

# Building a foundation for an effective civil service in Timor Leste

Dionísio Babo Soares

Division of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies  
The Australian National University

One of the most challenging tasks facing the Timorese government is the issue of attracting well-educated local people to fill technical/managerial positions in the civil service. During the period of Indonesian government (1975–99) a significant number of Timorese were sent to study in Indonesian universities and many of these have since graduated, however, not all of them remain or work in Timor Leste. Likewise, some of the former middle-ranking Timorese civil servants engaged by the Indonesian civil service left Timor Leste following the violence in September 1999.

From mid 2000, a number of Timorese were recruited to work for the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) on a contractual basis. This temporary offer however made qualified people hesitant to join the civil service due to fear of losing their job when UNTAET withdrew.

The lack of available jobs also impacts on the recruitment of well-educated people. As a consequence, many people accept positions as they arise, regardless of whether their skills are to be best utilised, resulting in the inappropriate placement of people within the administration. As well, since the recruitment process emphasises educational

qualifications and the ability to speak English and Portuguese rather than skills and experience, Timorese civil servants who worked in the previous Indonesian administration, who are mostly non-graduates, have been marginalised. In fact, in the first five years after independence, the cadre of 'well-educated' civil servants recruited to technical or managerial positions could also benefit greatly from the skills and experience of civil servants from the former Indonesian administration.

## **Who do we mean by well-educated?**

While it is difficult to provide a definition of the term 'well-educated', it is clear that reference is made to people with a certain degree of education and certain skills. Thus, for the purpose of this paper, the term refers to university graduates or people with an equivalent tertiary education and certain skills and experience.

In Timor Leste, the well-educated fall into three categories. First are those who have graduated or those who have a university degree. This group comprises people in their late twenties and early thirties, and is

estimated to number 1,000–2,000 people. Second are those who do not have university degrees but have worked in the previous Indonesian administration and possess some degree of experience and basic skills in civilian administration. This group numbers 5,000–7,000 people. Third are those who possess a university degree and have experience in the civil service, both under the Indonesian and UNTAET administrations. However, this group is small in number.

### Education in the colonial period

The introduction of formal education in Timor Leste began approximately in the second century of colonial occupation, pioneered mainly by the Catholic Church. The involvement of the colonial government commenced a century later with the establishment of a school for the 'Sons of Regúlos' (Children of Regúlos/Liurai) in Dili (which also covers Manatuto) in 1864. While the Catholic Church might have established these schools for missionary purposes, the colonial government's purpose was political in nature. Schools which were set up in 1864 (Dili-Manatuto) and in 1877–79 (Luca and Soibada), were designed for the sons of the indigenous rulers who constituted the allies of the colonial government. Perhaps the strong

resistance by the indigenous kingdoms against the colonial administration at the time was a contributing factor of this goodwill, that is, to better prepare the future kings, the sons of Regúlos. Community Schools were introduced as early as 1877–79 in Dili and continued to the end of the 19th century. The representation of such schools was limited to certain parts of Timor Leste.

The poor representation of educational facilities continued until 1959, when a rebellion in Watolari protested the poor handling of education and social welfare in Timor Leste.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, in 1959, the Portuguese began a policy to increase elementary education. From 1959 to 1969, the number of students enrolled in elementary school rose from 4,898 to 27,299, and there was an increase in secondary enrolments from 175 to 376 (Fox 2001, citing Agencia-Geral do Ultramar 1970).

By 1973 about 15 primary schools, 298 district schools, 50 catholic primary schools, 93 schools set up by the military and 7 junior high schools had been established (Table 1).

In 1971, around 42,372 (33,760 male and 8,592 female) pupils were enrolled in primary education in Timor Leste, with a total of 667 teachers (UNESCO 1975:127). While there were later developments in the physical reconstruction of primary schools, only one additional senior high school was

Table 1 **Schools in Timor Leste, 1967–73**

	Primary school	District school	Catholic primary school	Military school	Junior high school
1967/68	13	110	40	38	1
1968/69	14	120	41	62	1
1969/70	15	150	42	80	1
1970/71	15	191	42	89	2
1971/72	15	244	44	92	2
1973/73	15	298	50	93	7

Source: Various sources.

## Policy dialogue

established in Dili in 1975. A few Timorese were able to go to Portugal to pursue tertiary education from the early 1970s.

### Human resources in the Indonesian period

Perhaps, the most radical change in education came about in the early 1980s, several years after the occupation of Timor Leste by Indonesia. The Indonesian government policy on education enabled primary schools to be set up in almost all villages in Timor Leste. Jones (2000) estimates that by 1985 there were 497 primary schools in the province, and Indonesian government statistics show that by 1993–94, 652 primary schools and 103 secondary schools had been established (Kantor Statistik Propinsi, 1993).

