

Why the Return of Partisanship in Timor-Leste is a Good Thing

David Hutt, The Diplomat
19 October 2017

What a relief. For years, myself and some other pundits deplored the fact that there was [very little political opposition](#) to Timor-Leste's "unity government." So little, in fact, that President Tuar Matan Ruak went beyond his constitutional role by taking it upon himself to hold the government to account. Now, after presidential and parliamentary elections, partisanship has returned.

FRETILIN won only 23 out of 65 seats at July's parliamentary election. The National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT), which had been the larger party in an informal coalition with FRETILIN since 2015, won 22 seats, down eight from the previous general election. The CNRT, however, did not continue with the coalition. Instead, FRETILIN was joined by the Democratic Party (PD), which won seven seats, in forming a minority government, with a combined 30 seats.

This is the first time since independence, in 2002, that Timor-Leste has been controlled by a minority government. Now, however, the three opposition parties – CNRT, the PLP (eight seats) and KHUNTO (five seats) – are questioning whether to oust it from power and form their own majority coalition government.

A few weeks ago they [penned](#) a letter to the new president, Francisco "Lu-Olo" Guterres, which said they are "willing to present an alternative government solution" that ensures "peace, stability, and development." The letter also lambasted Guterres, who happens to be FRETILIN's president, for allowing the party to form a minority government, instead of seeking a majority alternative.

The new minority government could be formally toppled if its program is twice rejected in parliament. If this happens, the president is constitutionally bound to test whether another party, or coalition, can form a functioning government. Another election is an alternative in the event of an impasse, though one cannot take place until January.

I hasten to predict some criticism. A stable government, even the absence of an opposition, ought to be welcomed in Timor-Leste, some might try to say. After all, it

was political conflict that led to the violence we saw in 2006.

Two quick rebuttals. First, to argue the 2006 crisis was caused simply by political partisanship is to be willfully ignorant of the economic, social, geographic, and historical sources that coalesced in the preceding months and years.

Second, by constantly holding 2006 up as a smirch on the horizon that Timor-Leste could always return to, it keeps the country in a state of perpetual paranoia. Also, it does not dignify how much progress (so quickly, I might add) the half-island nation has made since. Fast forward just 11 years from 2006 and, instead of assassination attempts and chaos, today we have the possibility of the electorate returning to the ballot stations, not onto the streets, to solve a political problem. What's more, when the annual reports by think-tanks and pollsters on democracy or human rights are published, Timor-Leste is invariably found near the top, if not at the top, of countries in Southeast Asia. The Economist Intelligence Unit's latest Democracy Index, for instance, ranked Timor-Leste higher than any other Southeast Asian country, in 43rd place globally.

Moving on, I must admit that I wrongly predicted FRETILIN and the CNRT would continue their "unity government" after July's election. With their combined 45 seats the two parties would have formed a sizeable, though weakened, majority in parliament. Rumors are still swirling as to why they didn't. One only imagines what echoed through the corridors of the *Parlamentu Nasionál*.

The CNRT's leader, Xanana Gusmao, who stepped down as prime minister in 2015 to fashion the unity government, resigned from the party shortly after July's vote. And he bowed out with diffidence, [saying](#) that voters "do not trust the CNRT to govern" and that "will not accept proposals from anyone, nor invite any party to form a coalition because [the CNRT] does not intend to participate in government." He also seemed resigned to FRETILIN's rule. "This is the right moment for FRETILIN, as the winning party of the 2017 elections, to assume, and with full legitimacy, the reins of government," he said, contradicting the letter CNRT lawmakers later sent to the president, quoted earlier, expressing distrust of the minority government.

Despite my previous incorrect prediction, I hasten to make another: it seems unlikely the three opposition parties would now be able to form a functioning coalition to take the reins, despite their apparent intent. The PLP, headed by former president Ruak, was formed last year to oppose the big-budget plans of FRETILIN and the CNRT. These include costly mega-projects at the same time as the country's Wealth Fund is running drying, oil revenues falling, and state budgets increasing. The PLP, instead,

favors diverting the money to education, healthcare, and other basic services, and away from what, it claims, are unnecessary and corrupt mega-projects.

But the CNRT is irredeemably tied to many of these programs that FRETILIN still seems intent on going ahead with, and it's unlikely that the party's MPs will U-turn on them. The PLP might find a better ally in the youth-focused KHUNTO, which won seats for the first time in July. It has its roots in the country's martial arts groups (too long to explain that history, but [read this](#) for more) and gained significant ground by appealing to the unemployed youths. KHUNTO, naturally, ascribes to many of the same positions as the PLP. But together they only account for 13 seats, about a fifth of parliament. So the CNRT is needed if the PLP and KHUNTO want to form a majority government.

An alternative, and perhaps a better option, is that the three opposition parties remain in opposition and try to hold the minority FRETILIN-controlled government to account. In the long run this would be a far better exercise in democratic development. FRETILIN, with five fewer MPs, will have to learn how to couch policies and legislation to attract cross-party support. In short, the art of negotiation and appeasement that has been rarely needed in the past.

There is a much more important reason, too. Speaking after July's election, FRETILIN's general-secretary and now Timor-Leste's prime minister, Mari Alkatiri, [said](#) that "now the campaign is over, there are no opponents, there are only compatriots who want to work together." His appeal was to possible coalition partners. But his choice of language is telling. As I have argued before, bipartisanship (or "consensus politics") is not the best solution to a fractious and violent political environment like the one Timor-Leste witnessed in the past. The better solution, rather, is to fashion a political system where opposition to, and criticism of, the governing party is not viewed as treasonous. In other words, when the opposition becomes accepted as a "loyal opposition."

Damien Kingsbury, of Deakin University, would write in a 2007 [essay](#) about the events of the previous year: "The government also interpreted expressions of alternative perspectives as disloyal and potentially seditious. This lack of acceptance of legitimate dissent and a loyal opposition was perhaps its greatest political failure."

In the years following the 2006 violence any attempt at cultivating the idea of a "loyal opposition" was dropped for matters of security and, afterwards, was not possible when FRETILIN joined the CNRT as part of a "unity government." Today, however, might prove to be an opportune time to foster such a political development.