

# Timor-Leste: A New Decade, A New Government, A New Beginning

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When I first visited Timor-Leste twenty-two years ago, I witnessed the courage of students demonstrating for independence. Throughout the following years, I joined other Americans in observing with intense interest Timor-Leste's travel along the road to independence, from the exhilarating popular consultation and its tragic aftermath in 1999 to the joyous assumption of sovereignty in 2002. Since then, the government and people of Timor-Leste have met the manifold and complex challenges of establishing an entirely new country from the ground up with courage and dedication. Even as a young nation, Timor-Leste has exhibited a tremendous commitment to the principles of democracy and human rights. The result is a country that counts, in the Asia-Pacific and around the globe.

During its first decade, Timor-Leste raced to establish public and civil institutions, recruit and train personnel, and map patterns of interaction among them to create the structures and the spirit necessary for nationhood and civic order. Deep challenges included a severe shortage of qualified human resources, the near-total destruction of basic infrastructure in 1999, and some of the world's most dire social and economic development indicators.

In the next chapter of its history, Timor-Leste is set to become a peacekeeping success story. Already in 2012, the tenth anniversary year of independence, it has conducted not just one, but three peaceful, free, and fair elections—two rounds to select the president in March and April and parliamentary polls in July. It has inaugurated a new president, seated a new multi-party parliament, and formed a new coalition government, all with its own authorities in charge and minimal violence and bloodshed.

## A First Decade of Building Peace

This happy turn of events was not a given. In the early years of independence, episodic upheavals included a security sector collapse that required the return of UN and Australia-led peacekeepers in 2006 and the attempted assassinations of the President and Prime Minister in 2008. Creating stability was at the top of the national agenda. Urgent tasks included resettling some 150,000 persons who had been internally displaced by the 2006 events while continuing to reintegrate into their local communities Timorese who had sought refuge in the Indonesian province of West Timor in 1999. Vital programs included rebuilding the national police service and defense force and strengthening the justice system.

To address its peace-building and state-building objectives, in 2008 the Government of Timor-Leste established seven national priorities around which it built a system of work

plans and consultations among ministries, development partners, and civil society organizations. The government viewed this as an instrument to shift Timor-Leste's focus from emergency and humanitarian assistance to post-conflict stabilization and recovery and toward more traditional development issues. As a mark of Timor-Leste's success with major security-related issues such as resettlement of those uprooted in the 2006 violence, stabilization and security moved from the top to the bottom of the national priorities list over the national priorities system's four-year lifespan. In 2012, the government started the work of establishing a new tripartite consultative and coordinating mechanism to support implementation of the *Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030* that the National Parliament approved the year before. The Plan is organized around four broad pillars: social capital; infrastructure; economic development; and the underlying institutional framework.

Cognizant of its responsibility to act as a good steward of the nation's finite natural resources, the Timorese government established a Petroleum Fund into which it deposits all earnings from oil and gas; the Fund wins plaudits for transparency. Timor-Leste was the third country in the world and the first in Asia to become fully compliant with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). To promote citizen empowerment and anti-corruption objectives, the Ministry of Finance has launched Internet portals on the government budget, government procurement, government results, and foreign assistance.<sup>1</sup>

Through its leadership of the "g7-plus" group of fragile and conflict-affected states, Timor-Leste has shared its peace-building and petroleum revenues management experience with other fragile states. It led the development of the concept of a "New Deal" for aid effectiveness in conflict-affected states: the New Deal rests on the premises that states need to cross certain peace-building and state-building thresholds before they can realistically expect to achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals and that the transitions from fragility must be country-owned and country-led. The late-2011 endorsement of the New Deal at the Fourth High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan brought the g7-plus and Timor-Leste's initiative to the world stage. In March of this year, President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron explicitly endorsed the New Deal in their joint statement on the US-UK joint partnership for development.

### Looking Ahead to the Peacekeepers' Departure

In September 2011, a high-level committee led by then-President José Ramos-Horta, Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, and Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) Ameerah Haq developed a Joint Transition Plan for the withdrawal of the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT), with a target date of end-2012. In addition to UN Security Council agreement, the Joint Transition Plan describes UNMIT's withdrawal as contingent upon Timor-Leste's having continued stability, elections in mid-2012, and a peaceful transition to a new government, with adequate political space for the opposition. Joint working groups are methodically working through to-do lists to ensure a smooth transition.

