

# Reflections on solidarity with East Timor

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## Introduction

Pat Walsh, Adviser on Transitional Justice to President Xanana Gusmao of Timor Leste, emphasizes "the critical contribution made to the eventual achievement of Timor's independence by international civil society" and its continuing importance. Closely associated with the Timor Leste Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CAVR), Walsh notes the close documentation in the Commission's report of "global civil society's 'remarkable gift of solidarity' to Timor-Leste". Finally, Walsh's discussion of many decades of solidarity with East Timor concludes with a personal evaluation of the country after the crisis of mid-2006:

"the Timor project has not failed. The situation is precarious and fragile and formidable challenges, especially in delivering justice and economic opportunity, are still ahead, but Timor is not a failed state. Constitutional processes have been followed and calls for extra-constitutional quick fixes have not been heeded."

*Note: this is the text of a speech given at the Australia-East Timor Association dinner on 28 November 2006 held to mark Timor's 1975 declaration of independence.*

## Essay - Reflections on solidarity with East Timor

This function is to commemorate East Timor's 1975 declaration of independence. The CAVR (Timor Leste Truth and Reconciliation Commission) report *Chega!* did not pronounce on whether or not this declaration amounted to a genuine act of self-determination. Instead it took the position adopted by

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the UN, namely that East Timor remained a non-self-governing territory for which Portugal had residual responsibility until August 1999 when the people did clearly exercise their internationally recognized right to self-determination in keeping with international standards and freely opted to separate from Indonesia. In the course of time - as *Chega!* records, this was also the position wisely adopted by FRETILIN, albeit for pragmatic campaign purposes. This policy switch was fundamental to the development of the solidarity movement because it badged the struggle as an issue of international human rights, rather than exclusively a struggle in support of a particular political party and ideology. This had the effect of depoliticizing the issue and, in the course of time, allowing a broad range of supporters to express their solidarity on principle.

Today's commemoration is a good opportunity to recall the critical contribution made to the eventual achievement of Timor's independence by international civil society and to emphasise the continuing role of civil society and its contribution to nation-building in Timor-Leste. Civil society's commitment is being tested today as it was during the long struggle for self-determination. A long-term approach is needed today just as it was in the past.

Civil society's contribution to independence is acknowledged in detail in *Chega!*, which has been launched in several centres in Australia in recent days and is being launched in both Canberra and Westminster London today. Though not complete, the report contains the fullest account to date of global civil society's 'remarkable gift of solidarity' to Timor-Leste. It is to be hoped readers are not deterred by the length of the Report. Many sections, such as the 30 pages on international civil society (which includes an account of Indonesian civil society's role), can be read on their own.

The nature of this solidarity in Australia has changed over the years. As mentioned, originally it was largely ideologically driven and associated with FRETILIN. David Scott's book *Last Flight Out of Dili: Memoirs of an Accidental Activist in the Triumph of East Timor* (Pluto Australia, 2005) reflects on this. Today, and most notably in Australia, it is a broader phenomenon that embraces a cross-section of partnerships in both societies and includes business, professionals, and local and national government in its ranks. This is a wonderful model that other countries with a history of support for Timor could look at and possibly adopt. It ensures the diversified mix of inputs that nation-building in Timor requires and is an extraordinary offshore resource for Timor that in its own way is as precious as the wealth of the Timor Sea. Nothing must be allowed divide or diminish this solidarity. Smart solidarity groups like the Australia-East Timor Association (AETA) participate in this movement and contribute through coordination, resourcing and institutional memory.

A word of warning, however. Organisations with a human rights background on Timor should not feel passé. There is still an important need for human rights monitoring and advocacy particularly in relation to domestic compliance and accountability in Timor. This work is also a contribution to nation-building. It is disappointing that important organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have dropped Timor-Leste from their agenda. Groups with a political party focus should also continue their partnerships to ensure that political parties in Timor, whether new or old, adopt sound policies and are effective, whether in government or in opposition. At this seminal stage, their organizational and political health is critical to the development of our new democracy.

