Tension is simmering in East Timor, reports James Scambary, and it’s time for the government to start delivering justice, security and opportunities.

Photo: James Scambary

HERE is the destruction of ’99; here is the destruction of 2006, and here is the destruction of 2007,” exclaims Mateus, a wide sweep of his hand encompassing a densely packed row of derelict, weed-infested houses covered in gang graffiti. Mateus is a resident of the conflict-prone village of Luromata, in the west of Dili, and the dates refer to the major waves of violence that have afflicted the Timorese capital over the past decade. “The government came here in 2007 to do peace talks, but since then we have seen nothing,” he says. Close by, several heavily tattooed youth, members of the martial arts group Kera Sakti, sit listlessly by the roadside. One of them, very drunk, is slumped over with his head in his hands. “If the government comes here again,” Mateus says with sudden vehemence, “We will stone them and burn their trucks. We don’t want them here.”

Local residents claim that Luromata has always been “hot” (a colloquial term used to denote violent tension), but the same scene and sentiments would be encountered in much of the western part of the city. Under the Indonesian occupation, this once sparsely populated area was developed into dense housing complexes for the Indonesian military and civil service. After the occupation ended in 1999, the complexes were populated by a wave of rural migrants; they are now a crowded patchwork of uneasily coexisting ethnic enclaves. They are also among the poorest parts of the city, and some suburbs are not much more than shanty towns. Many have no proper water supply or garbage collection, or have no government services at all. While development agencies sometimes talk of bridging the urban–rural divide, in this case both sides of the divide can be seen in the ten-minute drive between Luromata and the graceful gardens and boulevards around the Government Palace.

Not surprisingly, the western sector of the capital also contains the heaviest concentration of gangs and crime. Like pressure cookers, these suburbs are always ready to boil over into a wider conflict, as they did in 2006. That violence lasted two years, killing as many as 200 people, destroying up to 6000 houses and leaving more than 140,000 people displaced.

The conflict largely ended after the combined attacks on the prime minister, Xanana Gusmão, and president, José Ramos-Horta, in February 2008 by Major Alfredo Reinado (who was killed in the attack) and his followers. While this calm can partly be attributed to shock at such assaults on two revered national figures (and, of course, on conflict fatigue), there was also a sense of hope that with a new government, things would change. Now, the honeymoon seems over, and the truce is fracturing.

Fighting, sporadic but at times intense, sometimes involving over 300 people at a time, is taking place in eight neighbourhoods across the city. That the conflict has not widened is partly because of the strategic placement of twenty-four hour police posts in other trouble spots. In the rural areas, low-level conflict has broken out again in a number of areas in which historical grievances have festered for decades. Previously dormant groups have reappeared in the border regions, much as they did in 2005 during the alarming but largely unheeded spike in violence ahead of the major outbreak in 2006.
Since January, a joint national police and army force has been conducting an intensive manhunt in the two border districts of Bobonaro and Cova Lima, following two killings there by alleged “ninjas.” In East Timor, ninjas are not quite the mythical figures of 1990s Hollywood action films; they are much more recent and real. During the Indonesian occupation, they were the black-clad masked intruders, many of them drawn from the criminal underworld, hired by the Indonesian military to harass and kill independence supporters. Nowadays, they are feared criminal gangs with reputed magic powers that help them evade detection or capture. Rumours of such groups can quickly spread fear and panic in the community.

Whether there are ninjas or not is not really the issue. What is certain is the existence of widening discontent and communal conflict. Countless long running property disputes and payback vendettas fester across this remote, often inaccessible region. Quite often these disputes are violently enacted by the different factions of some fifteen martial arts groups, which between them have an estimated 90,000 members. The national, mass nature of these groups has made them a destructive force in Timorese society, and their conflicts are again spreading.

Syncretic or millenarian groups or social movements have also proliferated in this region. Mostly they are a minor nuisance, preoccupied with extracting “membership fees” from locals. But sometimes their conflict with other groups can turn deadly, as it did in the mountainous western Ermera district in November 2006. Seven people were killed in just over a week in a dispute that spread throughout the western region and then into Dili, leading to renewed conflict that lasted another year. Even now new groups are being formed; one group is reputedly parading around an eleven-year-old boy as the son of Christ. Groups like these were the harbingers of social discontent before the outbreak of the 2006 conflict.

