

Politicians Must End Irresponsible Brinkmanship



(Google photo)

While Timor-Leste's political elite remains divided, ordinary people have long reached a consensus: peace and security above all else. This widespread desire for stability means that citizens want the on going impasse between [the Government and the opposition](#) to end. Therefore, Fundasaun Mahein (FM) urges the political leadership to set their ambitions aside and prioritize citizens' [security](#). This requires a compromise-based, constructive approach to the current situation.

Fortunately, the divisiveness of the political elite has not spread to ordinary people. Therefore, although the current situation makes many citizens recall [the 2006 Crisis](#), it is very unlikely that communal [violence](#) will reoccur. The divisive Easterners versus Westerners (lorosae versus loromonu) language that played a key role in [the 2006 violence](#) is thankfully absent from public discourse. While politically affiliated [Martial Arts Groups \(MAGs\)](#) still remain a threat, the widespread yearning for peace testifies to the Timorese people's political maturity.

The [security forces](#) have also become far more professional and independent over the past decade. This should enable them to fulfill their [constitutional role](#) of upholding security regardless of the political situation. While political actors manipulated divisions in both the police and [the military during the 2006 crisis](#), in recent years the security forces have become better able to resist political interference. In this way, the current political controversy has actually revealed significant improvements in both the general population and the security forces. Timor-Leste's leaders should also learn to approach political issues in a mature and responsible way.

One of the key disputes underlying the ongoing political standoff involves the transfer of power to the new generation. CNRT President Xanana Gusmão believes that this shift should begin now. Therefore, when he resigned as Prime Minister in 2015, he chose the younger Rui Maria de Araujo as his successor. While this has not prevented Xanana from wielding power behind the scenes, it at least provided a veneer of generational transition. In contrast, FRETILIN General Secretary and current Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri wants the old generation to remain in power for the next several years as part of an inclusive government that will gradually give way to younger leaders. While the generational

transition is extremely important, neither politician has chosen to raise it in public. Furthermore, the belligerent attitudes that Xanana and Alkatiri have adopted are counterproductive.

Partly due to the disagreement over the generational transition, Xanana refused to form a coalition with Alkatiri's FRETILIN party after the Parliamentary Election in July. This refusal forced FRETILIN to form an unstable minority government, while the opposition parties coalesced into the [Parliamentary Majority Alliance](#). The Government will fall if its second policy program is rejected by Parliament. Therefore, Alkatiri has repeatedly postponed presenting this second program in the hope of either brokering an agreement with Xanana or holding new elections next year. Alkatiri will likely continue to delay the second program, keeping the Timorese government in a state of limbo. The partisan tensions surrounding this situation have caused widespread fear that political parties will instigate violence through Martial Arts Groups.

All political actors must make compromises in order to resolve the current situation through legal means. Therefore, FM deplors Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri's statement on December 2nd accusing [the opposition Parliamentary](#) Majority Alliance of attempting a coup d'état against his government. Such incendiary statements degrade political discourse and make it harder to reach agreements. FM also urges all news media to avoid using this kind of inflammatory language and to recognize Alkatiri's assertion as nothing more than an irresponsible outburst

Alkatiri has also been using his Facebook page to make additional divisive comments. One of these posts personally insulted PLP leader Taur Matan Ruak by suggesting that he engage in debate with a junior FRETILIN minister. Such language only makes a political agreement harder to achieve. Therefore, Alkatiri should immediately stop making such unproductive comments.

For his part, Xanana's ongoing international trip has again demonstrated his formidable authority, as his absence makes any meaningful negotiations between the Government and [the opposition impossible](#). FM does not claim to know why Xanana has continued to travel abroad while his country is in crisis. But given his vast political influence, he has a responsibility to address the current situation. All across Timor-Leste, people are hoping that Xanana will return so that he and Alkatiri can resolve their disagreements and allow ordinary citizens to live in peace. His seemingly endless trip represents a shameful abdication of his responsibilities as a key Timorese leader. FM urges Xanana to immediately come back to Timor-Leste and make the compromises necessary to stabilize the political situation.

Timor-Leste's leaders could find a consensus if they focused on the needs of ordinary people and not the ambitions of the Dili elite. Such a consensus could be based on policies designed to improve the welfare of the people, and particularly of the majority of Timorese citizens who reside in rural areas. Education, health, and agriculture all desperately need to be improved. By prioritizing these sectors over the ill-conceived

megaprojects in Oecussi and Suai, the political leaders could develop a program that would both unify the elite and garner popular support.

In addition to seeking consensus, all political actors must recognize that the Constitution has supreme authority in Timor-Leste. In particular, the political leadership should recognize that the Constitution institutes checks and balances for the good of the nation. For example, during the presentation of the first policy program in October, Prime Minister Alkatiri denigrated Members of Parliament as “children” in response to their criticism of him. He should instead recognize that the Constitution allows the Government and the Parliament to criticize one another.

Free discussion of policies and ideas is an essential part of any healthy democracy.

Lastly, too much of Timorese politics occurs in behind-the-scenes deals among the political elite. This culture of backroom intrigue prevents ordinary people from understanding and evaluating their leaders’ actions. It also means that members of the old generation wield the true power even when younger leaders hold official positions. Timor-Leste would benefit from a more transparent political culture, allowing ordinary people to follow and participate in important debates. The current elite can contribute to the nation’s political maturity by recognizing the rule of law, pursuing constructive policies, and mentoring the leaders of the future.

To this end, FM offers the following recommendations:

1. Prime Minister Alkatiri should ensure that his public statements are constructive and conducive to dialogue.
2. Xanana Gusmão should return to Timor-Leste immediately and engage in dialogue with the Government.
3. This political dialogue should focus on improving the lives of the people, not on furthering politicians’ private agendas.