

# Timor Leste's Preparation for Accession into ASEAN: Public Participation, Production of Knowledge, Comparative Histories, and Perspectives from Below<sup>1</sup>

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This paper examines political institutions in Timor Leste and the country's preparedness for joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It explores and tries to understand the processes of formulating a national strategy in Timor Leste, especially its foreign policy, and determining whether the institutions and characters within are effective in achieving national and regional goals. It stresses the importance of and obstacles to building knowledge of Southeast Asian states in Timor Leste and the need to establish collaborative research between scholars in the country.

ASEAN is a 47-year old institution, and while numerous studies and literature reviews examine and critique its ineffectiveness as an organization, some have also celebrated its strengths (Acharya 2009; von Feigenblatt 2012; Seng Tan 2014, among others). Despite the available literature, I am not sure where to search for more public information on Timor Leste's foreign policy, especially towards ASEAN. This lack begs me to raise the following questions: is the problem really in ASEAN (considering some member states' snobbish refusal to let Timor Leste join)? Or is it in our own nation-building processes and strategies? Are we taking our time too slowly and don't really know when or how we will join? Do we have any idea how joining ASEAN will benefit Timor Leste? Is our

Ministry of Foreign Affairs well-coordinated? Does it share information effectively with other ministries? And is there a public information campaign that shares the results of our public officials' numerous foreign trips to ASEAN meetings to the larger Timorese public? Or is foreign policy only for a very small group of elite men, who are not accountable to anyone? Dr. Tam Nguyen's (2014) eye-opening research is very enlightening concerning these points.

One might also ask: does public opinion even count or matter on a national development strategy, especially on foreign policy? Should they set the standards (if there are any) and lead the way (however contradictory, ill-informed, and/or unsustainable)? Should a national development strategy and foreign policy be more than just government policy? Should it not include civil society organizations, academics, students, women's groups, youth organizations, religious groups, and other people, whose lives and futures will be affected by economic integration, trade liberalization, labor migration, and other political, economic, and ecological issues?

Timor Leste's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jose Luis Guterres, responds to the question on the "lack of human resources" as a justification for the "lack of preparation."

"The remaining challenges to join ASEAN, in my point of view, is human resources, because in other areas we are more or less (on par) with many of the ASEAN countries... To address the lack of qualified professionals in the country, the country has enough financial resources—from oil and gas revenue—to hire retired ASEAN diplomats from other countries to come work in Timor Leste." (Guterres 2014)

But why do we immediately assume that we don't have enough human resources within the country? And why do we need to hire foreign experts—for example, retired ASEAN diplomats, including former Indonesian Ambassadors—to formulate our foreign policy strategies (including resolving border disputes with Indonesia)? We do have local experts and human

resources; we just have not identified them as “intellectual capital and assets” because of patronage politics. So far, we have misused and underused our human resources and intellectual capital, basing recruitment on patronage favours, rather than meritocracy. As for hiring Indonesian diplomats as our foreign policy advisers, the following question arises: what was the point of becoming an independent, sovereign nation?

### **Building knowledge economies**

I want to focus on “knowledge economies” in Southeast Asia and ask why we are not investing in the human development fund for more research, knowledge-production, and educational and informative exchanges that could enrich and strengthen our bargaining position in ASEAN. Why aren’t we empowering our researchers, scholars, students, and public officials by providing more scholarships that will enable them to participate in Southeast Asian Studies fora in ASEAN, with the rest of Asia, and the world? They barely have access to online journals! As Milena Pires, Director of the Centro Para a Mulher e Estudos do Genero and the Timor Leste Representative to the CEDAW Committee in Geneva and New York observes: “As a nation, we are stunted not only physically, but also intellectually” (2014). This brings us to the paradox: is it possible to be “stunted” even when one has control of power and resources, oil, and money? Apparently, yes, for several reasons which I will discuss below.

In today’s regional economic integration, the most important capital is intellectual capital, and the most successful and sustainable will not be those who are oil-rich, but those with the most knowledge and capacity to translate that knowledge into social and political change and to improve the human condition (e.g. Singapore and Korea—they who have no oil!). So why do we continue to perpetuate an unsustainable system that does not value knowledge producers? What kinds of new knowledge are we producing in Timor Leste about our Southeast Asian neighbors, the regional community, ASEAN, and even ASEAN +3? So much money is being spent on foreign travel (total amount for the entire

Timor Leste government as of July 2014 was \$9,193,966.00, and for 2013 is \$15,364,320.69) and yet there is no public information about these costly official visits. Is our foreign policy relying primarily on old clandestine methods?

