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A Friend in Need: Australia and Timor Leste

By Loro Horta

SYNOPSIS

Timor Leste's relations with Australia have always been complex, oscillating between outright hostility and polite coldness. It is, however, in hard times that one knows who our real friends are.

COMMENTARY

DURING INDONESIA'S 24-year occupation of East Timor from 1975 to 1999, Australia was the only Western nation that recognised the territory's annexation. Following its independence in 2002 as Timor Leste, relations were strained by a maritime border dispute with Australia. At stake were billions of dollars worth of oil vital for Timor Leste's survival. Australia used all kinds of tactics to pressure the tiny and impoverished Timor Leste to make concessions on the maritime border issue.

Relations reached their lowest point when an Australian intelligence officer went public and admitted installing listening devices in Dili's cabinet room in 2004. This was the meeting room where Timor Leste leaders planned their negotiations with Australia. For a new nation already suspicious of Australian intentions, this was the last straw.

Timor Leste-Australia Tensions and Diplomacy

In the end Australian espionage accomplished nothing positive but exacerbated Timorese anti-Australian sentiment to an all-time high. It was diplomacy that finally settled the maritime border dispute. Under the leadership of Timor Leste's founding father Xanana Gusmao, the two countries reach an agreement in 2018 that permanently settled their maritime boundaries.

Following the agreement, relations improved though suspicion remained. Feeling hurt

and betrayed, Timor Leste grew closer to China and considered opening an embassy in Moscow. It finally allowed Chinese warships to visit — the last maritime nation in Asia to do so. While most Timorese held no grudge against the Australian people, they deeply resented their political leaders. Timor Leste-Australia relations, however, improved by the time the COVID-19 pandemic broke out.

In March 2020 Timor Leste reported its first confirmed case of COVID 19. Despite spikes in the number of cases occasionally, by and large the young nation has handled the pandemic reasonably well. Under the competent leadership of former health minister and prime minister Dr Rui Maria de Araujo as head of the COVID-19 task force the country has coped well.

Without diminishing the merits of the Timorese authorities, things would have been much worse without Australian support. Despite being hit hard by the pandemic, Australia has donated over 900,000 dozens of AstraZeneca vaccines. Thanks in part to Australian help, Timor Leste now has one of the highest vaccination rates in the developing world, with over 60 percent of its 1.4 million inhabitants having received at least one dose.

Australia has also sent dozens of medical experts to assist the local authorities. In August, Dr Sergio Lobo, another former health minister and a leading figure in the country's fight against COVID-19, went into an induced coma as a result of infection in the line of duty. As Dr Lobo's life hung in the balance, the Australian government flew in medical experts and equipment that eventually saved his life.

Supporting Role of Australian Public Opinion

This gesture touched the hearts of the Timorese leadership and reminded them that despite past tensions Australia was with them in hard times. Australian aid has not just come from the government. Several Australian NGOs have donated millions worth of medical equipment for the fight against COVID-19.

Despite a lockdown in many parts of Australia, Canberra has begun to allow Timorese agricultural workers to return to work in Australia. While still small in numbers, this gesture has been well received by a country struggling with serious unemployment.

In April the country, already reeling from the hardships of COVID-19, was hit by the worst floods in the past five decades, killing over 50 people. Once more Australia — both government and private sector — came to the rescue. No other country has been as generous.

While Australian governments in the past had behaved in a predatory and sometimes even racist manner towards tiny Timor Leste, Australian public opinion has been staunchly sympathetic towards the young nation.

It was Australian public opinion that forced Canberra to settle the territorial dispute in a fair manner. It was an Australian intelligence officer with a guilty conscience that exposed Australia's secret campaign against the Timorese people. But the Australian people remained firmly behind Timor Leste.

Timor Leste-Australia Ties: Where to Now?

Timor Leste's iconic leader Gusmao and its most respected diplomat, Ramos Horta, have always understood that the best defence against Australian government predations was the Australian people.

However, Australia's support should not be taken for granted. Neither should Dili's. In early October, the Timor Leste government sent to a Dubai expo a 140-strong business delegation, headed by seven ministers. The Timorese delegation was larger than that of the United States. In contrast, no Timor Leste senior official has visited Australia in the last three years.

At present relations between Timor Leste and Australia are at their best. It is now up to both sides to keep it that way. While Canberra is mostly to blame for past tensions, Dili can do more. The first generation of Timor Leste leadership understood the vital importance of diplomacy as the best defence the country possesses.

In the past two years, the country's foreign policy is being run by young politicians at a time when experienced hands can work with them to steer Timor Leste through choppy waters. Both Timor Leste and Australia are being confronted with the same growing challenge — tensions caused by big power competition.

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