

How Much Faith Do Timorese People Have In Our Politicians? Community Attitudes Surrounding The 2023 Electoral Campaign

By Fundasaun Mahein, 28 April 2023

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Fundasaun Mahein recently hosted five law students as interns from Universidade da Paz (UNPAZ). During their one-month internship, the students conducted research on community attitudes in relation to the upcoming election. The objective was to understand which issues voters feel politicians need to prioritise during the campaign as well as to measure public confidence in the political parties and the democratic process. The research also explored voters' expectations of the parties that would eventually form government.

The interns asked open questions without prompting, and they ended the interview by asking respondents if they had a specific message for the political parties that win office in May 2023. The interns also sought to make their study representative of the electorate, covering the spectrum of ages, gender, place of residence (urban, rural) and vocation (students, workers and unemployed). They conducted interviews with 69 people who raised 391 concerns and priorities, that is, an average of five or six concerns and priorities per person.

The term 'concerns' did not only relate directly to matters of policy but also matters of political integrity, professionalism and social values. Three quarters of the respondents spoke of issues that deal directly with FM's core focus including national security, public safety, crime, political accountability, corruption and so on. All of the respondents raised development and governance issues that implicate national security indirectly in so far as a strong economy, inclusion and equity and social well-being are fundamental to building a law-abiding and safe democratic society.

Below, FM has listed the top ten issues that respondents identified as key concerns and priorities going into the 2023 Parliamentary Election:

1. Basic services and infrastructure

"We never get help from the political parties. They have to take an interest in the general population because we suffer from a lack of fresh water and electricity. The health services are poor, and the roads are in disrepair."

"The leaders need to improve education, because there aren't enough teachers, there are no books and libraries, and the pupils just sit outside in the garden."

Not surprisingly, the universal concerns relating directly to people's material well-being were the first priority. All respondents discussed the urgent need for the government to bring electricity and potable water to those communities that still lack them, to improve roads, and to raise the standard of education and health services. Respondents frequently linked these issues to the need for politicians to strive to build a more equal society and to respond to the needs of the poor. For Timorese, the provision of basic services and infrastructure is a question of justice.

2. Broken promises

"We all know that the leaders promise, promise, promise, but nothing eventuates."

“We ask the leaders to follow through on their promises, to implement the programs they promise during the campaign.”

More than two thirds of respondents indicated that campaigning politicians had to keep their promises when they enter government. Based on this research, it seems that the majority of the adult population has become accustomed to political parties unashamedly ignoring their pre-election promises once they have won office. The Timorese people are clearly fed up with broken promises.

3. **Government professionalism**

“I ask the political parties that win the election to govern truthfully and honestly, wholeheartedly and rationally, with respect for all of us.”

“I feel sad when I see our leaders make law for themselves like the pension for political service. They have to focus on the people and free the people from a life of poverty”.

“The government has to rule for the common good, not for private interests.”

FM [wrote recently](#) about our concerns related to the lack of professionalism within the state bureaucracy, and how this excludes the majority leading to a loss of public faith in the state. From the results of this research, it seems like many Timorese people share our concern, as 50 per cent of respondents urged the government-elect to govern wholeheartedly and with commitment/rationally and so on. There is a common perception that politicians tend to ignore the needs of the broader population while they protect their own interests. The younger generation in particular feels that after two decades of independence, the people of Timor-Leste are yet to experience genuine political professionalism.

4. **Modifying the political system**

“The political parties that win have to employ competent people based on merit”.

“I feel that elections lack transparency. In previous elections there is evidence that the voting slips are not the originals. I am afraid our democracy will disappear and Timor will become a dictatorship.”

This general category encompasses a wide range of concerns and priorities that government is not representative, accountable and transparent. Many respondents sensed that Timor-Leste’s democracy was under threat. Some felt that the country was sliding towards authoritarianism with political elites becoming increasingly insular and removed from the general population and their daily concerns. Others felt that political patronage, clientelism and ‘vote- buying’ had eroded the meritocratic principles of state and bureaucracy. The specific policy area that stood out among this host of general concerns is that politicians need to tackle corruption and crime.

5. **Unemployment and work**

“The parties that win the election need to create work opportunities for our youth so that they don’t have to go overseas. Our nation needs our young people.”

“They have to raise the salaries for public servants: \$115 a month cannot sustain a family.”

“The government needs to create dignified places for vendors to sell their goods.”

“We ask the new government to provide work for the young people so that they don’t start causing problems.”