Two such groups, Bua Malus and the CPD-RDTL, have been targeted by the joint police–army operation, and many of their members have been arrested but later released. The operation is an almost a replica of the response to the Atsabe killings of 2003, and equally controversial. Those killings were initially blamed on Colimau 2000, a millenarian resistance sect not unlike these two groups, composed of veterans, farmers and unemployed youth. As in the current security force operation, the army rounded up dozens of Colimau 2000 members, breaching the constitutional restriction on their deployment in internal conflicts and ignoring due process or proper investigation. All but three of the group were later freed without charge.

As with that exercise, the current operation has come under heavy criticism. Yayasan HAK, a local human rights group, found evidence of a litany of human rights abuses committed by the joint forces. There is also a widespread and compelling belief that the main aim of the operation is to save face after a series of high-profile police brutality cases.

The national police have never been high in public estimation. They are perceived as largely ineffective, riven by regional, family or gang affiliations and tainted by association with the former Indonesian regime. After police involvement in the violence of 2006–07, some communities began to regard them as perpetrators rather than protectors. Many communities regard the army in a similar light.

In numerous recent cases police have been involved in gang fights, extortion, shootings and the use of excessive force, but two incidents have particularly provoked public outrage. One was a highly publicised, unprovoked bashing of an unarmed man during the launch of a fishing competition. A video clip of the bashing found its way onto YouTube and so the usual terse rebuttal by the secretary of state for defence, Julio Pinto, was not possible. The most controversial incident, though, was the fatal police shooting of an unarmed teenager (which is being treated as a murder) during a fight at a party, just before Christmas. The shooting led to emotional street protests and the abrupt withdrawal of the national police from the streets of Dili.

These incidents have underscored serious concerns about the readiness of the national police force to resume full responsibility for policing. The excessive force used by members of this highly factionalised and politicised organisation sparked the wider civil disturbance that exploded into violence in 2006 (as it did in the 2002 Dili riots). Tensions between the army and the police led to a series of lethal confrontations between the two forces that year, ending in the massacre of twelve police. Most observers now agree that despite the formation of a joint command, these tensions still exist. There is also general agreement that there has been little real reform of the police force. An International Crisis Group Report published in December 2009, for example, identified a backlog
of 250 cases of police facing disciplinary or criminal cases, and found that some of the key figures involved in the 2006 crisis still occupy senior posts.

Despite these problems, the United Nations mission to East Timor, UNMIT, under heavy pressure from the government, has announced the progressive handover of policing to the national force. Yet a report by Australian National University–based scholar Bu Wilson, leaked in late 2009, claimed that not only was the police force abjectly unprepared for resuming active duty, but that the whole reform and handover process was itself “a many layered fiction.”

The most ominous finding of the report, which Wilson prepared for the Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, was that few of the issues that led to the 2006 clashes between the security forces had been resolved. These include the severe factionalisation of the security forces along regional and operational lines and a lack of demarcation in their roles, leading to competition between the two forces. The report, whose findings were echoed by the International Crisis Group report and a UN human rights report released around the same time, found that this situation remains largely unchanged, with a number of police units bearing army-style long arms and receiving paramilitary style training, and the army continuing to be deployed in internal conflicts.

The report also questioned the logistical and operational capacity of the police, with many district and sub-district stations lacking either transport or radio communications, with no vehicle or equipment maintenance budget to remedy the situation. It was equally scathing of the way UNMIT has handled the process. It found, among other failures, that three years after the commencement of the United Nations mandate, there is no agreement between UNMIT and the government of Timor-Leste on a mechanism for removing suspect police. It also found that the mentoring and monitoring of police to assess their readiness to return to full duties was dysfunctional to the point of being non-existent. Some UN officials admitted that they did not really have the capacity to conduct such a process.

The lack of process and justice for former perpetrators is part of a wider pattern of impunity that has meant many of the issues of 2006–07 have been left unresolved. Some of the key figures behind the 2006 violence have received government contracts rather than jail sentences. Many others, such as the Petitioners, the group of around 495 army deserters whose protests sparked the 2006 violence, have been paid off, as have the internally displaced victims of the violence who lost their homes in the conflict. As seen recently in the Solomon Islands, however, such a chequebook approach to conflict resolution rarely has more than a temporary effect.

Across political lines, many people have been angered by the pardoning or release by presidential decree of former militia members Joni Marquez and Maternus Bere, who were guilty of serious crimes in the 1999 militia rampage. While the recent conviction of members of the group who carried out the February 2008 attack on the prime minister and the president is welcome news, there is strong speculation that they too, may be pardoned. The fact that nobody has been convicted for shooting President Ramos Horta has left more questions unanswered than resolved, with conspiracy theories rife about the involvement of Xanana Gusmão himself.

