Crisis in Timor Leste: looking for the causes to find solutions

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Introduction

Richard Curtain, a Melbourne-based policy adviser to UNICEF, argues that behind the recent violence in East Timor lay a misreading of key causal factors, including

> "the extent of the poverty experienced by the poor in Dili, the frustrations of young people, and the lack of response by the Government to the plight of the poor under extreme pressure from increasing costs and declining incomes."

The government's

> "narrow development strategy, … supported by the World Bank, has been on getting the institutions of state established first and foremost, followed by the provision of basic services. The effect of this approach has been that the economy, especially the agriculture sector, has been left to fend for itself."

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Essay - Crisis in Timor Leste: looking for the causes to find solutions

Some key questions

What caused the recent upheaval in East Timor? Could it have been predicted? The World Bank did state in July 2005 that 'despite considerable progress, the current stability in Timor-Leste is fragile, and the country remains vulnerable to conflict'. What lessons are there for Australia in relation to not only this fragile state but the others in the 'arc of instability' that defines our region?

A mere recounting of the recent events offers us little insight into its underlying causes. Simple explanations of the collapse of the civil order in Dili, such as the early departure of the international peacekeepers, do not do justice to a complex reality. Restoring security through the use of foreign military and police will have little longer term impact unless key problems are addressed. A self-sustaining peace will only come if the real issues are identified and solutions implemented.

The breakdown of the social order was so widespread that virtually all of Dili's population left their homes to seek the protection of makeshift camps. Even with the restoration of order, the majority of Dili's population were still refusing in late July to return to their homes, exposing themselves to major health risks.

Scenes of mob violence by gangs of youth have figured strongly in media reports. But we know little of what was happening behind the scenes. Why have the communal leaders in Dili been so ineffective? They could have intervened to initially stop the rumours of regionally based conspiracies. They could have mediated the emerging conflicts and stepped in to stop the rampaging gangs.

If the underlying causes are not tackled, the conflict could escalate to a new level. Simple gut feelings about imagined regional differences driving the mobs could turn into more explicit political demands for regional separatism. If regionally based antipathies take on a life of their own, many national institutions such as government departments and agencies will not be able to function.

Restoring social trust is fundamental to any solution. The traditional way to identify the perpetrators of the violence is to have them arrested, brought to court and punished with imprisonment. But this approach will not work in Dili for three reasons. First, the numbers involved will cause major delays in a justice system that has already failed to perform effectively, causing feelings of 'justice delayed is justice denied'. Second, pursuing punitive justice will do little to help rebuild social trust as it does not involve the community. Third, it will not help to reintegrate the perpetrators back into their communities.

The best solution is to engage Dili urban communities in restorative justice processes. This means

the communities themselves, with or without out the help of facilitators, have to devise ways to acknowledge the issues, heal the hurt inflicted on the victims and punish those responsible. The punishment should focus on making good the loss suffered by the victim or other forms of community service.

Indicators of potential problems

I could foresee the potential for conflict emerging but could not predict how far it would deteriorate. Sitting in Dili in late March and early April, it was possible to note the signs that the small protests would escalate, particularly if force was applied by the authorities.

My insights came from a national youth survey I helped to design and administer in late 2005 and early 2006. On an assignment from UNICEF to help develop a national youth policy, we interviewed a random sample of over a 1,000 young people aged 15 to 35 years.

Three of the survey findings survey stood out. First, concerns about security dominated the responses of most respondents. Young people's need for increased sense of security, civil order and well-being was fundamental to how they viewed their situation. This need underpinned, for example, their attitudes to whether they believed they could play a positive role in the community or not.

This concern about security is a reflection of the deep trauma nearly all had suffered during the Indonesian occupation. According to a 1999 survey, as many as three out of five adults had experienced some form of torture. One in three people were judged to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. However, the survey results also refer to widespread fears among young people about a lack of economic insecurity due to unreliable sources of income. In many cases, food insecurity was a major concern, stemming from drought and low yielding subsistence crops.

A second key finding which was more of a surprise was the endorsement of violence by a significant minority of young people. One in five young people agreed with the statement that 'violence should be met with violence'. Most young men are involved in martial arts groups. However, for many, this is more a matter of self identity in a society where there are few other ways of acknowledging young people's place. More important in trying to explain violent outbursts are the conditions in the local community. The strong association between weak community leadership and youth violence was suggested by the survey results. In the areas where young people were predisposed to violence, respondents were twice as likely to agree that their community leaders had failed to resolve local conflicts.

Causes and precipitating factors

The strong underlying conditions conducive to social protest were present in the form of a rapidly worsening economic situation, particularly in Dili. The Government's lack of response to the worsening economy added greatly to the growing frustrations.