Nearly half of the interviewees rated youth unemployment as a priority area for the new government. Unemployment is high in rural areas, but with high levels of rural-urban migration it has become highly concentrated in Dili. Successive governments have failed to prioritise agricultural development, and agriculture thus continues to be predominantly oriented towards subsistence needs. Many young people do not consider this form of agricultural work as 'employment', and continue to leave rural areas to seek the few employment opportunities which exist in Dili. The growing urban youth population and insufficient employment opportunities, in turn, are creating frustration and exacerbating crime and violence. Respondents expressed other work-related frustrations including low salaries and lack of decent facilities for street and market vendors.

6. **Peace, security and stability**

"The parties that win the parliamentary election need to create peace and stability".

"We ordinary citizens need to live in safety."

Just over sixty percent of respondents want politicians to take responsibility for guaranteeing lasting peace, security and stability across the country. Some respondents felt that politicians not only fail to do so but are very often actively undermining peace through irresponsible actions or to advance their personal political agendas. These findings confirm FM's previous concern about how [low-level violence is widespread in](#) Timorese society, while there is an ever-present risk of social and political unrest.

7. **Security and peace during the election campaign**

"The campaign has to follow the law, it is not an opportunity to create problems."

Due to the contentious nature of Timorese politics, the risk of socio-political unrest is of course magnified during political campaigns. While the previous two elections were held with only limited disturbances, many people continue to worry about security during election periods. Those respondents concerned about political behaviour also raised the urgent need for security forces to ensure security and peace during the election campaign.

8. **Political behaviour of elites**

"During the campaigns, political parties are less focussed on communicating their policy agendas than they are on insulting each other."

This research found that more than one third of respondents deplored the behaviour of some elites during the campaign, particularly the tendency to insult opponents and run down their credentials, instead of focussing on the serious issues that afflict the country. In a previous blog, [FM argued](#) that the poor campaign conduct of politicians jeopardises the democratic ideal of free and peaceful elections as well as long term national security, as it creates dissatisfaction and disillusionment among the public with the democratic process.

9. **Agriculture**

"They have to finalise the Tasi Mane Project, and with the proceeds invest in agriculture and other sectors."

"In my opinion, the government shouldn't import food such as rice from Vietnam. Instead, they should invest in our own agricultural production, because the majority of Timorese are farmers."

Almost one third of respondents urged the incoming government to provide more support for the agricultural sector. They raised the issue of agriculture in a number of contexts, such as to combat child malnutrition and food insecurity, invigorate local market production, replace food imports and diversify the economy. Remarkably, for a country in which more than 70 percent of the population are farmers, only four percent of the budget is dedicated to this sector.

10. Economic diversification and sustainability

“We need to have an economic plan not just for now but for the future of Timor-Leste.”

“Developing the non-oil sector is key, because now we are living off the oil, which will dry up, won’t it. So, we need to invest in agriculture, tourism, and others.”

Around 15 per cent of respondents appreciated the need for long term economic planning. In most cases, respondents referred to the challenges Timor-Leste will face when “the oil runs dry”. As FM and many other observers have pointed out—and as the Government itself acknowledges—Timor-Leste will face a major financial and social crisis within the next decade if economic productivity fails to improve significantly and the country’s petroleum wealth continues to be wasted on unproductive “investments”. Several respondents mentioned the need for investment in agriculture and tourism in the context of economic planning.

Conclusion

As a general observation, the fact that not a single person declined to be interviewed for the UNPAZ study is indicative of the general enthusiasm surrounding the electoral campaign. This is unsurprising given Timor-Leste’s history and ongoing support for historical political leaders and parties. The significant number of concerns expressed by research participants was also suggestive of an active political engagement, while apathy or withdrawal from political participation was not evident.

Paradoxically perhaps, the respondents revealed a high degree of ambivalence about and disappointment in politicians. The research results indicate that a significant proportion of the electorate is desperate for change in how politicians behave and rule. In particular, they want to see campaign promises kept and the resulting improvements in their daily lives. The Timorese people long for precisely what they have been deprived of over two decades of poor political performance: professional and honest politicians who take them seriously and represent their wishes. They want development in all areas of life, but they want it with equality and equity. Finally, they demand governance without corruption and clientelism, and politicians who can plan ahead and confront the future instead of looking after their own interests.

Fundasaun Mahein fears that if the political parties and politicians fail to respond to these pressing issues now, conditions in this country will continue to deteriorate, precluding any improvement in the people’s living standards, and eventually even destroying the wealth and privileges that politicians have secured for themselves. Therefore, FM urges politicians to take seriously the concerns expressed by the participants in our research, and to develop serious programs which take into account people’s daily needs and the long-term economic sustainability of the country as a whole.