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Timor-Leste and ASEAN: Doors Closing for Dili's Membership?

By Loro Horta

Synopsis

Timor-Leste's application to join ASEAN, currently stalled, may not be accepted in the end unless the country overcomes its limitations. Dili must stop blaming others for its self-inflicted wounds, which Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao says his government must address.

Commentary

TIMOR-LESTE's application for membership of ASEAN is facing objections by several members of the regional grouping. While Singapore has been perceived as being too reluctant to support Timor membership, its objections, based on very pragmatic reasons, are being increasingly shared by other ASEAN members such as Indonesia, which was seen as among Timor's strongest supporters.

This is not a good sign for Dili. Among the explanations put forward for Singapore's objections to Dili's application are Timor-Leste's continuing instability and its lack of capacity for membership.

Dysfunctional government

In the past five years, the young nation's government has grown steadily dysfunctional, with ministries and other government institutions in a state of disarray. Although Timor is one of the smallest nations in the world with a population of just over one million, the country possesses one of the largest governments in the region. The current cabinet has 55 members - 17 ministers, 14 vice-ministers and 24 secretaries of state; there are three vice ministers for education alone. To illustrate the surreal situation, there is, for example, a Secretary of State for the Environment as well as a Secretary of State for Nature Protection.

This top-heavy government is exacerbated by the very modest capacity of many of the cabinet members. For instance the foreign minister, Jose Luis Guterres, does not possess a university education while his knowledge of the English language is limited. Other ministers also lack university education while many have criminal convictions - for corruption to sexual harassment. A current minister had to be recalled from his ambassadorial post in a neighbouring country so as to avoid standing trial for sexually molesting a citizen of that country who happens to be his secretary.

The net result of this state of dysfunctionality is that Timor-Leste has not been able to fulfill some of the most basic requirements of ASEAN membership. Due to sheer ineptitude, several agreements and protocols remain

to be signed and ratified. Basic requirements such as border and airport security have not been met. For instance Timorese passports including diplomatic passports lack the basic security measures and immigration services are unable to electronically read them.

Lack of talent and resources

Since taking office nine months ago the foreign minister has spent more than half of his time travelling to exotic destinations such as Mongolia and Morocco. As noted by a senior Indonesian diplomat who has been advising the country on its ASEAN membership: "These people are not serious, this (minister) is never around."

Timor-Leste has appointed some of the country's brightest as diplomats but they are hampered by the dysfunctionality of the government. Instead of focusing on opening embassies in ASEAN countries, a requirement for membership, the country has opened embassies in more distant places, such as South Africa and Angola.

While a reported US\$2 billion from the country's oil revenues have been spent on infrastructure the country still lacks basic facilities to host major ASEAN events such as the heads of government summit. Power cuts are frequent and the main airport runway is too short to accommodate large aircraft.

Timor-Leste is even struggling to meet its obligations towards smaller and less demanding organisations such as the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP), a loose organisation of eight Portuguese-speaking countries. In 2013 Timor-Leste is supposed to assume the two-year rotating presidency of CPLP. So far, the ministry of foreign affairs has not been able to propose an agenda for the country's presidency.

Growing frustration with Timor

Timor-Leste's inability to meet the basic requirements of membership is beginning to generate criticism among other members apart from Singapore, with Indonesia showing growing frustration at its neighbour's inability to meet its obligations. An Indonesian diplomat expressed his concerns over the possibility that ASEAN membership may be denied to Timor-Leste for many years to come. The diplomat notes: "In 2015 ASEAN will become an economic community, if Timor does not join by then it will become even harder for the country to do so in the future, because the membership requirements will only increase."

While Timor-Leste is far from meeting its requirements, ASEAN membership by 2015 is not impossible if there is seriousness and dedication on the part of Dili. A national approach that involves the entire state is required and in particular a serious reform of the foreign ministry is overdue. Nominations for diplomatic and other government posts need to be based on the minimum of competence and experience.

The country possesses a growing number of young and talented people educated abroad who are eager to contribute. However, many are growing frustrated and have been leaving the country or working for international organisations. In the end, Timor's admission into ASEAN depends upon its leadership and people.

To his merit, Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao sees the daunting challenges confronting his nation. In the speech during a recent visit to Singapore, Prime Minister Gusmao acknowledged that human resource and lack of infrastructure are the main challenges facing Timor's ASEAN membership. Scapegoating any ASEAN member like Singapore will not address the many problems faced by the young nation. Timorese need to stop the inclination, so common among developing nations, of blaming others for their self-inflicted wounds.

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