

Reflection on Timor's Political Stalemate and Future Implications

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Introduction

The July election this year was the best election yet organized in Timor in Timor's history. It was expected that the power transition would also be smooth. Unfortunately, continuing political stalemate and uncertainty exposes the fragility of our political institutions and surfaces existing political factions. We now live in an uncertain world and have no idea where this political deadlock will lead. On the surface, it appears that this political deadlock reflects the inability of our leaders to unite. But my own sense is that it reveals more than that. As the society becomes more complex, the interests are also more complex. And this political deadlock reflects how our society has evolved, and our existing political institutions are unable to manage this. Regardless of how this political deadlock turns out, this will have long-term implications for the country's political institutions, and the way the society perceives politics.

Round of Failure

This political impasse leads many people to synthesize and to make hypothetical comments, including blaming one another for the ongoing uncertainty. Some begin to blame external actors, primarily Australia. The political leaders, on the other hand, criticize each other for lacking the so-called "*sentidu do estado*" or "nationalism." Some even try to bring the Cold War mind-set to the context by arguing that it is a fight between the left and the right, progressive forces and the status quo.

I am not in a good position to judge the validity of these arguments. But for me, from the beginning, this uncertainty reflects two important things. The first is the fragility of our political institutions. By institution, I mean the rules of the game that define how power is distributed within the society. This is not only about the constitutional arrangement; but also involves the past political practice, primarily the 2007 precedent, the principles and the values that become the basis for the democratic society. Secondly, this also reflects the failure of political elites to manage their interests. This involves "give and take" in the negotiation process, their failure to build mutual trust, and the inability to reach consensus. Looking deeper, and trying to understand the way this political process unfolded, it is important to note how each political actor behaves.

The public reaction to the election result was that there would not be much change in terms of the power structure and the development policy. Some predicted that Fretilin – Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente – would continue to form a coalition with the Xanana-led CNRT – *Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução de Timor*. The political communication last July and August seemed to reinforce this prediction. The post-election political statement from the Fretilin leadership reinforced this prediction. For example, Mari Alkatiri frequently stated that "Fretilin's victory is a Xanana's victory." This sent a message that

CNRT was Fretilin's preferred coalition partner. At the same time, the political message also created a lot of confusion about which form of the government would be established — national unity government, coalition or the confidence and supply or 'Incidencia Parlamentar'. According to the Fretilin, it has practiced 'confidence and supply' between 2015 and 2017 to guarantee the government's stability through votes in the Parliament to ensure that the Government's budget would not be rejected.

Fretilin's efforts to reach out other political parties only became public after their efforts to reach an agreement with the CNRT had failed. *Partido Libertação Popular* (PLP), whose original position was to be in opposition, responded positively to Fretilin's invitation to enter into negotiation. KHUNTO – *Kmanek Haburas Unidade Nasional Timor Oan* – also responded positively. This time, it seemed that the Fretilin would be in coalition with PLP and KHUNTO.

The public reaction was initially positive, particularly from those who are dissatisfied with the ten of CNRT-led Government. At the same time, looking from the programs, both parties give more importance to social spending and the equal distribution of resources. These should have provided a strong ground for both parties to find a common ground.

Surprisingly, after negotiations, Fretilin and PLP announced that they had been unable to reach an agreement. The failure raised the question about the points of disagreement. Initially, it was thought that Fretilin did not agree with the PLP's proposal to have the position of the Speaker of the House, putting the blame on PLP, primarily its Vice President, Fidelis Magalhães. But, according to Taur Matan Ruak (TMR), it was more than that. From TMR's version, the fact that Fretilin was trying to secure all the parties' support within the Parliament does not give the security for the PLP. According to TMR, PLP does not feel secure with efforts from Fretilin to have all parties in Government since it gives the opportunity for the Fretilin to leave PLP in the future. This sounds more reasonable than the argument about the position of Speaker of the House itself. But from Fretilin's version, the point of disagreement was on the position of the Speaker of the House. Fretilin would have accepted TMR as speaker, but they are sceptical that Fidelis can perform the task.

The failure of Fretilin and PLP in the negotiation did not prevent the coalition from securing a majority of Parliament since Fretilin already had support from the PD. The real problem for the Fretilin is the refusal of KHUNTO, which withdrew from the coalition at the very last minute. This is the real blow for the Fretilin, and for the country because it means that the government does not have a majority in Parliament. The implication is that the government itself is not stable. But unlike with PLP, publicly, there is no clear point of contention between both parties.

Without a majority in Parliament, the Prime Minister then turned to public opinion to get support and Social media became the real battleground; hoping that public pressure will change the opposition parties' position on the proposed government program.

In the public opinion campaign, the Government presented its programs as "pro-people" and "pro-poor". Another campaign is that although the government does not have the majority in the Parliament, the opposition party also is responsible for the national interest. This sends a message that parties who vote "NO" on the program, are "Not Pro-Poor", "Not Pro-People", or do not accept responsibility for the state or lacking nationalism.

Some people may be persuaded by this strategy,, but the real problem is that it cannot address

the real concern of the opposition about the certainty and stability of the government. This is the real issue raised by the CNRT in its opening statement when the Government's program was being debated. Although many people refer to the Constitution, CNRT itself did not question the constitutionality of the Government. The CNRT just thought that a minority government would not be stable. Fretilin supporters, on the other hand, argue that the CNRT or Opposition Parties should play "confidence and supply" rules as the Fretilin did during 2015 until 2017. The problem, according to the CNRT version is that when Fretilin played that role, Fretilin received some critical positions such as Prime Minister, Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs, and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Furthermore, the concepts like "responsibility to the state" or "nationalism" can be interpreted differently in different contexts, by different people. Therefore, one cannot merely judge someone's level of responsibility to the state and their level of nationalism based on how they voted for the program. These expressions have different meaning depending on who uses them and in what context. In the meantime, the strategy of relying on social media to launch personal attacks, while hoping to get support from the opposition, seems to contradict each other. One cannot launch an attack while hoping for support at the same time.

