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Young and Wild Timor-Leste's troubled military

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ON 8 February 2006, some 350 officers and soldiers from Timor-Leste's small defence force abandoned their posts and marched to the presidential palace. The unarmed soldiers protested against ill treatment, discriminatory practices and poor conditions within the Timorese Defence Forces (FDTL).

After two unsuccessful attempts at mediating the crisis, the young nation's charismatic and widely respected President Xanana Gusmao gave the mutineers an ultimatum. "Return to your posts and you shall not face court martial, or face the consequences of doing otherwise." Only 25 took the offer. Since its creation in 2002, the FDTL, or *Forças Armadas de Defesa de Timor Leste*, had face serious disciplinary problems. Before the 8 February incident, 60 other personnel, including a major, were charged for indiscipline.

Most observers explain the current problem as something to be expected when a 24-year old guerrilla force is transformed into a regular army. While this explanation may have some merit, it fails to address far more fundamental issues. First of all, most of the disciplinary cases involved young soldiers who had little or no participation in the war of national liberation. Most of them were new conscripts who had joined the force in 2002. Therefore, the causes of the current military crisis in Timor-Leste are far deeper and may have severe consequences for the young nation if not properly addressed.

Regionalism is one such cause fuelling the current crisis. During the war for national liberation against the Suharto regime, most of the military campaigns took place on the eastern side of the island. This was due to the natural conditions favourable to guerrilla warfare and to the fact that the western part of the country was too close to the Indonesian border. As result, most of the guerrilla force were made up of people from the east, or *Loro Sae*. Indeed, almost all of the new army's high ranking officers are easterners.

This situation has led many to accuse the FDTL of being a *Firaku* or eastern- dominated force. Soldiers originating from the western part of the island accuse eastern officers of favoritism in promotion and double standards when it comes to discipline. To complicate matters further, Timor's National Police Force, the PNTL, has a high number of western personnel particularly among its senior officers. Once again the demands of the war of national liberation created this situation. The more educated and urbanized people, suited for police work, came from the western side of the island and many served previously in the Indonesian bureaucracy, giving them the advantage of experience.

President Xanana's strategy of promoting national reconciliation allowed for the integration of many former Indonesian functionaries and pro-autonomy elements into the security forces, especially the police force. PNTL'S current commander Commissioner Paulo Martins was a former Colonel in the Indonesian Police.

This has led many in the military to see the 3,500-strong police force as illegitimate and Western-dominated. The need to focus on internal security, rather than external threats, due to remarkable improvements in relations with Jakarta, means that the Police rather than the military has benefited from government attention. The donor community reluctance to fund the military further exacerbates the problem.

As a result, the PNTL is a far larger and better equipped force, perceived to enjoy a higher standing within Timorese society, while the military, who claims -- and rightly so -- to have made the most sacrifices in the struggle for national liberation, is being marginalized. The rivalry between the military and the police is clearly demonstrated by the type of disciplinary cases reported in the FDTL. Nearly 70 percent of the cases involved confrontations of one type or another, between police officers and military personnel and invariably, the regionalism element was always a contributing factor.

The root causes of the current military crisis in Timor-Leste are far deeper than the mere challenges of transition from a guerrilla force to a regular army. Confidence- building measures between the two forces -- the police and the military -- are critically needed, particularly among the rank and file. Nearly four years after independence, Timor-Leste does not yet possess a military disciplinary code, let alone a defence policy. Addressing some of these deficiencies may go some way in taming Timor's young and wild military. But, above all, there is a need to recognise that the current military crisis is more than just a problem of transition from a guerrilla force to a regular one.

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