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OPINION

In East Timor, the Beat Goes On

This young nation is ready for a new generation of leaders to take the helm.

By **XANANA GUSMAO**

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I am a great believer in the two-term limit imposed by the U.S. Constitution on presidents of the United States. If we had such a rule in East Timor, I wouldn't have to spend so much time explaining why I resigned last month as prime minister, eight years into the job. But East Timor doesn't have mandatory term limits, so I feel the need to underscore why the time is right to allow new leaders to take our nation forward.

Our new prime minister is Rui Araujo, whom I first met when he was a medical student risking his life in Indonesia to courier information to me as leader of the Timorese resistance. He is an accomplished administrator and former vice prime minister.

His new cabinet brings in fresh talent while retaining our best and most experienced ministers. It will give young future leaders the chance to develop so that East Timor can move on from its older generation of resistance leaders. The cabinet has also been reduced in size by almost a third, which should allow more nimble and efficient governance.

East Timor has recognized that we can't effectively build our nation with hyperpartisan politics. Thus all four political parties represented in the National Parliament have come together to form a unity government. This promotes national cohesion and stability while allowing the government to attract the best people our small nation has to offer.

While I am happy to relinquish the leadership position after eight years, I am not relinquishing my long-cherished goal of achieving full sovereignty for our nation.

The dream of a sovereign Timorese nation kept me going for the 17 years that I fought with the Timorese resistance against the Indonesian military dictatorship that invaded in 1975. And the dream of a sovereign Timorese nation sustained me during the seven years that I led the resistance from an Indonesian jail. Our struggle cost the lives of around 200,000 people, nearly a quarter of our population, who died in battle or from deliberate starvation. Those deaths are a heavy burden that I carry with me every day.



Former East Timor Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao PHOTO: EPA

When East Timor finally became an independent nation in 2002 following United Nations-sanctioned vote for self-determination in 1999, there was much to celebrate. There were also many friends to thank, including former U.S. President Bill Clinton, who was instrumental

in getting the Indonesian military to accept the presence of U.N. peacekeeping forces.

Starting in 2002, we had to build a new nation from the ashes of our traumatic past. We had to design and implement a system of government, a bureaucracy and a financial system. We had to rebuild destroyed infrastructure and begin providing education, health and other services to our long-suffering people. And we had no choice but to rely on our international friends and partners for help.

I served as president from independence until 2007, then took on the role of prime minister. During that time, much of our official energy was diverted into complex negotiations with Australia about access to valuable oil and gas resources on the Timorese side of the median line in the Timor Sea. But the median line in the Timor Sea that separates East Timor and Australia has yet to be accepted by Australia as the boundary. This leaves us with no recognized boundary and no understanding as to where East Timor ends and Australia begins, with security and commercial implications for both countries.

These negotiations continue, and though I am no longer the prime minister, I will continue pursuing full sovereignty for our nation as we work for a permanent maritime boundary properly determined by international law. Only with this determination will East Timor's full sovereignty be secured, and with it the sovereign ability to pursue the economic direction best for our people.

Eight years was long enough in the top job, yet I am proud to continue serving East Timor as minister of planning and strategic investment. I look forward to helping implement our strategic plans for transforming East Timor into a healthy, well-educated and prosperous nation.

Mr. Gusmao, formerly East Timor's president (2002-07) and prime minister (2007-15), is now its minister of planning and strategic investment.