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<sup>1</sup> The Timor-Leste Transparency Portal is found at the following address: [transparency.gov.tl/english.html](http://transparency.gov.tl/english.html).

The signs are good that the UN Secretary General will be able to recommend to the Security Council in the Fall that it approve the conclusion of UNMIT's mandate at the end of the year. If stable conditions continue to hold, we can anticipate the departure of almost 2,000 UNMIT staff, including 1,250 police officers. We also can anticipate the departure of the several hundred Australian and New Zealand military personnel who compose the International Stabilization Force.

### Committing to Timor-Leste's Success

We celebrated the tenth anniversary of diplomatic relations with Timor-Leste on its tenth birthday this year—and what an eventful ten years it has been. The United States and Timor-Leste enjoy a “*parceria permanente*”—a permanent partnership—that is characterized by collaboration promoting human rights and democracy around the world and building the young nation's capabilities at home. During the pre-independence 1990s, the United States supported the Timorese people with scholarships and technical production and marketing assistance to coffee farmers. Millions of Americans have sipped a brew made from organic arabica coffee grown in the cool hills of Ermera. We played an historic role brokering Timor-Leste's independence.

With enthusiastic support from Congress and successive administrations, the partnership has exploded with activity since independence. A host of agencies joins the State Department in building the Timorese institutions and habits of cooperation that allow us to work together across the span of bilateral and multilateral interests.

In the security sector, US Pacific Command engagement and a Section 1207 “Supporting Police, Sustaining Peace” program support the professionalism of Timor-Leste's military and police and contribute to the ability of our two countries to collaborate internationally. An enduring deployment of US Navy Seabees delivers both engineering know-how and humanitarian assistance.

To help Timor-Leste strengthen its young institutions, USAID, the Department of Justice, and the Millennium Challenge Corporation support Timor-Leste's justice sector, governance/anti-corruption agencies and processes, parliament, the courts, media, and civil society. The US House of Representative's House Democracy Partnership has assisted the National Parliament from its very early days with research capability, staff development, and professional exchange.

In law enforcement, Diplomatic Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Coast Guard, and the Secret Service are among the US agencies that are prominently contributing to building Timor-Leste's law enforcement skills and capabilities.

Especially in outlying areas where most of the population lives, the level of development is among the lowest in the world. In the United Nations Development Programme's 2011 Human Development Index, Timor-Leste placed 147 of 187 countries. USAID and the Millennium Challenge Corporation are leading the drives that are improving

maternal and child health, reducing infant and maternal mortality, and inaugurating self-sustaining health systems. The Department's English Access Microscholarship Program for secondary school students, English Language Fellows, US-Timor-Leste undergraduate scholarships, and other programs are expanding English-language capability to open the doors to new opportunities and then providing those opportunities.

USAID and the US Department of Agriculture are helping alleviate poverty and promoting development in rural areas through programs that improve farmers' production and link them to markets. We estimate that these programs benefit more than ten percent of Timor-Leste's population. USAID's Cadastral Survey Project and support for legislation on land ownership are potentially among the United States' most significant contributions to domestic peace and economic growth.

### A Second Decade Beckoning for Development

Prime Minister Gusmão is starting his second term. His new government has pledged to apply the nation's petroleum revenues to developing the human capital, infrastructure, and opportunities necessary to create jobs and reduce dependency on oil. The tasks are enormous, but a more stable foundation will allow the government to concentrate on its development priorities.

The job of establishing every element of a functioning polity and economy is complex and time-consuming. Timor-Leste has had to create everything from license plates to a high court. The international community has been a willing partner in this once-in-a-lifetime endeavor, from UN agencies and official development agencies to international NGOs and private organizations such as Rotary Clubs, church groups, and educational institutions that undertake a significant number of friendship initiatives.

As it enters its second decade of independence, Timor-Leste is poised for success—the new decade of independence should indeed be a new beginning. We look forward to congratulating its people and leaders on their achievements that will allow the UN peacekeepers to depart at the end of the year. The United States will remain a committed partner in Timor-Leste's inspiring national journey.