By 1995, the number of enrolled tertiary students had risen to 8,740 with an estimated increase of 2.33 per cent per year (Kanwil Depnaker Propinsi Timor Timur and Universitas Timor Timur 1996). No statistics on the number of graduates are available since most of these documents were either destroyed or lost.<sup>2</sup>

The number of tertiary education students in Table 2 includes Indonesians who worked in Timor Leste both as civil servants and as non-government employees. It is estimated that until 1998 around 4,000 Timorese graduates from various tertiary institutions had obtained permanent jobs in Timor Leste. In addition, the number of civil servants has also increased.

In the final five years of Indonesian administration (1994–99), Timorese graduates from Indonesian universities occupied positions such as assistant to the governor, head of districts and sub-districts, bankers, agriculturalists, health analysts and other professional positions. While the decision-making positions were filled mainly by Indonesians who left the territory after the August 1999 referendum, skilled and experienced Timorese were evident at the middle-rank level.

### Human resources in 2003

Due to the lack of statistical data, it is not clear how many educated and skilled people remain in Timor Leste or how capable they

Table 2 Number of enrolments, 1990 and 1995

Level of education	1990	1995	2000 (estimate)
Not in school	140,332	183,063	76,473
Not completed primary school	48,393	47,678	13,184
Primary school	37,223	38,104	105,494
Junior high school	19,975	20,925	54,204
Senior high school	27,673	36,706	107,194
Tertiary education	5,770	8,740	34,309

**Sources:** Biro Pusat Statistic Timor Timur, 1990. *Sensus Penduduk 1990* (Population Census 1990), Central Statistical Bureau of East Timor, Dili; Central Bureau of Statistics of Indonesia, 1994. *Susenas 1993* (National Socioeconomic Survey 1993), Central Bureau of Statistics, Jakarta; Central Bureau of Statistics of Indonesia, 1996. *Susenas 1995* (National Socioeconomic Survey 1995), Central Bureau of Statistics, Jakarta; Central Bureau of Statistics of Indonesia, 1995. *Supas 1995* (Inter-Censal Population Survey 1995), Central Bureau of Statistics, Jakarta; Kanwil Depnaker Propinsi Timor Timur and Universitas Timor Timur, 1996. *Perencanaan Kesempatan Kerja Daerah Repelita VII*, Kanwil Depnaker Propinsi Timor Timur and Universitas Timor Timur, Dili.

are of adjusting their roles from a provincial bureaucratic administration into a state administration. Following September 1999, there was a massive exodus of people to West Timor, some of whom obtained permanent jobs in Indonesia and have remained there since. Rough estimates show that less than half of the 1998 university graduates (less than 2,000) are currently living and working in Timor Leste. Nevertheless, they constitute only a minor fraction of the whole number of the well-educated civil servants, most of them occupying the middle-level positions and below. A small number of graduates from Australia, Portugal and Mozambique have returned to work in Timor Leste.

### **Changing perceptions of civil servants**

Many Timorese associate civil servants with lazy, project-oriented individuals in low paid jobs. These negative stereotypes arise from the experience of the Indonesian administration which had very little accountability. The very low salary earned by civil servants has also contributed to the negative perception of this profession.

In the early months of the UNTAET administration, most Timorese graduates' preferences were for jobs in national and international non-governmental organisations. At the time, UNTAET was in the early phase of establishing the administration and had not yet begun its civil service recruitment program. Until August 2000, most of UNTAET's local staff were limited to drivers, cleaners and translators, the latter not necessarily being university graduates. Some of them acquired their jobs on the basis of experience working for the previous United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) prior to the 1999 referendum. The low salary paid in the early period—US\$80–150 per month, compared to the international staff salary of US\$4,000–

8,000 per month—also discouraged graduates from joining the civil service.

UNTAET began recruiting civil servants in early 2001, but attracted little enthusiasm from the graduate community. Most applicants were former Indonesian civil servants and secondary school graduates. This situation led UNTAET to claim that Timor Leste had a crisis in human resources.

After long periods of systematic underdevelopment of human resources, it is not surprising that Timor Leste faces a lack of skilled and experienced people to build the new nation...Although a number of well-qualified and experienced Timorese from the diaspora have returned to help rebuild the country, they alone cannot fill even a small percentage of the 9,000 or so posts in the public service (United Nations 2000:94–97).

The termination of the humanitarian phase of the UNTAET administration and the commencement of the rehabilitation and reconstruction period have seen changes in the structure and perception of the civil service, and a number of Timorese graduates are now employed within the administration.

Perhaps this positive change is attributable to improvements in conditions and the working environment. Many Timorese who worked for the administration in January–December 2000 experienced the benefits of joining the civilian administration, which contributed a great deal to their learning process. Good management and clear job descriptions within the UNTAET also have enabled Timorese employees to become more involved in planning and implementation. The opportunity to undertake education and training has also attracted public interest. The civil service is the core engine of the administration, and having more experienced, skilled and well-educated staff will help the administration to undertake the tasks ahead.

