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Activism, aid and sovereign borders

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An estimated ten thousand Timorese protesters besieged the Australian embassy in Dili on 22 March 2016 to protest Australia's refusal to negotiate with East Timor on a permanent sea boundary in the oil- and gas-rich Timor Sea.

The fledgling half-island nation asserts the vast majority of oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea – worth about US\$40 billion in royalties and tax alone – would lie in its territory if sea borders reflected the norms of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea, a contention Australia rejects. Lindsay Murdoch, South-east Asia correspondent for Fairfax media reported on the eve of the protest Mr Xanana, a hero of East Timor's independence revolution, made a speech calling for Timorese to "stand firm and raise one voice" to demand that Canberra negotiates with East Timor. East Timor claims it has lost some US\$5 billion (nearly \$6.6 billion) in royalties and tax revenue in the Timor Sea since independence, enough to fund its entire budget for three years.

This rally had a huge turnout for a national population of just 1.2 million. It follows a long tradition of activism in the country: the country's key political figures, Xanana Gusmao, Jose Ramos Horta and Mari Alkatiri were student activists in 1974-5 when the Portuguese were decolonising. A new generation of student activists (known as the *gerasaun foun*) advocated for independence in the 1990's after the Indonesians massacred several hundred students in the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre. Since independence Timorese activists have been vocal about injustice. They disagree with their own government on the issue of impunity for the perpetrators of violence in 1975-1999, which have been documented in the CAVR report on truth and reconciliation, because the government has not followed through on its recommendations that justice should be served. Timorese activists have spoken out against Australia's murky history in its dealings with East Timor, from its withdrawal from the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 2002, just months before the country's independence celebrations to ensure the new nation could not challenge Australia under jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice. The rally yesterday was organised to mark the anniversary of Australia's decision to withdraw from UNCLOS.

The Australian-Timor-Leste relations have been further challenged by the alleged Australian bugging of the cabinet room in Dili to eavesdrop on Timor-Leste's deliberations over a maritime treaty in 2004, shortly before the treaty was signed. Recently the Timorese government has been seeking the negotiation of the maritime boundary, which is not legally established, because it has been postponed by the Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMATS) treaty established for resource sharing of oil and gas reserves. Now, in the light of the difficulties in coming to an agreement to exploit the Greater Sunrise field, and realisation that the field would be entirely in Timorese territory if an internationally recognised median line maritime boundary could be agreed, Timor-Leste has been seeking to open negotiation on the issue with Australia.

Australia has held firm to its refusal to do so. In exasperation at Australian diplomatic inaction, [Timor-Leste has publically appealed for negotiations to be held on the maritime boundary.](#)

It is important to remember the strong support that Australian activists have given East Timor since 1975. Its relations with Timor-Leste are not only through the fractious government to government relationship, and Timorese have many Australian friends. Historically too, the Timorese have distinguished between their relationship with the Indonesian people, who they befriended, and the Indonesian Administration and Military which they opposed. Australia also has many relationships through non-government aid organisations and a network of 'friendship cities' which tie citizens of one Australian council area to Timorese citizens of a district or sub-district of Timor-Leste. Set up in 2000 following the destruction and killing wrought by the departing Indonesian forces, Friendship Cities have proved enduring and valuable.

For example the City of Port Phillip's Friends of Suai/Covalima has supported the Covalima Community Centre for 15 years enabling it to become a vibrant centre for youth skills training as well as promoting gender equality in the district.

The relationship between Timor-Leste, a fledgling and poor country, with its rich and powerful neighbour Australia, has been likened to David and Goliath because the two countries are so clearly unequal in their stage of development. Aid also brings an additional aspect of inequality into the relationship. Timorese activists are vocal and critical of western development models which have resulted in a lack of connection between the lived experiences of the population and the processes of development being planned and implemented by the government and international agencies. External agencies, they say, should be making decisions *with* and not *for* the Timorese.

Fortunately, strong ties between Timorese and Australian solidarity and development networks are part of an enduring relationship, and many of these friends are standing by Timor-Leste at rallies around Australia this week. While Timorese activists criticise the Australian government's actions they are still able to see Australians as a source of friendship.

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