

Fundasaun Mahein's Observations During 2022 Presidential Election And Implications For Security And Democracy

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Fundasaun Mahein's Photo

On 19 March 2022, the people of Timor-Leste participated in the [national election to choose the President of the Republic](#) for the period 2022-2027. From a total of almost 860,000 registered voters, 664,106 voted (77%), while 195,525 (23%) did not vote. Of the votes cast, 12,247 (1.8%) were invalid. Dr José Ramos-Horta was the top voted candidate with 46.56%, but since Dr Ramos-Horta received less than 50% of the vote, a second round will be held on 19 April where the public will choose between Dr Ramos-Horta and the second highest-voted candidate, current President Francisco Guterres “Lú-Olo”, who received 22% of votes cast.

Fundasaun Mahein staff registered as national election observers and carried out observation in various places, including in several voting centres in Dili as well as in other municipalities. From our observations, we can report that while the campaign and voting processes were mostly successful and conducted without major incidents, there were several irregularities and problems which also occurred. This included violent incidents and inadequate police action during campaigns, problems with voter registration, safety problems related to increased travel to rural areas, and incorrect behaviour by security forces during voting. From FM's perspective, these problems have contributed to a lower voter turnout and reduced public satisfaction with the electoral process, which weakens Timor-Leste's democratic institutions, political development and public security. This article describes some of these challenges and their implications for democracy and security in Timor-Leste.

FM's monitoring during the campaign period noted several issues. First, some campaigns began before the official campaign period, such as an event held by “The Greens” in Tasi Tolu on 11 February to declare support for President Lú-Olo. We also heard reports that campaign events disturbed school activities, in violation of Government Decree No. 3/2022 which bans campaign activities close to schools. FM observed that some campaigns and candidates used symbols of state institutions, including FALINTIL flags and F-FDTL berets, which is prohibited under Government Decree No. 3/2022, Article 14.

During campaigns in various municipalities, there were several violent incidents between supporters of different candidates and parties. One contributing factor was the illegal involvement of martial and ritual arts groups in campaigns. Also, while PNTL was actively involved in providing security at campaign events, they unfortunately failed to prevent violence from breaking out. A possible reason for this is that PNTL did not apply the law equally to all. FM observed that PNTL confiscated many motorcycles during campaign events, but at other times when political figures committed clear violations, PNTL did not take any action. This culture of impunity creates an image that laws can easily be violated, which weakens public respect for security institutions and the rule of law.

There were also problems with voter registration which contributed to reduced participation and public frustration with election authorities. To facilitate voters to change their voting location from rural areas to Dili voting centres, STAE organised several “parallel” centres in Dili. However, FM observed that many people lacked adequate information about voter registration and could not register in time to change their voting centre to one of the parallel centres in Dili.

As a result, some people could not vote due to being unable to travel to rural areas due to work commitments and lack of funds. In addition, many students arrived to vote in parallel centres but found that their names were not on the list, as their universities had failed to send the list of names to the election authority. This led to much confusion and anger at voting centres, and several students were arrested. In some centres there were long queues, which meant that some people were forced to wait for several hours to vote. This discouraged some people from voting as they did not have time to wait. On the other hand, some voting centres were much less busy, indicating that there was an imbalance in the distribution of registered voters between different centres.

Another consequence of difficulties with voter registration is that travel between Dili and rural areas sharply increased during the election, because people could not change their registered voting centre. Due to the poor quality of roads and vehicles and bad driving habits, the increased traffic resulted in numerous accidents. Furthermore, the cost, risk and time required for travelling to remote areas to vote discouraged people from voting, and will likely result in even lower turnout in the second round of voting due to financial limitations of many people.

FM also observed that while PNTL’s actions during the voting process was mostly in accordance with the rules, we noted that in some cases PNTL did not maintain 25 metre distance from voting centres as required. Although no one reported being intimidated by PNTL presence, it is important that PNTL follow these rules to avoid possibility of influencing voting. A final observation related to election security was that facilities for disabled people are still limited, especially for visually impaired people. The lack of Braille facility for voting means that visually impaired people require assistance to vote, which prevents them from voting secretly.

Based on these observations, FM offers the following recommendations to Timor-Leste’s election authorities and decision makers to prevent these problems from occurring in the future:

- Experience during this election shows that relying on institutions such as universities to register large numbers of people has excluded many people from the democratic process. Therefore, the Government should develop a simple online registration system to enable individuals to easily change their own registered voting centre. The system should be compatible with smartphones, as more people have access to these than to laptop or desktop computers. The online system should be tested well in advance of the registration period to ensure that any problems are detected and fixed before it is rolled out to the public. There should be an information campaign on television, radio, social media and public billboards to invite people to access the online system.
- PNTL must ensure that they fully understand the rules related to their presence at voting centres and involvement of groups and symbols during election campaigns. They must also ensure that laws are applied equally to avoid impunity. This includes taking necessary action when political figures or parties violate laws. Failure to do so weakens the rule of law and national security in Timor-Leste.
- Timor-Leste urgently needs improved facilities for disabled people in many areas, including in voting processes. A solution for strengthening participation and voting security for visually impaired people is to implement a Braille system for voting. This can enable visually impaired people to vote without assistance from others. Wheelchair access to voting centres is also important to ensure access to disabled people.
- Political parties and candidates must refrain from involving martial arts groups or using provocative rhetoric attacking the “other team” during campaigns. Several violent incidents occurred during the election campaign which illustrate that Timor-Leste still faces many challenges in our democratic development. We therefore hope that party leaders and other political figures can publicly denounce such violence and ensure that their approach to political campaigns does not manipulate people’s emotions and provoke violence.