



Discussion Paper No. 1*

FROM RESISTANCE TO INDEPENDENCE: Timor-Leste's Leadership Challenge

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Introduction

After decades of subjugation, isolation and repression, most especially across twenty-four years of occupation by Indonesia, Timor-Leste became independent after the 1999 referendum. Suddenly, the leaders of Timor's unsinkable independence movement had to transform themselves from determined resisters into the heads of a brand new nation. This transformation has not been easy.

In the eight years since independence, the country's growing pains have included a UN-led government that yielded decidedly mixed results, several years of state formation by democratically elected Timorese officials, uneven steps towards addressing the population's massive poverty and development needs, and the current period of crisis that has involved sacked national soldiers, the rise of a renegade military leader, ongoing urban unrest, a severely weakened police force, and a new coalition government that does not include Fretilin (Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste, or The Revolutionary front for an Independent Timor-Leste), the political party which received the most votes in the September 2007 elections.

One irony emerging from the current crisis is that while some within the Timorese resistance movement have become prominent and even award-winning leaders, they are currently better known for their rivalries and inability to coexist. While this state of affairs may be commonplace among politicians, interviews conducted in November 2007 revealed strong and widespread criticism of them. Many interviewees, in fact, blamed the nation's leaders for failing to resolve the current crisis and even accused them of lacking the technical capacity to do so. Indeed, to some degree, the crisis initiated by street riots in 2006 has evolved into a crisis of national leadership in 2007.

However, in all the discussions of leadership capacity, one truly significant Timorese resource was scarcely ever noted: the extraordinarily high degree of resilience of the Timorese people. This paper examines the impact of this characteristic on the development of leadership capacity in Timor-Leste and raises questions about how leadership training programs can most effectively address this issue.

* This paper is meant to stimulate discussion about the leadership challenges currently faced by Timor-Leste's leaders. This paper represents the views of the author and does not in any way represent the views of the LCCNR team, the World Bank or of CMPartners, LLC.

Background

The idea for this discussion paper emerged over the course of a November 2007 assessment activity. The assessment aimed to provide advice about leadership in Timor-Leste for CMPartners and its World Bank colleagues, who are collectively initiating a leadership training program called the Leadership and Communication Capacity for National Renewal (LCCNR).

Field assessment findings strongly suggested that LCCNR was facing unusually challenging circumstances in Timor-Leste. Two questions surfaced most prominently:

1. *How can LCCNR succeed if at least some people view the skills they promote – peaceful problem-solving and negotiation – as weak leadership?*
2. *How can younger and lower-level leaders employ skills learned during LCCNR trainings if problem-solving roles are usually reserved for the highest-level leaders?*

The paper is designed to highlight the central themes about leadership that emerged from fieldwork in Timor-Leste in November 2007. The themes arose from analysis of findings from interviews with Timorese government, non-government, youth and women's leaders, in addition to ordinary Timorese citizens. Forty Timorese individuals, in total, were interviewed, in addition to a handful of international agency officials. Those interviewed included Timorese government officials from some of the highest and lowest government positions (including members of the national parliament and the sub-village *Aldeia*), as well as urban youth, rural widows, and displaced women's group leaders. All of those who were interviewed were invited to share their views of leadership.

Every effort was made to carry out an assessment without bias of any kind. The information provided here is not comprehensive – that would not even be possible, given the limited field assessment period. Instead, the only purpose of this paper is to invite discussion about leadership in Timor-Leste, and what might be done, by LCCNR and others, to enhance the capacity and effectiveness of its leaders.

Four Leadership Themes in Timor-Leste

The leadership characteristics that have emerged from field interviews draw from successful resistance against decades of powerful oppressors and with little external attention or support. Out of this experience has emerged a model of leadership that features tenacity, an unbending, resolute approach to challenges, strength of convictions, and an insistence on discipline in the ranks. Most of those who were interviewed contended that good leaders were tough and brave, and many became leaders only after garnering attention and respect as resistance fighters against 24 years of Indonesian occupation (1975-1999) – and since independence. Followers tend to expect strength and information from their leaders. Leaders themselves are known to control hierarchical organizations and are prone to rivalry. For some, negotiation and compromise are thought to be signs of weak leadership.

It needs to be made clear that this is very likely not the only leadership model in Timor-Leste. Some leaders, for example, quite obviously successfully and peacefully negotiated with rivals, counterparts and adversaries in the process of Timor-Leste's emergence as an independent nation in 1999. At the same time, it appears to be widely held that leaders in Timor-Leste could benefit from an enhancement of their capacity. What follows are the four primary findings from the November field assessment that pertain to Timorese leadership.

1. *A Tradition of Successful Resistance* – Timorese leaders proved to be a remarkably resilient cohort during the long resistance years. But a legacy of successful resistance has also caused problems. Two will be mentioned here.

First, many who were interviewed reported that a reputation for violence was a common leadership qualification. It was not unusual to learn about current male leaders who had track records as fighters during the Indonesian occupation. To some extent, this tradition appears to have influenced the current independence period. For example, a non-government leader contended that "Leaders in Timor-Leste use violence to show that they're strong. And people are used to resolving problems with violence." In addition, a youth leader explained that "I'm a leader because I killed people." This is, of course, one way of expressing the value

placed on courage for a leader. But it also suggests that a record of some degree of military or gang violence is one leadership characteristic in Timor-Leste.

Second, the successful tradition of strong-willed, unyielding leadership has not always led to leadership successes during the independence period. Most of the leaders who were interviewed mentioned that a kind of “winner-take-all” stance was common while collaboration was not. Quite clearly (assuming that this is true), this presents a considerable challenge to any leadership training endeavor, because the leadership model it creates runs counter the skills and tools that leadership training emphasize (namely, negotiation and open communication).