This confidence in civil society prompted us to launch *Chega!* not just in Canberra but in other centres in Australia. The experience of other truth commissions is that most governments do not read reports from their commissions and only slowly implement their recommendations, if at all. This is already the case in Timor-Leste, although the recent commitment made by Prime Minister Horta to see his government and the Parliament implement as many of the recommendations in *Chega!* as possible is cause for hope. Ultimately, however, the fate of *Chega!* will depend a lot on the commitment or otherwise of both local and international civil society. As a report on crimes

against humanity, its contents are of universal concern and are important not just for Timor-Leste but also for the advancement of Indonesia and the international community.

### **The 2006 crisis and civil society commitment**

Most Timorese and their international friends have been heartbroken and tested by the events of 2006. Though the crisis has deepened rather than weakened solidarity, it is fair, after 7 years of intensive input, to ask hypothetically why this commitment should continue and to expect, especially from the Timorese Government, some honest answers.

Personally, my partner Annie Keogh, who works in the vocational education sector supported by Victoria University and the Victorian Government, and I have five reasons to continue.

First, human solidarity. This is a season for solidarity with troubled friends, families and colleagues, not separation.

Second, there is no need to leave. Despite the sickening and maddening violence, the trouble is mainly confined to Dili and is intra-Timorese. Internationals, Chinese, Indonesians, the rich, members of other faiths and the like are not being targeted, though there have been tragic isolated incidents. Dili is not Baghdad, even remotely.

Third, continuing builds confidence. Timorese have lost confidence in their institutions, leaders, neighbours and themselves. It is important, where one can, to show belief and confidence by continuing to live in one's neighbourhood and to work in one's institution. This is also true on the macro-level. After a period of surrender, the peaceful majority are now re-asserting themselves, encouraged by the renewed UN commitment, the presence of international security, and the resumption of government under Prime Minister Horta. Many positive examples could be given that illustrate the emergence of a new spirit committed to unity over division and peace over violence.

Fourth, the Timor project has not failed. The situation is precarious and fragile and formidable challenges, especially in delivering justice and economic opportunity, are still ahead, but Timor is not a failed state. Constitutional processes have been followed and calls for extra-constitutional quick fixes have not been heeded; the Presidency, Government and Parliament are functioning; financial resources exist; scheduled elections are being planned; public works have been re-activated. The wakeup call of the crisis has been heard by the President, the Prime Minister and the UN and World Bank, both of which now recognise that things were not progressing as they believed. For his part, Prime Minister Horta, who early on rubbished *Chega!*, has taken a second look at it and has now publicly acknowledged the urgency of implementing its recommendations on the fundamentals of nation-building such as accountability, rule of law, non-violence, human rights, effective government and the strict neutrality of the security agencies. If one can judge from its public comments, however, FRETILIN does not seem to have heard the wake-up call. As a major stakeholder it should be less defensive and conspiracy theorists who are contributing to its state of siege reflex should use their good offices more constructively.

Fifth, it can be done. On a recent visit to Ireland, a land once devastated by colonialism, poverty and conflict, we were struck by its prosperity and the fact that the Fianna Fail party, FRETILIN's equivalent, has held power for most of the Republic's life and presided over its recent astonishing growth. Brunei, nearer to home, is an enclave which shares borders with Malaysia and Indonesia, gained its independence in 1978 and has a population half that of Timor-Leste. Its prosperity is also notable.

Solidarity means being solid, firm, stable and dependable, particularly when things go wrong. This

year's crisis has taken us all back to basics and challenged us to think more deeply about our commitment and its focus. Timorese colleagues worry about the international impact of the crisis. They should know that, as with pre-independence, civil society will accompany them long-term.

## **Information about the author**

Pat Walsh works in Dili as Adviser on Transitional Justice to President Xanana Gusmao, and has written widely on East Timor for more than three decades. He was a [founder of the magazine Inside Indonesia](#), and for many years Director of the Human Rights Office of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid.

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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](mailto: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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