According to his classic sociological study, Theory of Collective Behaviour (1962), Neil Smelser argued there are six key stages in explaining the outburst of mob behaviour, with each stage adding to the effect of the preceding stages. The first necessary ingredient is structural conduciveness or the underlying factors that predispose people to mob outbursts. Added to this are the pressures or structural strains that make the situation worse. The third essential stage causing people to mobilise is the emergence of a generalised belief, which identifies a simple cause of the problems and frustrations. Fourth, precipitating factors such as localised protests then serve to spread the belief leading to the fifth stage where people mobilise on a large scale to act in an unorganised but collective way. The final stage, which determines the nature and extent of the collective outburst, is

the effectiveness of the available social control mechanisms.

Strong underlying conditions conducive to social protest were present in the form of a rapidly worsening economic situation, particularly in Dili. The Government's increased assertion of centralised controls and lack of response to their worsening economy added greatly to the growing frustrations among Dili residents. The lead up to and the holding of the Fretilin National Congress in May as a precursor to national elections in the first half of 2007 created a political pressure cooker atmosphere, heightening fears about the behaviour of the government in how these elections would be managed.

The emergence in late March 2006 of a set of beliefs about regional differences served to identify a scapegoat for the widely perceived problems. Claims of threats and conspiracies by people from one region served, by identifying a scapegoat, to deflect angry people away from confronting an all powerful force.

The last straw that caused people to flee their homes was the police's failure to keep civil order. However, the breakdown of the social order was also due to the failure of community leaders initially to halt the spread of the belief that east west differences were the cause of people's problems.

Why Dili?

Why were the outbursts largely confined to Dili? The explanation can be found in the type of poverty many Dili residents are exposed to. In contrast to the serious but static poverty of the rural areas, the poor in Dili suffer from a more volatile form of poverty. This volatility causes a higher level of frustration than static poverty.

Initially, the urban poor benefited from the 'trickle down' effect of the large injection of funds to do with the UN presence. The concentration of resources in Dili has been a huge drawing card for many from the rural areas. This attraction to the capital has applied especially to young people who have come to seek out opportunities for further education and/or find a job.

However, with the withdrawal of the 8,500 or so international peacekeepers in late 2004 and the scaling back of the UN presence in other ways, Dili's economy has deteriorated. The service sector that had grown up to respond to this artificial demand, typified by the large number of taxis in Dili, has been chasing fewer and fewer customers.

On top of this fall-off in the demand for services, costs increased in the second half of 2005 due to the sharp rise in petrol prices. Increased costs have applied to most goods in Dili as they are imported. Those earning a living from driving a taxi were caught in a vice of rising costs and falling demand, making it impossible to raise fares. Drivers have had little or nothing left for themselves after paying for their fuel and the taxi owner.

This example for one group of low income earners in Dili can be repeated for others struggling to survive. The Alkatiri Government in its 2006-07 Budget, announced in early June 2006, acknowledged belatedly the dramatic rise in the cost of living in Dili. It did this by making major cost of living adjustments of between 15 and 20 per cent to civil servants salaries to cover cost increases in fuel and food. However, apart from a subsidy to electricity consumers, no assistance for the urban poor was proposed.

The effects of a Youth bulge

Dili's youth bulge is another important source of pressure on the social order. The presence of a youth bulge, backed by other economic and social conditions, is often linked with the emergence of

civil conflict. A large youth share of the total adult population historically has been associated with political violence and revolutions such as the English and French revolutions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Research for the decade to 2000 shows that developing countries with a high share of youth in their population are more likely to experience new armed conflict. In addition, an increased risk of political violence often comes from an expanding population of higher-educated youth who are facing limited opportunities to obtain elite political and economic positions.

East Timor has a quarter of its total population aged 15 to 30 years. But in Dili this age group is even more concentrated, accounting for just over one third of the population. The number of 15 to 24 year olds in Dili's population was 32,399 in July 2004 which is nearly twice the share of this age group in the general population. About half of the country's senior high school students go to school in Dili.

Unresponsive government

The Government was seen by many people to be unresponsive to their plight. The World Bank in July 2005 highlighted the Government's 'poor outreach' to the wider community: 'communication between the Government and the population is inadequate and often ineffective, resulting in limited mutual understanding'. The World Bank noted that the Government is reluctant to collaborate with civil society and 'has not yet succeeded in engaging constructive critics or in maintaining an effective dialogue with communities'.

However, this unresponsiveness was not merely due to poor public relations skills. The Government's failure to spend a quarter of its allocated budget in 2004-05 and ongoing budget surpluses also sent out signals that it was more concerned about maintaining tight centralised controls than in getting services to the people. At the same time, government ministers managed to spend the allocation for overseas travel early in the 2005-06 budget cycle.

The Government's narrow approach to development

However, a bigger failure by the Government to respond to the needs of its citizens has been its narrow development strategy. The Government's focus, supported by the World Bank, has been on getting the institutions of state established first and foremost, followed by the provision of basic services in education and health.