With this in mind, it is important to note that if a leader is seen to be weakening his or her stature by compromising or negotiating, then stalemate or conflict with other parties becomes much more likely. It also becomes more likely that other parties are seen as adversaries or rivals much more than simply counterparts. Some of those who were interviewed strongly contended that this is precisely what is going on with many of Timor-Leste’s older and more established leaders. As a non-government agency official remarked about “big leaders,” “There’s no will to compromise at all.”

Some of those interviewed held out hope for the younger generation of Timorese leaders. There was a sense that such leaders would have less at stake and, in their youth, would be more receptive to learning new skills and changing their leadership styles. But at the same time, it is certainly possible that the existing leadership model may influence younger leaders to act in ways that some older leaders appear to have established: that is, to be steadfast, determined and unyielding, and to view negotiation and compromise as a sign of weakness.

Again, it is essential to view this leadership model both as having demonstrated considerable effectiveness during the pre-1999 resistance period, as well as creating potential challenges during the current independence era.

2. *Hierarchy and Obedience* – One core strength of leadership during the resistance period – maintaining a disciplined, hierarchical, and almost military structure among followers – may have become a weakness (to some degree) during the current independence period. At the very least, it certainly inspired much criticism during interviews about leaders who were thought to be remote and out of touch about the needs and concerns of ordinary citizens. Some of those who were interviewed expressed fear of authorities; many expressed frustration with the reported tendency of leaders to dominate, command obedience, and remain largely unaccountable for their actions.

The reference to hierarchy and organizational structure was striking, particularly by ordinary Timorese who were interviewed. A number of ordinary citizens described a government structure that was accessible to them only through its lowest level, the Sub-Village (Aldeia). Yet several mentioned that it was dangerous to approach the Aldeia because, as a male youth stated, “Something bad can happen” if they do (it appeared that reporting problems to Aldeia can be taken as criticism of the leader). Others considered it especially dangerous if a poor citizen went to the second government level, the Village (Suku) level, instead. Such an approach, some explained, was dangerous because it may upset the Aldeia, who may respond by removing that person from any lists of those entitled to receive assistance.

Much reference was made to the significance of producing lists of people who would qualify for some distribution of material. Yet such lists were only made when they were requested by one’s superiors. Ordinary citizens who were interviewed, in short, described a government system that operated in the following way: orders came down from more powerful leaders to gather information through the creation of citizen lists. The information they gather is sent upwards, to higher-level government offices (Sub-District, District, and National levels). Then lower-level officials (and citizens) awaited responses from their superiors.

It is important to try to set this into context. Discipline, order, structure, and efficient organization were inevitably required during the many years of resistance. The leader-and-

follower approach appears to have been tested under unusually difficult circumstances, and proved highly successful.

What is much less clear is how much this sort of hierarchy is useful in the current post-resistance era. For example, some of those who were interviewed warned that lower and mid-level leaders might not view themselves as the ones who can solve problems. One leader maintained that many Timorese believe that “Solving problems is for the big leaders to do.” And, by implication, no one else.

3. *An Emphasis on Sharing Information* – One of the most striking findings from the November 2007 fieldwork was the significance of information-sharing as a core component of good leadership. Illustrative of this is the following response to the question, “What does a leader do?” by a male youth of 23. “They provide information,” he simply stated. Less clear was what sort of information leaders provide, although some general ideas emerged: leaders provided information on the security and development situation, and what solutions and benefits might improve the lives of Timorese.

The finding on the significance of information stands in sharp contrast to findings on leadership in other post-conflict countries, where leader effectiveness was mainly judged by their ability to directly protect and provide for their followers.¹ The value placed on the sharing of information by leaders was noted by many of those interviewed. Yet it was clear from most that the way that political leaders manage and share information needed to be improved, if not overhauled. In a society where sharing information is so highly valued, leaders appear to have placed a high priority on controlling information flows.

While this is hardly surprising or specific to Timor-Leste, it is also potentially problematic because of its emphasis on a closed management style. When combined with a reported tendency towards hierarchy and demonstrations of commanding strength, indications that many leaders limit information exchange runs the risk of fueling stalemate and conflict, and undermining possibilities for negotiation, compromise, open communication, and inclusive problem-solving processes.

4. *Women Leaders: Indications of a Separate Trajectory* – A discussion with two women’s leaders suggested a significantly different model for leadership. It was the only case that surfaced where a collaborative (and not hierarchical) method of addressing problems was detailed. As one of the leaders explained, “Women try to find another way to solve problems. We meet together and try to solve the problem among us, and without men being involved.” If they cannot solve the problem before them, they go as a delegation to discuss the situation with their Aldeia. Then they wait for a response. One leader estimated that they receive one about half of the time. As with other poor citizens who were interviewed, the women’s leaders preferred not to approach their Aldeia to get an update on their request. It is another indication of just how powerful and potentially dangerous that leaders, even those at the lowest government level, can be viewed.

Developing a Way Ahead?

While Timor-Leste’s leaders have established a legacy of resilience, it is nonetheless widely believed that there is a problem with the general leadership situation in Timor-Leste. To invite discussion about useful steps for improving it, two questions are offered:

1. *Does compromise and negotiation undermine the standing of powerful Timorese leaders?*
2. *Will younger and lower-level leaders be able to assume peaceful problem-solving roles?*

The responses to these questions will help leadership training programs such as the LCCNR to better meet the needs of their participants and to more effectively contribute to reinforcing the capacity of Timor-Leste’s leaders in the future.

¹ Such as Burundi and Rwanda, where the author carried out similar baseline research in, respectively, 2004 and 2000.