### **Attracting the well-educated**

It is still difficult to assess whether the number of well-educated Timorese available to fill the technical/managerial positions in the civil service is sufficient since no research has been conducted to quantify this group. One of the options available is to approach the professional organisations in Timor Leste. Since October 1999, a number of professional associations, for lawyers, civil engineers, architects, agricultural engineers, economists and social and political graduates have regrouped. In past years, recruitment for managerial positions could be conducted through professional associations, with agreements to ensure that candidates maintained their integrity and professionalism once they were selected.<sup>3</sup>

Another option is to broaden the recruitment requirements to embrace experience and skills. A significant number of civil servants from the former Indonesian administration, despite their lack of education qualifications, possess the necessary basic skills and experience. They, too, can be targeted to fill managerial or technical positions provided that they have received the necessary training. Attention should be paid to providing training and education for new recruits, especially those who have not completed university studies.

### **Facing the challenges**

It should be noted that social status plays a significant role in social relations in Timor Leste. Each ethnic group and clan has a particular social rank. Lately, new groups such as the guerrillas (*Falintil*), the clandestine movement, veterans of resistance, members of youth groups, newly emerging women's groups and even the well-educated have acquired their own social ranking. The relationship among these groups is

dominated by their social status and will certainly affect their working relations.

In order to have an effective and stable government, it is important that sensitivity to issues of status be exercised. Failure to observe status will lead to disagreement among different groups. Timorese are sensitive about their public domain, and the civil service is perceived as a public issue.

### **Recommendations**

Most Timorese still think that they can easily get a job with the administration if they have good contacts with insiders. This perception can be traced back to the Indonesian administration, in which corruption and nepotism were rife. While this perception seems to be waning, it is important to have a clear mechanism for recruitment on merit in place.

Often, issues like ethnicity, family relations and other personal relations are brought into play whenever recruitment for institutional positions takes place. In light of this, appointment of members of the recruitment board needs to be transparent and balanced (for example, on the basis of ethnic or district origins) and, if possible, should include independent international officers.

Rotation of staff through different districts should be encouraged. This will lessen the public's suspicion of the institution and the recruitment mechanism.

While it is important that a person is recruited on the basis of merit, former Indonesian civil servants who are skilled, but do not speak English and Portuguese, are disadvantaged. Thus, the definition of 'merit' needs to include educated and/or skilled people with experience in administration.

A clear job description clarifies the requirements for the job and targets specific skills of candidates. Well-defined job descriptions ensure civil servants have work appropriate to their skills and reinforce the

merit system by demonstrating that people will not be selected if they fail to fulfil the requirements of the position.

For an administration to be workable and able to assist in the reconstruction of a country, apart from having well-educated and skilled civil servants, it is important to appropriately place candidates. For this purpose, a mechanism needs to be established to ensure that recruitment involves broader consultation with, and meets the requirements of, the intended institution or job.

Throughout the Indonesian administration, recruitment was centralised and lacking in coordination among state departments, which often resulted in the inappropriate placements of recruited candidates. The approved candidates were often sent to government departments without prior consultation with the institutions concerned. As such, they faced difficulties in performing their tasks properly.

While in the early years after independence the recruitment of civil servants might be conducted by the central government, it is necessary to establish new mechanisms and ways to decentralise the recruitment process in the future. It is imperative to give each institution an opportunity to recruit new staff on the basis of their operational needs and available budget. The central administration should be made available only to assist or be consulted, as well as to investigate issues whenever complaints from the public arise.

### Closing remarks

In facing the challenges above, it is important that the Timorese public be informed about issues such as recruitment procedures, the impartiality of the selection team and gender equity in recruitment. In addition, given the current situation in which various groups

seek to accentuate their position in the society, social status and ethnic balance should be considered as well. Furthermore, in order to avoid distrust and disagreement with the established procedures, the mechanism set for recruitment needs to be simple and explicit as well as transparent.

The emphasis on well-educated recruits might be one option, but in the first five years after independence it will be also necessary to consider skills and experience in the recruitment of individuals for technical or managerial positions in the administration. The civil administration needs to function with the available resources pending a more comprehensive and elaborate recruitment procedure in the future.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This rebellion has been interpreted in various ways to suit different regimes in power. The Portuguese claimed it as a revolt against the administration and the Indonesians claimed it as an attempt to break away from the Portuguese. In my conversation with Julio Alfaro, the son of a protester who was involved in the 1959 revolt but later was captured and sent into exile (and died) in Mozambique, he stated that the essence of the protest was merely to insist that the colonial government pay more attention to the social welfare of the locals, who until that time lacked access to education and other government services.
- <sup>2</sup> Some of the 1990 data can be seen in various publications such as those of the Central Statistical Bureau of East Timor (*Biro Pusat Statistik Timor Timur*) and Jones' (2000) brief analysis of human resources in Timor Leste.
- <sup>3</sup> Reviewer of this paper makes the point that for Timor Leste this is not easy given the lack of skills and lack of incentives for the locals to participate in the job-matching process. The 'market solution' would be to provide better information and pay better salaries whilst allowing positions to be filled from the widest pool of candidates.

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