What kinds of new social scientists and natural scientists are we producing who can help improve, enrich, analyse, critique, and/or reform not only ASEAN, but also the study of Southeast Asia in Asia? Let us say that Timor Leste is accepted as a member of ASEAN tomorrow. In which case, what kinds of conversations can we engage in at dinner table meetings if our knowledge base of other Southeast Asian countries is minimal? How can we participate in panels about Southeast Asian histories, politics, and cultures within the Asian region when our scholars and public officials barely have access to information and cutting-edge online research journals?

### **Obstacles to cutting-edge, innovative knowledge economies**

Without overstating the obvious, the greatest obstacle to production of new knowledge about our immediate geographic neighbours is the lack of curiosity (and thus, by extension, our lack of preparation in joining ASEAN). Except for a very curious few, many Timorese are not interested in learning about their Southeast Asian neighbors, who may also not think much about Timorese culture, history, and politics. Another obstacle is arrogance and lack of humility; also, too much resources are wasted on superficial foreign travel and are not invested on rigorous research, thorough analysis and writing, and/or on sharing public information after the expensive *viagem estrangeiro* to other Southeast Asian countries. Finally, plain, narrow-minded ultranationalism excludes the contributions of non-Timorese citizens, who are labelled as “outsiders,” “anti-establishment,” “trouble-makers,” as in the recent infamous case of the expulsion of international judges from Timor Leste. Some ethical international advisers can be useful “mirrors” of our society, especially when it comes to corruption, waste of resources, and

maladministration. Instead of just kicking them out as a “threat to national security,” it would be meaningful to reflect carefully on their investigations and observations in order to improve our systems and institutions.

Let me explain these three points through anecdotes. The first one (lack of curiosity) is a colonial legacy of our former European colonizers, and the Indonesian occupation of Timor Leste. Most Southeast Asians, including Timorese, are more interested in learning the language of their former oppressors and colonizers than in getting to know their immediate neighbours. The second one (arrogance and lack of humility) is a little bit more complex and it comes from the new Timorese elite’s attitudes towards their “poorer” Southeast Asian neighbours. Once, I ran into Timorese MPs at the airport and asked them about what they learned during their “study tours” in other Southeast Asian countries, including Cambodia and Laos, and they replied: “What could we possibly learn? They are so much poorer than us.” Surely, there is a lot to learn from the history of Angkor Wat or the Khmer Rouge (even Noam Chomsky and Ben Kiernan managed to research and write books comparing Timor Leste and Cambodia). There is a kind of arrogance that because Timor Leste is oil-rich, there is no need to learn about anyone else, especially poorer countries. How truly ironic. At other times, I have asked Timorese officials and some students about their impressions of the Philippines. Fortunately, the responses are varied: some very negative, some positive, as one would expect; but very rarely have I ever come across anyone with an avid curiosity and a serious desire to learn about Philippine histories, languages and cultures, beyond superficial browsing on Facebook and the internet.

On the question of a narrow-minded ultranationalism, some Timorese think that Timor Leste is the best nation on earth and that its citizens suffered greatly and thus deserve the most (especially because they “lost” their youth during the war, among other reasons). This kind of attitude prevents us from learning about other conflicts, colonialisms, patriarchies and matriarchies, dictatorships, and militarized masculinities; it blocks us

from enriching our knowledge on how to save ourselves in a time of severe climate change, rising sea levels, and the imminent end of this planet. How can we possibly still adhere to a narrow-minded nationalism? Where does it get us? What does it mean to be a nationalist in the brave new world of the digital and online revolution, which has undermined nation-state boundaries in many ways? These are questions that we need to start addressing collectively.

### **What can Timor Leste gain by joining ASEAN?**

The Philippines was one of the five founding members of ASEAN. Yet one might ask, what do the poverty-stricken minorities and rural people in the Philippines, or in Thailand and Vietnam for that matter, think of and know about ASEAN? Is it even relevant to their lives? According to the Malaysian Ambassador to Timor Leste, as a child growing up in rural Malaysia, he could not care less about what ASEAN was; but as a diplomat representing Malaysia, he had to learn. Has there been any change in ASEAN as an institution since its inception 47 years ago to make it more community-oriented, participatory, and inclusive of the perspectives of poor people in Southeast Asia, who are the most affected by the onslaught of climate change, military rule, war, forced displacements, and violence against women?

At any rate, regional and international solidarity amongst Southeast Asians today (for instance, Filipinos protesting and condemning martial law and military rule in Thailand, and international cooperation on human trafficking) come from grassroots social movements, political parties, and women's organizations. Indeed, non-state spaces—educational exchanges, knowledge economy networks and linkages, conversations, comparative studies of penal and judicial systems, public discussions about strengthening anticorruption activities in the region and worldwide—represent creative possibilities for ASEAN integration.