The effect of this approach has been that the economy, especially the agriculture sector, has been left to fend for itself. The Government had been slow to allow decision-making over the allocation of resources for development to be decentralised to rural areas where the mass of the population lives.

The Government's narrow approach to development was criticised in a major UN report, originally completed in the first half of 2004 but only released in March 2006. The UN Development Program's (UNDP) Human Development Report on East Timor called for a more forthright 'pro poor growth' strategy focused on the needs of the rural population. The report rejected the Government's (and the World Bank's) heavy reliance on the private sector as the engine of growth: noting that 'although ultimately private investment should play an increasingly important part in stimulating economic development, for the next ten years at least the predominant source of funds will be public expenditure'.

The UNDP report further criticised the Government's lack of focus in its expenditure priorities on the rural population: 'only one-third of the total public expenditure and one-fifth of goods and

services are going to the districts' [outside of Dili]. The UNDP called on the Government to pursue a pro poor growth strategy 'that is equitable and creates sufficient employment for Timor-Leste's growing labour force'. It proposed that this be done by directing more resources and decision-making authority to the rural areas.

Identifying a scapegoat

The emergence of a set of beliefs about regional differences in late March 2006 was a crucial stage in mobilising the disaffected. Identifying a weak party to blame is a common ploy of the angry but powerless when confronted by an all powerful force, in this case - the Government.

The failure of the police to keep civil order was undoubtedly the final straw that caused people to flee their homes. However, just as important was the failure of community leaders initially to halt the rumours undermining social trust and the subsequent spread of the belief that east west differences were the cause of people's problems.

Precipitating events

The main precipitating events were the growing scale of the protests by the dissident soldiers and their supporters in response to the failure of the Government to respond to their petition. The Government treated the problem treated as a legal issue - the soldiers had deserted their posts - and not a political one for the Government to solve.

The first protest of the soldiers took place on 6 February when about 400 protested outside President's Office & were told by the President to return to barracks. On 23 March, the President returned from overseas and issued a press release, criticising the Government for failing to address the causes of the soldiers' protests. This statement gave rise to further, unorganised protests. These protests in late March and April organised by the dissident soldiers served to mobilise larger groups in the population, using the rallying cry of East versus West.

The final stage which tipped the protests into mob violence was the response of the police. These protests would have remained small-scale if the police had not overreacted to the burning of a vehicle outside the Prime Minister's Office on 28 April by firing on the crowd and shooting five of the protesters.

Failure of social control mechanisms

The overreaction of the police and military to the protests outside the Prime Minister's office on Friday 28 April caused a small protest to spread rapidly. The shooting of unarmed police on 26 May and the collapse of the police command resulted in a complete absence of social control, provoking widespread mob violence. The evidence presented on Four Corners on 19 June suggests that the actions of provocateurs also greatly contributed to this rapid escalation in violence.

Failure of community leaders

The failure of the police to keep civil order was undoubtedly the final straw that caused people to flee their homes. However, just as important to the breakdown of the social order is the failure of community leaders initially to halt the rumours undermining social trust and the subsequent spread of the belief that east west differences were the cause of people's problems.

Why were the newly elected leaders in urban communities not able to step in and maintain social control by resolving localised conflicts where they initially emerged? As noted above, the national youth survey showed that where violent outbursts by young people did take place, this was often due

to the failure of community leaders to resolve conflict in their areas.

Conclusion

Responses to the current crisis should not repeat the mistakes of the past. The World Bank President has stated (22 June, 2006) that: 'healing the wounds of this crisis will be a substantial challenge'. One of these challenges is for the international community to tailor their assistance programs to the new situation. As Paul Wolfowitz stated:

> We cannot go back to business as usual. A new understanding between Timor-Leste and the international community is needed to address the causes of the conflict and support long-term peace-building.

The current crisis resulting in the breakdown of the social order in Dili is the result of the misreading by all principal actors of the significance of key causal factors. These factors are the extent of the poverty experienced by the poor in Dili, the frustrations of young people in particular, and the lack of response by the Government to the plight of the poor under extreme pressure from increasing costs and declining incomes. These issues will need to be addressed but in a way that also restores the widespread loss of social trust. Building the basis for human security and sustaining it in all its forms needs to be primary focus of government policy.

Information about the author

Richard Curtain is a Melbourne-based public policy analyst. He was an adviser on national youth policy to UNICEF Timor-Leste from September 2005-April 2006.

This article is taken from a longer analysis of the recent crisis in Timor-Leste which was initially prepared for UNICEF, and includes a discussion of six recommended responses. A copy of the longer paper with a full set of references is available from the author.

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Nautilus invites your response

The Austral Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to the editor, Jane Mullett: austral@rmit.edu.au. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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