

# Dili protests show Timor-Leste is speaking with one voice on maritime boundary

11 April 2016 3:30PM

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Movimentu Kontra Okupasaun Tasi Timor (MKOTT or the movement against occupation in the Timor Sea) organised a two-day peaceful protest on 22 and 23 March in what turned out to be one of the biggest concentrations of demonstrators to date in the short history of Timor-Leste. Among the many banners of MKOTT at the rally was one that read 'Come A-Waltzing Matilda With Us "Mates" ... Draw the Border Line Now!'

*East Timorese students protest outside the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia 24 March 2016 (Photo: Getty)*

Over 10,000 protesters on the first day and almost as many demonstrators on the second day gathered in front of the Australian Embassy in Dili. The demonstrators' demands were that Australia respect the sovereign rights of Timor-Leste in the Timor Sea and that Australia talk with the Timorese Government to define a maritime boundary in accordance with international law. The Australian Government has consistently refused to make such a good neighbourly gesture.

The two-day protest coincided with the 14th anniversary of the Australian Government's withdrawal from the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice, which deprived Timor-Leste of the right to resort to an international judicial umpire on maritime boundary disputes should bilateral negotiations fail. Even friendly bilateral talks over the issue, however, have not transpired due to the Australian Government's refusal to negotiate.

The Dili protestors were joined by many similar protests across Timor-Leste; thousands rallied in the districts of Aileu, Ainaro, Baucau, Cova Lima, Lautem, Manatuto, Manufahi and Oecusse. Demonstrations were also held by Timorese and international solidarity groups in Australia (Canberra, Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide), Indonesia (Surabaya, Jogjakarta and Jakarta), Kuala Lumpur, Manila, the cities of Aveiro and Lisbon in Portugal, Dungannon in Northern Ireland, as well as Peterborough in England. Other protests in the UK were called off after failing to receive police permits in time. Additionally, an online campaign drew support right across the globe.

The protests highlighted the Timorese people and their friends' strong feelings about the issue. It is a response to the Australian Government's approach to not delimit a permanent maritime boundary. When Australia can do it with its other neighbours, it is bewildering as to why it can't with Timor-Leste?

While some have tried to link the protests to the Timorese Government, there should be no doubt that these protests grew out of the strong feelings held by the Timorese and were neither government led, nor government incited. The forceful, yet peaceful, protests were organised by Timorese civil society.

Speaking at the conference on Maritime Boundaries held by the Associacao Dos Combatentes Da Brigada Negra on 16 March, former Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao applauded the Timorese for standing strong for their sovereignty, which might have mistakenly been interpreted as instigating the protests against the Australian Government.

Xanana Gusmao has never been to any formal university, but he knows international politics and diplomacy. Thus, any contemplation of Xanana inciting the demonstrations does him a great injustice. Similarly, it amounts to an insult to the people's will and determination to achieve full sovereignty for Timor-Leste. Timorese know what is right and wrong.

Timor-Leste had refrained from protests and other action on this issue for some time in order to see what would transpire with the Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea agreement (CMATS) which states that the agreement is made without prejudice to either party's claims to maritime boundaries. However, given the deadline for the approval of development plans as set out in Article 12 of CMATS had come and gone, and given the further lack of goodwill after it became known that Australia spied on Timor-Leste during the negotiations, as well as Australia's refusal to sit at the table to settle maritime boundaries, Timorese decided enough is enough.

What is now obvious is that the government and people of Timor-Leste are speaking one language; sovereignty, which remains incomplete with a neighbour who refuses to negotiate the delimitation of the maritime boundary.

The people of Timor-Leste are now more determined than ever in demanding their just rights in the Timor Sea. The demonstrations in March have also proved that the Timorese are prepared to take this new fight to all corners of the world, so long as the Australian Government holds on to its position of refusing to negotiate for a permanent maritime boundary in the Timor Sea.

The Waltzing Matilda might take some time still.

*The views expressed here are the author's own and do not represent any institution he is affiliated with.*