At the same time, by joining ASEAN, Timor Leste may reduce its dependence on Indonesian trade and investment; accelerate the

“decolonization” process; establish new allies in the region; provide a counterbalancing strategy; diversify sources of foreign direct investment (FDI); and facilitate the transfer of expensive scientific, health, and technology machinery to Timor Leste (we have to pool and share our resources for the youth and students to be able to learn together about women’s health, cancer, heart diseases, and others).

However, questions and obstacles remain: can one open up the Timorese economy and still have a policy deemed nationalistic (e.g. Singapore model)? Or is it better to become protectionist and nationalistic (e.g. South Korean model)? And assuming Timor Leste joins ASEAN, what is the role of the President’s Office in shaping foreign policy? Should our foreign policy be left to one person alone? How can the Timorese government, in particular the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, be more accountable, visionary, and better coordinated with other ministries of Southeast Asian countries? What can be done about the lack of coordination, fragmentation, and harmonization—all resulting in a general lack of preparation? What are the consequences for seeking justice for crimes against humanity (through the Truth and Friendship Commission) when our relationship with Indonesia is based on too much friendship and not enough truth?

### **Timor Leste and ASEAN: Hidden Resources and Future Possibilities**

Having raised all these rather depressing questions about the state of our nation, is there any hope? Yes, Timor Leste has enough open-minded people, who in many ways are integrated (in one way or another) into Southeast Asian communities (way ahead of the government’s efforts). These include Timorese workers and students, who have lived in, studied, worked at, or are currently working and studying in various countries of Southeast and East Asia (i.e. South Korea, Japan, and China). They are avidly learning and speaking the local languages, reading everything they can about the regional histories, and even marrying locals. These

transnational, multicultural families are raising multiracial children, constantly crossing borders, negotiating citizenship and rights, transforming parenting styles, sharing cultural backgrounds, and creating more opportunities to learn other languages and areas of study for others. They symbolize the hope of a Timor Leste that wishes to be more inclusive, and build a strong knowledge economy of the region based on rigorous language-based research.

Moreover, there is hope if we invest on research, education, and in the production of knowledge and new social scientists. These include learning other Southeast Asian languages (and in the same process, learning humility as one crosses borders); investing in existing critical research centers; engendering curiosity in other Southeast Asian cultures; building a Department of History; teaching Southeast Asian histories; and developing a foreign policy of international cooperation without domination. Research initiatives with our Southeast Asian neighbors can focus on:

- Comparative penal and judicial systems
- Political, economic, and ecological developments in Southeast Asia
- Analysis of different paths to political-economic development from the perspectives of the *longue durée* and ethnography
- Hidden labour of men and women who are marginalized in the history of their societies
- Interrelationships between and among political and economic agents, actors, institutions, systems, and social processes
- Multidisciplinary approaches that seek to combine historical studies, national case studies, comparative and regional studies, and theoretical analyses
- New political economy perspectives, in addition to more established, historical, sociological, and anthropological studies on the social processes that

influence the decisions of peasant farmers, household economic managers, local traders, governing elites, powerful interest groups and change agents in civil society, the private sector, and governments and state bureaucracies

- Comparative rural development policies and change and resistance in rural Southeast Asia
- Comparative foreign policies and international relations (for instance, what was the foreign policy and political thought of Ho Chi Minh when it came to regional cooperation? What was the foreign policy of Timor Leste during the anticolonial resistance period and how is it different now, post-independence?)
- International migration process and labour mobility in the region, as well as social policies of labour-exporting states, such as Indonesia and the Philippines
- Gender and natural resource management
- Energy industrial complex, particularly the problem of the predominantly supply-side treatment of the energy issue, which hampers efforts to reframe it in the context of social and ecological recovery
- Dynamics of the financial markets in the region, including, for instance, the hunt for the richest in Asia-Pacific by the top asset management conglomerates. Region-wise, it is increasingly clear that a more serious examination of China is needed. On the other hand, we also need to read India and Russia now on the same page; and
- Political economy of decolonization, nation-building, state-building, development, and the bureaucracy of foreign aid in the region.

## Concluding remarks

Timor Leste has only been independent for only 12 years, but a young nation offers some comparative advantages, including youthful idealism, hope, and a capacity to contribute towards change and reform. A principled, idealistic 12-year-old country can make a very meaningful contribution to a 47-year-old institution that has been criticized for all kinds of negative problems. But first, the 12-year-old must get its own act together and have a vision of where it wants to be. Without a vision, we have a Ministry of Foreign Affairs that may literally just be about having foreign affairs that does not benefit Timor Leste. Without a vision, we just have ministries full of functionaries literally with no imagination, and a country full of juvenile-delinquent-type leaders and policy-makers who prioritize their private foreign affairs (literally) above national interests.

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