident in previous governments.

This is the first presidential election since independence that has produced a definitive outcome in the first round of voting, despite a field of eight candidates. In the first presidential election, held just weeks before Timor-Leste's independence on 20 May 2002, only two candidates stood, one of whom was Xanana Gusmão. The outcome was a lay down misere. In both 2007 and 2012, with a candidate field of 8 and 13 respectively, the presidential race went to a second round.

This is also the first presidential election in Timor-Leste held without the considerable logistical and security support of an in-country UN peacekeeping mission. The UN's peacekeeping presence ended on 31 December 2012, following the largely peaceful presidential and parliamentary elections earlier that year. This time around, Timor-Leste's National Electoral Commission and national security services fully managed the electoral process and the dynamics on the ground without international assistance. The EU mission observing the election has reported positively on its transparent and robust processes and the peaceful atmosphere in which it was conducted.

An amendment to the electoral law earlier this year introduced out-of-country voting for the first time, and polling was set up at a handful of locations in Portugal and Australia. Voter numbers were modest given the size of overseas communities in the polling locations: a total of 525 voters, fairly evenly split between the two countries.

Still More of the Same

All of Timor-Leste's presidents so far have been prominent figures from the 24-year resistance to Indonesian occupation which began in December 1975 in the wake of the collapse of the Portuguese colonial administration in the territory and the decolonisation process that was then underway.

Timor-Leste's first president, Xanana Gusmão, led the resistance from the late 1970s, progressively rebuilding and broadening its support base and modus operandi. The country's second president, Jose Ramos Horta, who on his own account was encouraged to stand by Gusmão, was a tireless international campaigner for independence whose efforts were recognised with a Nobel Peace Prize. The third president, Taur Matan Ruak, fought in the armed resistance from the outset and became head of the armed force in 1998 following the jailing of Gusmão in 1992 and the death of his successor at the head of the armed wing. Lu-olo joined FRETILIN, the pro-independence party formed in 1974, and fought with the armed resistance when Indonesia invaded, rising through the ranks as a political cadre to become a top political leader in FRETILIN and, from 1998, the most senior office-holder in the party.

As original members of the resistance, at home or abroad, all of Timor-Leste's presidents belong to what is described in Timor-Leste as the 1975 generation. The 'new generation', who spearheaded the civil disobedience campaigns that put the international spotlight back onto East Timor from the late 1980s, are chaffing for power. The presidential runner-up, Conceição, is one of them. Gusmão made it clear in the lead-up to the presidential vote that it was not yet time for the younger generation of leaders to take over. The parliamentary elections in July will be their next big test.

Author Notes

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