Challenges ahead for the next government of East Timor

By Michael Leach
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While Jose Ramos-Horta’s emphatic victory in the runoff round of presidential elections offers new hope of political stability in East Timor, all eyes are on the more important parliamentary elections on June 30. The party or coalition commanding a majority in the 65-member assembly parliament will form government, and determine who fills the more powerful post of Prime Minister.

Xanana Gusmao’s new party CNRT, strongly allied to Ramos-Horta, will be seeking to emulate the Nobel laureate’s success in the runoff vote and form a new government to replace the current Fretilin administration.

But with 14 political parties contesting the poll, the parliamentary election more closely resembles the divisive multi-party format of the first presidential vote.

New changes to the electoral law requiring counting to take place in district capitals, rather than voting stations - purportedly aimed at reducing the risk of village-level intimidation - may see an increased number of vote-rigging claims.

Sixty-five representatives will be elected under a party-list proportional representation system to serve five-year terms. Smaller parties must reach a 3 per cent threshold to be eligible for seats, which should rule out more than half those running. The key numbers to watch will be a governing majority of 33, and supermajority of 44, which allows for constitutional changes.

In the absence of political polling, the first round presidential election figures offer the only available indication of possible outcomes.

One unwelcome trend from the first round presidential vote was the emergence of three regional voting blocs. The eastern districts returned majorities for Fretilin’s candidate Lu Olo, while the central districts around Dili were Ramos-Horta’s stronghold, and western districts voted overwhelmingly for other opposition party leaders, such as Fernando “Lasama” de Araujo of the Democratic Party (PD).

In many cases, these results reflected the origins of party leaders in different language and ethnic groups, indicating that regional political loyalties run deep. For the next government, this presents a worrying potential for political “balkanisation”, highlighting the nation-building challenges that still face East Timor after five years of independence.

If a similar vote distribution was repeated on June 30, no single party will come close to a parliamentary majority in their own right. However, the four main anti-Fretilin opposition parties would together approach the coalition supermajority figure of 44 seats.

The strong likelihood is that Xanana Gusmao’s CNRT will form a governing coalition with PD and other opposition parties after June 30. The position of prime minister will go to the coalition partner with largest number of seats. Gusmao has the higher profile with a broader support base and is therefore favourite, but Lasama’s PD has the more organised party structure, and a strong support base among a younger generation of voters, and in the west of the country.

The likely “kingmakers” will be two smaller western-based opposition parties running in formal coalition. While this coalition has an informal alliance with PD, they are likely to favour the high profile former president if he
polls strongly, with Lasama offered the post of deputy Prime Minister.

Such a result would see Fretilin out of office, but remaining the largest single party in parliament with close to one-third of the seats, waiting in the wings should new coalitions prove unstable.

Projections aside, the final result on June 30 will depend strongly on the impact of the “Xanana factor”. While Gusmao is likely to build upon Ramos-Horta’s first round share of 22 per cent, many from the east see the former president as having taken sides in the east-west tensions of last year.

Much will depend on whether the charismatic former resistance leader still has the symbolic capital to unify a divided nation, or whether his image as a consensus maker is now tarnished. If the latter, Fretilin’s vote may rise slightly in the eastern districts, with CNRT capturing a larger share in the west at the expense of other opposition parties.

Such a polar result would be unwelcome, and it is to be hoped that any party with a leading role in the next government polls well across all districts. The size and distribution of the CNRT vote may tell us how entrenched regional loyalties have become.

Interestingly, a new government may be in position to “pick winners” in the internal conflict within Fretilin, by appointing ministers from the Mudança or “reform” faction. They would be wise to avoid marginalising Fretilin altogether, which will remain a key political force, and by far the most experienced in policy development.

For all its faults, real and perceived, Fretilin skilfully bankrolled the nation’s future development in very tough oil and gas negotiations with Australia. CNRT draws its name from the broad front that led the country to the independence referendum in 1999, and it should continue its former inclusive policy while allowing for democratic change.

Whatever its ultimate composition, the incoming government faces a number of serious challenges.

The first is political stability. In the long term, any new coalition government may prove fragile. The opposition parties have anti-Fretilin sentiment in common, and also Catholic Church endorsement, and broadly concur on the need to encourage greater levels of foreign investment, spend more of Timor’s oil and gas revenues, and to decentralise government administration.

But once in government, these broad brush strokes may prove insufficient to bind the anti-Fretilin parties to a coherent and stable policy agenda. Policy debate in East Timor remains underdeveloped, with political mobilisation heavily centred on leaders’ personalities and regional loyalties. Without an agreed and transparent coalition agenda, politics could easily descend into a bidding war among governing parties, to satisfy local patronage networks.

Another key challenge will be satisfying the demands of Timorese youth for a greater say in politics. Aside from PD, the opposition parties are still led by the older generation, and it is unlikely that this election will see the transition of power to the demographically dominant youth. Along with high youth unemployment, the “disconnect” between the political elite and younger Timorese is a background factor in ongoing political unrest and gang violence.

While the next government is likely to upgrade the status of Indonesian as a language of public administration, on some controversial intergenerational issues (such as the use of Portuguese language in primary education) the anti-Fretilin parties, broadly representing different generations, may yet find little ground in common.

Foreign relations are another policy battleground. Where Fretilin has consciously fostered multi-polar relationships with the EU, China and the Portuguese-speaking countries to offset the influence of its two powerful neighbours, the opposition parties - rhetorically at least - are signalling higher priority ties with Indonesia and Australia.

While there is much common sense to this position, it also comes with potential costs for a small nation. Much of the heat generated by the recent “Force 2020” report is related to this wider debate over strategic alignment -
and the meaning of independence - rather than the specifics of the military expansion plan itself.

Tackling uneven development will be another challenge. A little known economic study commissioned by former Prime Minister Alkatiri one month before the 2006 crisis indicates some significant socio-economic factors behind last year’s east - west tensions.

While all districts do poorly on key development indicators, the western districts fare slightly worse on food security, household wealth, literacy, and primary school education levels. On the other hand, displaced easterners dominate the refugee camps in Dili. Tackling these generational and regional fault lines will be a key task for the incoming administration.

The final challenge is justice. There have been grave concerns over a culture of impunity for past crimes in East Timor, combined with the sense that senior political figures were above the law, and the evident fact that security forces had been politicised.

Fretiin now appears to be laying the groundwork for some of its own figures implicated in the crisis to be pardoned, with new clemency legislation for those convicted of crimes other than murder. Unopposed in the parliament, the new act will pass into law unless vetoed by President Ramos-Horta. A new coalition government may not overturn the legislation if their own political associations, such as those with alleged “hit squad” leader Rai Los, currently campaigning for CNRT, compromise them. Such an outcome can only serve to reinforce popular mistrust of the justice system.

The 2006 crisis should warn future governments to remain accountable and responsive, to encourage participation and inclusion, and to strongly police the border between ruling party and state - areas for which Fretiin has been justly criticised, and recently punished by voters.

It would be a tragedy for all East Timorese, and the next government, if other lessons were taken from the crisis: that armed defiance is an acceptable means of opposing an elected government (provided one claims to be “defending the people”), that gangs are a handy resource for warring factions of the political elite, or that international intervention is an achievable aim for disaffected groups seeking to capitalise on political instability.

Though any number of justifications may be offered in relation to the crisis of 2006, and some may be persuasive, these are generally features of underground resistance, not of democratic opposition.

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