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Timor-Leste's Language Policy: Tetum, Portuguese, Bahasa Indonesia or English?

By Jose Ramos-Horta

Synopsis

Timor-Leste's language policy positions Tetum and Portuguese as official languages while making Indonesian and English as working languages. A recent article in RSIS Commentaries misses the open-mindedness and pragmatism behind the policy.

Commentary

ONCE IN a while a journalist or scholar opinionates on Timor-Leste's choice of its official languages. Victor R. Savage, Associate Professor in Geography at the National University of Singapore, wrote recently: "The current presidential election in Timor-Leste has brought international visibility to this rather marginalised state within Southeast Asia."

We have been called "fragile state", "failing state", "failed state" but "marginalised state" is certainly a new title just bestowed on us. Mr. Savage then proceeded to provide us with his scholarly opinion on what is actually a very simple issue in Timor-Leste - the issue of languages.

Open-mindedness

Articles 13 and 159 of our Constitution stipulate that Tetum and Portuguese are our official languages and the Indonesian Language and English are our working languages. Can one be more open-minded and pragmatic than that?

Timorese leaders and people, though islanders, are very outward-looking, open to cultural influences, eagerly learning and absorbing the good (and bad) we see, read and hear around us. We are among the most polyglot people in the world. A very large percentage of us manage as many as three to five languages - a native language, Tetum, Indonesian, English and Portuguese.

An increasing number of young Timorese are becoming conversant with English. It is estimated that English is understood by 31.4%. I am very impressed by how many of our youth have become fluent in Spanish, Korean, Japanese, Chinese after only a few months of studying the language. I always advise our youth to be open-minded towards information, knowledge and other cultures and learn as many languages as they can. I tell them not to be provincial as the average Australian, American or Briton who can manage only English.

According to Timor-Leste's 2010 census, close to 90% of all Timorese use Tetum in their daily life. An estimated 35% are fluent Indonesian Language users and 23.5% speak, read and write Portuguese. This is a very impressive number bearing in mind that in 2002 less than 5% of all Timorese understood Portuguese.

Growing importance of Tetum

In his essay Mr. Victor Savage questioned the wisdom of Timor-Leste's language policy and suggested that we should opt for English rather than Tetum and Portuguese, ignoring the fact that our Constitution provides space for Indonesian and English as working languages. However Mr. Savage erroneously claims that while Tetum is an official language "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."

It is obvious that either Mr. Savage has not been to Timor-Leste or has been there only in the usual fly-in, fly-out fashion. Most proceedings in our National Parliament, Cabinet, seminars, etc are conducted in Tetum.

The Timorese resistance, Government and our Church have done more for the spread and modernisation of Tetum than anyone. That Tetum is today spoken by almost 90% of our people is a great measure of our success in nation-building. But Tetum is still in the process of becoming a truly modern, functional language. Hundreds of words are borrowed from Portuguese, some from Indonesian Language, and I believe that in another 10-20 years, Tetum will be a very colourful, rich and dynamic language. Indonesian also borrowed hundreds of words from Portuguese as a result of Portuguese colonial presence in the region.

In another 10 years half of our people will manage Portuguese - our own version of Portuguese - as lively and musical as the Portuguese spoken in Rio de Janeiro or Luanda. And Tetum will be as colourful and lively but better endowed to face the challenges that come with the nation's opening to the world.

Mr. Savage, like many anglophiles, seems to hold a very simplistic view that English alone literally opens Heaven's gate for poor Timor-Leste and would solve our economic and social problems. And if English is the key to Timor-Leste's future, then I presume it must also be every poor country's road from rags to riches.

English not the be all

Conversely, following such a line of argument, the said scholar and others want us to believe that it was the English language that actually catapulted nations like Japan, Korea, Germany, Italy, France into major industrial power status? Then how does one explain Portuguese-speaking Brazil's rise to global economic status, overtaking aging England to become the world's sixth largest economy? And how does one explain the on-going "fragile state" status of some Pacific islands and Sub-Sahara African countries, which were under British rule and adopted English as their official language since independence?

And how about our Aborigine brothers and sisters in Australia whose life expectancy is 10 years less than ours? Are they not supposed to be much better off since they have been colonised by English speakers for some 200 years?

Contrary to the Singaporean scholar's assertion that our decision not to use Indonesian has to do with political sensitivities, I say, we have no hang-ups as far as Indonesian language and culture are concerned. I have even argued that we should elevate Indonesian to official language status at some point. We just have to carefully look at every aspect of its implication in terms of costs, availability of qualified teachers, etc. An estimated 36% of our people speak Indonesian, but in the 5-10 age bracket, particularly in the rural areas, this percentage drops significantly.

While we have great respect for the scholar's seemingly extensive knowledge about Indonesia and are grateful for his very wise advice, Timor-Leste and the Republic of Indonesia enjoy exemplary relations in every dimension - thanks to the foresight of the leaders of the two countries in opting for a forward-looking, pragmatic approach in managing the relationship.

Timor-Leste is an active member since 2005 of the ASEAN Regional Forum and has participated in ASEAN ministerial meetings for almost 10 years now. We have full-fledged embassies in five ASEAN capitals and by the end of 2013 we will have embassies in the remaining five. We also have embassies in Seoul, Tokyo and Beijing. There are 20 foreign embassies in Dili along with international organisations.

Not fated to slow progress

While I am grateful for Mr. Victor Savage's useful contribution to the debate on the language issue and for so

generously showing us the possible ways out of "regional marginalisation", I dare to challenge the Anglo-Saxon-centered view that somehow the whole world would be a better place if we all surrendered to the dominance of the English language. Our brothers and sisters in Papua New Guinea, Liberia, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, to mention but a few of the British "Commonwealth" countries, might challenge that claim. And French, Germans, Italians, Swedish might all disagree with Mr. Savage.

We all know how English is an important language for international interaction and acquiring knowledge, especially if one wants access to information on science and technology, international trade and finance. But the fact that a particular language has regional or global usage does not necessarily mean we must all automatically dump our historical languages and roots and adopt it as official language.

Even if we were to be persuaded by Mr. Savage and other like-minded scholars about the "superiority" of the English language and adopt it as our official language, there would be extraordinary challenges in terms of human and financial resources required to implement such a policy.

But again, I would pause and ask my brothers and sisters in Papua New Guinea, Liberia, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, South Africa, etc if in their experience of using English for many generations now, this supposedly miraculous language has freed them from poverty and conflict and if indeed they are now in 21st Century heavens.

Their answer might be along the lines: "English is very useful, gives us access to information on almost any field science, technology, international commerce, etc. But in itself, English is not a short cut out of poverty and prosperity. Just look at where we are now after generations under British rule and generations in the British Commonwealth."

I concede we are not all as practical-minded as our Singaporean brothers and sisters. I confess we are mostly somewhat romantic, have historical perspective, because we have a long history, and do not possess Singaporeans' practical and business-oriented mindset. So will we be condemned to slow progress only because we have a vibrant multi-cultural, multi-lingual, colourful, dynamic society, spending some time enjoying the beauty of life?

I am sure we won't. I am sure that Timor-Leste will be able to deepen the quality of education, integrate seamlessly within ASEAN and spur modern economic development without forsaking the common sense of belonging to our roots.

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