Justice, or the lack of it, in East Timor always has its discontents. The recent conviction of two ex-soldiers for crimes related to the 2006 crisis has run into opposition from some quarters close to the army. One parliamentarian has ominously declared that he will not let them be imprisoned. Known to many by his resistance code name, L7, this MP commands a sect-like group known as Sagrada Familia, with a membership numbering in the thousands. Another figure with connections to this group, Lito Rambo, has formed a new protest movement calling itself the FALINTIL and Youth Resistance Reserve Force; opposed to the conviction of these two men, the group attracted hundreds of people to its first rally. Such a development bears a strong resemblance to the rise of a number of violent, gang-linked, anti-state groups in 2006, formed to protest at the imprisonment of Major Alfredo after his capture by forces.

IN PARALLEL with these developments, disillusionment with the current government has been growing. Although the economic growth rate is 14 per cent, the figure is largely comprised of government spending, some of it of questionable value. The construction industry is certainly booming, but much of this activity involves rehabilitating derelict government buildings – once seen as symbols of the inertia of the previous government – along with new government developments, including the giant Presidential Office, and expatriate housing. The
benefits don’t appear to have trickled down to the general population – or at least that is the perception, which in East Timor can be as potent as fact. Much of the skilled labour for major construction projects is provided by foreign labour.

Up to 6000 houses were destroyed in the 2006–07 violence, but very few have been rebuilt or replaced. Although loose plans exist for urban planning schemes and social housing, but without tangible government commitment these remain just talk. Many vital social services continue to be provided by churches and donors, and many feted government achievements such as road construction or the return of the internally displaced have been driven largely by donors.

Almost weekly, new corruption allegations have eroded the government’s public image. The government’s $80 million national stimulus project, launched in August 2009, has been plagued by widespread allegations of waste, corruption and cronyism. Critics of the project allege that many of the projects funded under this initiative do not follow basic procurement guidelines, are of poor quality or are left incomplete. The only person to be charged with any offence so far, however, has been a local journalist for reporting the corruption. A widely respected and popular new anti-corruption czar, Aderito Soares, was recently appointed. But whether he has the powers and government willpower to support him remains to be seen.

Previously unthinkable symbols of growing inequality, such as gleaming new BMW convertibles, are now not uncommon in the streets of Dili. Plush new shopping malls and gated communities, serving expatriates and the new urban elite, have proliferated in the increasingly gentrified beachside suburbs surrounding the diplomatic area. This, is in a country where the average income is still estimated at little over 50 cents a day. Such overt flaunting of wealth is certain to provoke social envy, another major catalyst in the 2006–07 communal violence.

As occurred during the heyday of the initial United Nations mission after the 1999 referendum, this highly visible affluence and the presence serve as a magnet for rural youth migrating to the city in search of a share of the boom times. This influx leads to further overcrowding in the already densely packed predominantly migrant areas in the west of the city. These areas were already tense from the return of internally displaced families from the 2006–07 violence and this influx must certainly be seen as a key factor in the renewed urban conflict.

Many people now speak of a sense of something about to happen, just as they did before the attacks on the prime minister and the president. There are signs of new tension between the government and the main opposition party, Fretilin, and tensions within the governing coalition parties themselves, which has often translated into conflict in the past.

It is still difficult to gauge the current security situation with the presence of around 1600 members of foreign security forces and the national police force yet to assume full duties. It is important to remember that the 2006 implosion occurred after a major reduction in the security presence. While there had been many signs of growing tensions prior to that outbreak, it still caught most people by surprise. There are similar signs of such tension now.

The United Nations has extended its mission for another year, although it will be reducing its presence. East Timor’s deputy prime minister, José Luís Guterres, has agreed that the mission should remain in the country until 2012. Given current levels of tension, it is comforting that the mission will remain for at least another year, but it is neither a tenable nor desirable long term option. The UN and presence must be seen as part of the problem as well as part of the solution, which ultimately, only the East Timorese people can provide.

A major source of social friction in East Timor is lack of state legitimacy. If the state cannot provide equal access to resources people will revert to their own informal networks, in competition with other groups. If the state cannot deliver justice and security, people will provide their own; the growth of a diverse array of non-state groups serving both as security and agents of vigilante justice is testament to this. If East Timor is to avoid a repeat of the 2006–07 violence, the government must act now to distribute resources and opportunities equitably, reform the security forces, support and respect the justice system, and demonstrate that it is not above the law itself. •

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