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Assassination attempts in Timor-Leste: Tragedy of a Young Nation

Loro Horta

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On 11 February 2008, renegade soldiers led by former army Major Alfredo Reinado attacked the presidential villa in Timor Leste in a pre-dawn attack. The president, Jose Ramos Horta, was seriously injured and hanged on to dear life. An incredulous nation asks how things could have gone this far.

THE ATTEMPTS on the lives of Timor-Leste's top two leaders – President Jose Ramos Horta and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao -- were shocking and tragic. For a young nation still struggling to stand on its feet, the attempted killings were the most serious manifestation of the Timorese leadership's failure in nation-building.

Sadly, the perpetrators -- Major Alfredo Reinado and his group -- are the result of the political infighting between Prime Minister Gusmao and Fretilin, the former party in power, that characterised Timorese politics from the early days of its independence. Both Xanana and Fretilin created their own cadres of loyal supporters within the military and the police leading to the factionalisation of the security forces from the birth of the nation.

Hatred among brothers

This political infighting in turn has caused serious disillusionment among Timorese youths as once revered leaders such as Xanana lost their credibility and Fretilin, the only truly national party, falls victim to factionalism. Tribalism, in the form of the East-West divide within Timorese society has conveniently been used and abused by irresponsible leaders. A stagnant economy, unemployment raging at over 80 percent and a culture of violence resulting from 24 years of brutal Indonesian occupation did the rest. Reinado and his band are nothing more than the symptom of the serious social and political problems ravaging the country.

Had the Timorese leadership been united and able to control its thirst for power and petrodollars, Reinado may have never existed. Had the Timorese leadership shown the same sense of honour and nationalism that it showed the world in its struggle against Indonesia, such a tragedy may have been

averted. Reinado is a classic example of the Third World ruffian in uniform, who takes advantage of misery and desperation to thrive, just like countless other warlords. However, the behaviour of the Timorese elite has not been much better with many using Reinado when it was convenient.

After the 2006 crisis of leadership, Horta realised that without national unity, Timor-Leste, or East Timor, would never be able to stand on its feet, regardless of how great the support it may receive from the world. To this end he tried incessantly to reconcile Xanana and Fretilin while at the same time expressing his desire for a peaceful solution with the Reinado band. Indeed, a few days before he was attacked Horta had finally secured an agreement between Xanana and Fretilin for an end to their conflict.

An agreement granting amnesty and reintegration into the army for most of the rebel soldiers was also reported to have been reached between the President and the rebel soldiers, with 70 of them already cantoned in Dili for talks at the time of the attack.

The dominant view at the moment suggests that Reinado and some of his unknown political allies in government felt threatened by the President's success and so decided to strike before it was too late. However, things remain extremely confused. And as the FBI team arrives in Dili to initiate investigations, they can expect a daunting task ahead.

Regardless of the details that may emerge from the FBI investigation, it seems likely that as long as Timor's politicians continue to behave like warlords, new warlords like Reinado will be born again and again. Poverty, corruption, loss of faith in once revered leaders have given birth to Reinado and his thugs and only a serious addressing of these issues will ensure that there are no more Reinados in the future.

Foreign meddling

While the overwhelming responsibility for the tragedies that have ravaged Timor-Leste since its independence goes to its leadership, the unwise meddling in local politics by external powers has not been helpful at all. For instance, during the 2006 crisis it became clear that Canberra had no love lost for Alkatiri and was happy to see his back. Since the formative years of the country's security forces Australia and to a lesser extent the United States favoured Xanana's armed factions while trying to contain Alkatiri and his Fretilin. Portugal and some Asian countries in turn tended to support Fretilin.

This was highly unwise for it only added fuel to the fire that is still ravaging. In the end both Australia and Portugal have all the interest in the stability of Timor-Leste and very little to gain from its collapse. Both nations are Western democracies that had deployed their sons to East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan and share close ties with the United States. Canberra and Lisbon must emphasise their common interest rather than squabble over rather trivial issues such as the status of the Portuguese language in the country or who should train the Timorese intelligence services.

No other nations have the same attachment for Timor as Portugal and Australia and no one else is willing to sacrifice as much as these two countries for Timor. Such an emotional attachment and feeling of responsibility to assist Timor in its hour of need was clearly demonstrated by their outpouring of sympathy after the assassination attempts.

Regardless of the problems in their relations, Timor more than ever needs its old friends. It is therefore imperative that Canberra and Lisbon make a serious effort to develop a common strategy rather than undermine each other. It is also very important, particularly for Australia as a most powerful actor that it conducts itself as a friend, even as an older and much richer friend who must remember that it is dealing with an independent state. For no matter how poor the nation is, Timor is a nation with its own pride.

Light at the end of the tunnel?

At the end of the dark tunnel in which the Timorese now walk may be a light -- weak and fading it may be but a light nonetheless. Following the attacks there was unanimous condemnation from all sectors of Timorese society and support for President Horta, with once bitter enemies coming to show their determination to stand united in this hour of sorrow.

Since his election in May 2007, President Horta has made it his top priority to forge national reconciliation and fight poverty -- the core problems that underline Timor's chronic instability. Hopefully the current wave of solidarity for President Horta may translate itself into support for his vision of a united and wealthy country.

Horta certainly has a vision for his nation; it remains to be seen if his nation will be able to embrace it. Weak as it is, the light at the end of the tunnel can only be nurtured by a united nation.

Loro Horta is the son of President Ramos Horta and is an associate research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is also a Visiting Scholar at the Centre for International Security Studies at Sydney University Australia.