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## **Global Outreach and Local Contexts: Pope Francis in the Partitioned Islands of Asia Pacific**

*By Michel Chambon*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The Pope's recent visit to Southeast Asia highlights both the Church's attention to particular countries and aspects of the Vatican's wider diplomatic agenda concerning the Pontiff's envisaged global sovereignty.*

### **COMMENTARY**

In the aftermath of Pope Francis' historic visit to four countries in Southeast Asia, it is useful to evaluate the ways in which the spiritual leader of 1.3 billion Catholics has engaged with the region.

Since the beginning of his papacy in 2013, Pope Francis has made several apostolic visits, which have combined a few countries together. Sometimes, these plurinational visits were a way to build symbolic connections, send messages about their interdependence, and position the Holy See as an international actor. One of the most significant cases was in September 2015, when the Argentinian pope made a visit combining Cuba and the United States.

Among the four countries visited in September 2024 – Indonesia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Timor-Leste, and Singapore – two are located on partitioned islands, Papua and Timor. Indonesia rules parts of these islands and the rest stands as two independent countries. By visiting this archipelago, Pope Francis has directly and indirectly engaged with the intricate geopolitical reality of Southeast Asia and spelled out what the universal sovereignty of the Holy See could offer to the peoples of the region and their leaders.

## **Regional Contexts**

In the early evening of September 6, after three internationally acclaimed days in Jakarta, where the spotlight was on Christian-Muslim relations, Francis and the 80 international journalists who followed him arrived in Port Moresby, PNG. This country is marked by intense communal violence and international predation. Most of the population struggles with deep poverty and constant gun violence between communities. Religiously, PNG is Christian primarily but has intense tensions between historical churches (Catholic and Reformed) and newer Adventist and Pentecostal denominations.

Pulled by centripetal forces, the region also faces a serious risk of “balkanisation”. Twenty-five years after Timor-Leste’s independence from Indonesia, a move achieved through the strategic support of Catholic networks, it is now the Bougainville region which has decided to become independent from PNG. Thus, the papal tour in this tormented archipelago was both a security and geopolitical challenge.

On Saturday, September 7, Pope Francis met with the civil authorities of PNG, except the Prime Minister, who, as a committed Adventist, does not work during Shabbat. Thus, the 87-year-old pope, who had just arrived from Rome, briefly met the Prime Minister on Sunday morning at 7:30 am. Later that day, the pope, a few journalists, and humanitarian aid workers were transported by a military aircraft of the Royal Australian Air force to the north of the country near the border with Indonesia.

In this part of the vast island, Pope Francis did not mention Western Papua nor criticised Indonesia. While discussing poverty and development, Francis insisted on the beauty of Papuan peoples and nature while nonchalantly wearing a traditional crown. With tact and respect for the region’s complexity, the Roman Pontiff demonstrated his sovereign proximity and engaged solicitude for a marginalised community of the Pacific. Still, his audacious visit brought international attention to a highly divided island where predatory extraction of resources impoverished local populations and fueled communal violence.

## **Addressing Local Concerns**

The next day, Pope Francis flew to another divided island of the region, Timor-Leste, a country which converted entirely to Catholicism in the 1980s. While the new nation has successfully solved inter-communal violence and reconciled with its neighbour, Indonesia, it has serious difficulties building a sustainable and inclusive economy. And the Catholic clergy, which was so crucial in the independence process, did not rush now to mobilise its prestige and privileges to enact the social doctrine of the Church and effect socio-economic changes.

In this context, Pope Francis praised East Timor’s recovery and encouraged further reconciliation with Indonesia. But he also warned political and ecclesial leaders about poverty, underemployment, crime and emigration. Like elsewhere, the pope gave special support to youths and education in Timor. Without bringing premade solutions to poverty, his presence and public engagement opened space for national deliberation on how to address collective challenges.

On the question of migration, Francis turned the focus to countries of departure that had failed to appreciate their resources and provide jobs with fair remuneration. Unlike his usual insistence on the moral obligation of receiving countries to create fair conditions for poor migrants, he insisted on domestic causes that pushed people to leave their home country and family.

Francis also warned Timorese against “crocodiles” who come from outside and “change your culture, your history”. When he was questioned about this image during his return flight to Rome, the pope confirmed that he was referring to foreign sects that, unlike universal religions, have restrictive agendas. In Southeast Asia, crocodiles are not endemic to Timor only.

### **Papal Diplomacy and Agendas**

Through these multifaceted engagements in Papua and Timor, Francis did not only cross international boundaries but also economic, generational, and religious divides. Faithful to the thousand-year-old tradition of the Holy See, the Sovereign Pontiff pushed back against agendas that would restrict religion to a distinct social sphere. Adjusting his tone and messages to every context, Francis carefully but actively engaged with temporal and secular questions, calling all to respect others, build inclusive development, and care for the common home.

As a whole, this apostolic journey provides fresh material to understand what the Holy See means by the universal sovereignty of the pope. Rooted in a theological point of view which believes in the socio-political transformative presence of the resurrected Christ, the pope and his administration continue to engage with complex economic and political issues of every single nation and region. Such apostolic journeys aim to demonstrate that the pope, a world leader of his own kind, is more an opportunity to mobilise than a risk to manage.

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