On the contrary, the opposition argues that their position is truly based on the national interest because they want to have a stable government that can achieve long-term policy goals. This argument cannot simply be ruled out. Stable government is critical for political and economic stability; particularly for a country where most of the economy depends on public spending. Long-term political stability is the key to the economic development because investors and the people need to make the decisions about their investment for the long-term. Only a stable government can do it.

Overall, the debate on the program was not constructive and sent negative signals about the future dynamic within the Parliament. Both started from different point. Opposition faction started with questioning the legitimacy issue and already knew that they would reject the program; whereas the Government intended to push for the discussion on the content. Meanwhile, more important issue in Timor's destiny, which is the long-term economic and fiscal stability, poverty, inequality, and unemployment were rarely discussed during the debate.

The Focus is on PLP

PLP emerged in an interesting context. One cannot ignore that the reason PLP was able to come in third in the July election despite being new is due to TMR's figurehead. TMR's Presidency had to face the convergence of interests between CNRT and FRETILIN. This left the President at that time to take on the role of the opposition, as there were almost no opposition voices in Parliament.

It is true that the PLP emerged in a context where the level of dissatisfaction with the ten-year government was high. President TMR's stands on various issues, primarily on the way public resources were distributed during his presidency helped to use this dissatisfaction to benefit PLP.

In this context, PLP was expected to offer a new tradition to Timor's politics. It was expected to represent those interests that has been overlooked in the way Timor's politics was carried out in the last ten years. TMR's leadership was seen as the representation of it, given his record in the

Presidency.

Throughout the campaign, PLP campaigned on the banner of more equitable resource distribution. PLP was critical of government's mega-projects, and the way resources are being distributed across different segments of the society. It criticized both the Tasi Mane Project and ZEESM. These issues were highly contentious in the recent elections.

After the election, recognizing itself as a small party, the PLP's initial decision was to play a "constructive" and "educative" opposition; the kind of opposition that some people were looking forward to see in Parliament. Throughout the debate on the program, all eyes were on the opposition parties, primarily PLP. PLP's position on the government's program and the quality of its arguments were not convincing enough. In a situation where people want to have certainty, using only numbers of seats as the basis is not sufficient to convince the people. Therefore, this can have a long-term blowback for the party itself. In turn, some people began to question the "constructive" and the "educative" opposition that PLP had promised to play.

PLP's decision to establish a formal coalition with the CNRT can also have a long-term impact on the Party itself. This is primarily on the assumption that the voters who voted for PLP are those who were disenchanted with 10-years of CNRT government.

CNRT, although surprised to lose this election, was able to manage the situation well. CNRT sent the message that they will vote on the "national interests", but this is open to interpretation. After Fretilin failed to secure a majority government, CNRT emerged and capitalized on this failure by formalizing another opposition block within the Parliament. The implication is that although CNRT is not the most voted party, the final decision about the government will come from the CNRT, if not from CNRT's President Xanana Gusmão.

Future Implications

The current deadlock of the political process will have long-term impacts for democracy in Timor-Leste, in term of its institutions. The difficulty in forming government provides important lessons about political negotiation and future cooperation. The impact of the current political stalemate reached politically active groups and tends to polarize certain segments of the society, primarily the political groups in Dili.

At the elite level, this political stalemate, and continuing political communication will increase the level of distrust among them. This will have long-term impacts because regardless of how different their interests are, there have to be some interests in common. The problem is they could not find their common interests in the negotiation process and the way they communicate with each other. Perhaps, Mr. Francisco Branco was right when he said, after the Government's program was rejected, that this will renew the vicious cycle of "*odiu no vinganca*". The reaction from the social forces also tends to polarize the society more and more. Therefore, it will be hard for them to cooperate on certain issues in the future. In the context where political negotiation is the key, it will be challenging also to find a common ground if the current political atmosphere persists.

The second long-term impact for Timor's future politics is about the importance of the election. The inability of the most-voted party to form a government can be said that it is due to its inability to negotiate and to find a common ground with other parties. But for me, it raises the question also about the importance of the election as the final mechanism to distribute and to

organize the political power in the society. It is a risk for our democratic institutions that election becomes less important comparing to negotiation among elites. If so, , then from voter's point of view, what is the point for them when they go to vote for their party to win the election?

Thirdly, this ongoing political impasse also raises the question about what is at stake in the negotiation process. It appears to the public that the existing political parties are negotiating for power and positions (*fahe kadeira*), rather than principles, values, and the programs. In politics, one cannot totally neglect that reality. But it also raises the issue on the importance of values, principles, programs, and consistency in the way politics is carried out. This is a risk not only for the political parties itself; but overall about the trust of the voters on the entire political system. If our political system increasingly serves the interests of the politicians, the question then what about the rest of the people who are not politicians?

And the most important is the implication for the public trust for political institutions. Around the world, the democratic system is facing real threats and losing public trust. In many countries, ordinary people find that politics has marginalized them and only benefits the elites. Excessive concentration of wealth in the hands of few wealthy people also makes it hard for democracy, as democratic institutions are captured by the rich. This should have warned our politicians of future implications. The ongoing political deadlock can continue to destroy the public trust in the democratic institutions, as long as people don't see its impacts on their daily lives.