

A Resilient Nation Moves Ahead: Timor-Leste Secures Democracy, Peace and Stability in Latest Election

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Timor-Leste has stumbled. Today, it is standing again. The recent elections demonstrate that a post-conflict state such as ours can emerge from fragility to achieve peace and stability and serve as a model to other countries.

Ten years ago, such a thought would have been nearly unimaginable. A 24-year struggle for independence left Timor-Leste devastated. Pundits declared us a failed state, citing political instability, high unemployment and an anemic infrastructure. Today, those same people laud Timor-Leste as an example of one country's resilience and commitment to democracy, stability and development.

I arrived in Dili—the capital city of Timor-Leste—just weeks after jubilant celebrations marked our tenth year of independence in May. As I toured the streets, I remembered the sacrifices of 177,000 Timorese who died for our freedom. I watched cars and buses carrying legions of enthusiastic activists campaign passionately, and I hoped that we have proven worthy of their sacrifices. I think we have.



Source: The World Factbook, 2012.

A Peaceful, Two-Round Election

The election cycle began earlier this year in a two-round presidential election in March and April in which Taur Matan Ruak was elected president. He ran against 12 other well-qualified candidates, including Nobel Laureate and President José Ramos-Horta. The victory of Matan Ruak signals a changing of the guard and a new era of young leadership taking the helm. This election helped set the tone for the national parliamentary elections—only the third held in my nation's young history.

Twenty-one parties fielded candidates for the 65-seat parliament. Candidates' experience ranged from former military leaders to teachers to career politicians. I watched as polls opened at seven in the morning and voting continued until three in the afternoon for roughly 650,000 registered voters, who formed steady lines at polling stations across the capital and 13 electoral districts.

The excitement of my countrymen was palpable. One Timorese remarked that he had started before dawn and waited in line for hours in order to vote. Women carried their

children into the voting booths. For every one person that I saw, I knew there were thousands of others making their way to the polls. In the end, turnout was high: At 74 percent in the parliamentary election and 78 percent in the presidential, it was clear these elections mattered symbolically and literally.

And, the elections were important globally. Across the globe, Timorese in other countries, like Australia, Portugal and Angola, watched in great anticipation. At the Embassy in Washington, DC, my staff used this opportunity to educate more people and students about the structure of the Timorese government and electoral politics.

Our elections met international standards of transparency. The process was well-managed and domestic and international observers were present in large numbers. Some of these observers were working for the first time under the auspices of the ASEAN Regional Forum. The United States assisted in the planning and coordination of several observer missions.

Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão's party, the National Congress for the Reconstruction of East Timor (CNRT), won the majority of seats, while other parties such as the Democratic Party and Frente Mudança were also represented. Together, these parties will ensure the voice of the people will be heard, and Timor-Leste can continue on its path of peace and stability.

The international community, including major partners such as the United Nations, the European Union and the US State Department, lauded Timor-Leste for its elections and noted its success which further denotes the progress made by Timor-Leste since its independence in 2002. It is particularly heartening to hear such words from the United Nations, which announced its desire to withdraw from the country by the end of the year. There are, of course, no words that justly capture the gratitude Timorese feel toward the United Nations, which ran Timor-Leste from 1999, the year that Timorese voted to secede from Indonesia, until independence in 2002.

Indeed, establishing peace, stability and democracy has been a long haul for Timor-Leste, but it is hard to ignore the proof of our progress economically and socially. Timor-Leste is enjoying sustainable and rapid growth that is inclusive, reaching the poor and well-off. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the economy in Timor-Leste has the potential to sustain near double-digit rates of growth through this decade and beyond. In what is often dubbed as "Asia's Century," Timor-Leste is emerging as a vibrant frontier economy in Southeast Asia, applying to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, an organization whose members include Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam.

The economic progress has led to expanded opportunities for Timorese. Survey findings from the Asian Development Bank indicate that nearly three-quarters of Timor-Leste's children were in school by the end of the past decade, a 50 percent increase from the start of the decade. Just ten years ago, only two percent of children under the age of five from the poorest families received the full course of vaccinations. Today, that figure has climbed to nearly one-third. Ten years ago, 27 percent of the poorest mothers received

prenatal care from a trained provider. Today, that figure exceeds 75 percent. In addition, infrastructure is improving. The second of two new power stations will be operational soon and upgrades to the country's roads, ports and water supply facilities continue.

Looking Ahead

This is not to suggest that the hard work is over, but these steps speak to Timor-Leste's firm commitment to rebuilding, moving forward and ensuring the health and prosperity of all as a means to peace and stability.

So many have given so much for Timor-Leste, and we will honor them by helping other countries achieve peace, democracy and stability. Through our leadership of the g-7 plus, a group of 19 weak states from across the globe, we help guide other nations, such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to brighter futures.

We recognize that challenges await us and other countries, but we are heartened by the signs we have seen. Two thousand and twelve has been a watershed year. We have come this far, and we will continue to move forward.