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Timor-Leste's Language Policy: The Boulder on the Shoe

By Victor R Savage

Synopsis

Timor-Leste has chosen Portuguese as its official language of government, though Tetum remains the other official language. This language policy, a return to its colonial heritage, has future implications for the state's development and geopolitical relations in the region.

Commentary

THE CURRENT presidential election in Timor-Leste has brought international visibility to this rather marginalised state within Southeast Asia. The freedom-fighter generation of Timor-Leste has everything to be proud of in these elections. This is one country which testifies that an irredentist movement that fought for independence could eventually create statehood in the 21st century. It also underscores a moment in Indonesian history when the domestic fervour for reformasi was best symbolised not just in political change in Indonesia but in the granting of independence for East Timor as it was then known.

Challenges making Portuguese the official language

The simmering issue on the ground in Timor-Leste however has less to do with the presidential election. The likely source of future political debate lies in its language policy. The Timor-Leste government has chosen to use Portuguese as its official language of government since 2002 despite the fact that less than five percent of the population spoke the language. According to official sources the government chose Portuguese to safeguard their unique culture and identity, maintain their connections with the former colonial master, Portugal, as well as their privileged ties and friendships with other Portuguese-speaking nations. While the country's leaders had privately defended keeping the Portuguese language as a matter of heritage, they have also recognised the importance of learning English in schools to survive in a competitive world and to popularise Bahasa Indonesia.

Yet on the ground one gets the feeling that Portuguese has been given priority because it is the language of communication of the political and social elites – in short it is an elitist language in Timor Leste. This language policy has its own challenges.

Firstly, Portuguese is not an international language that will connect the people of Timor-Leste with a globalising world. Besides Portugal, the only Portuguese-speaking heavyweight is Brazil which is thousands of kilometers away. The ability to connect with the rest of the world for trade, tourism and business is likely to be

hampered. In Asia, Portuguese is no longer a language of political power that it once was from Goa to Malacca and Macau in the 16th century.

Secondly, Portugal is certainly not a country of economic and political prowess either globally or in the European Union (EU) to warrant the use of its language. Indeed Portugal forms one of the five PIIGS (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, and Spain) countries of the EU where the governments are saddled with huge debt. Portugal cannot be expected to lend financial support and advice to the Timor-Leste government. As one Timorese researcher said to me: "Portugal is a poor country, Timor-Leste is poor, and the relationship will make Timor-Leste poorer." When there are so many more economically developed states in Asia, why does the Timor-Leste government need to reconnect with its former colonial master?

Thirdly, the current language situation in Timor Leste is highly diversified – the people are exposed to essentially four main languages and many more dialects: Tetum, the native language, Bahasa Indonesia which is widely spoken, English and finally Portuguese – a language retained by the older generation Portuguese Eurasians in Timor Leste. One can understand the logic that after having won a bloody war of independence with Indonesia, the government wanted to distance itself from Indonesia. Yet, the reality on the ground begs for a more pragmatic political consideration:

Bahasa Indonesia is already the unofficial lingua franca in the country; Timor-Leste cannot separate itself from its geographical links and geopolitical realities of Indonesia. Indonesia is the largest country in Southeast Asia – accounting for 40 percent of the region's land area, population and GNP. Many Timor-Leste government officials and educational personnel have graduated from Indonesian universities and technical institutes and estimates show about 5000 students are currently enrolled in Indonesian institutions. Indonesia is also currently a rising economy which Timor-Leste cannot afford to ignore and yet could tap into.

Why not English as the top official language?

If the Timor-Leste government did not want to use Indonesian as its official language, it certainly could have considered English as the official language of priority. This neutral language would be amenable to all citizens and offer far more advantages than Portuguese: i) English is a language of international politics, trade, tourism, and higher education; ii) it is quite widely spoken in the country amongst the informed public and even youths; iii) many students expressed keen interest in learning English rather than Portuguese which they find of no cultural or economic relevance; and iv) if Timor-Leste is interested in joining ASEAN, does it not make more sense to give priority to English which is the operating language of the region? Given that Australia, New Zealand, India, Singapore and the Philippines are all English-speaking neighbouring countries, the use of English will certainly give the government economic and political leverage.

It is noteworthy that a private university in Dili, as a protest against the government's language policy, decided to conduct its classes in Tetum, Bahasa Indonesia and English - leaving out Portuguese.

One might say the Timor-Leste government is caught between the devil and the deep blue sea in pursuing the Portuguese language: its biggest English-speaking neighbour Australia has been unfriendly and certainly opportunistic with regard to off-shore oil and gas reserves and its Indonesian neighbour is viewed with apprehension and veiled distrust. Yet language forms the foundation and bedrock of a country – language cannot be changed overnight once set in place.

For a fledgling country with limited resources and a low level of development, Timor Leste needs to consider pragmatic, long term and viable educational programmes. The government's belief that the people of Timor Leste can pursue a multiple-language educational programme (Tetum, Portuguese, English, Bahasa Indonesia) seems flawed since there are few examples of successful bi-lingual much less multi-lingual national programmes regionally or globally. While pre-independence East Timor might have been for Indonesia's former Foreign Minister Ali Alatas the "pebble in the shoe", the Portuguese language might be a veritable boulder on the shoe for independent Timor-Leste's future progress and development.

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