

Timor-Leste in 2021: in troubled times a nation comes of age

by Michael Rose

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Volunteers from Timor-Leste's 'Clean Seas Movement' (Movimento Tasi Mos) distribute supplies in the aftermath of the April flood

Photo Credit: Movimento Tasi Mos

In May 2022 Timor-Leste will mark **20 years** of renewed independence.

No one could say that the past two decades have been smooth for Asia's youngest nation, and 2021 was no exception. Over the past 12 months its people have faced **fire**, flood and pestilence. **Environmental degradation**, youth unemployment, fractious politics, **police brutality**, gender-based violence, **child malnutrition**, dwindling petroleum reserves and poor governance all remain issues.

But, while there is cause for sadness looking back at 2021, there is also room for pride. A year that brought more than its share of problems to Timor-Leste was also one in which its people showed their determination to overcome them.

Even in a year defined by disaster it is likely to be the April floods that people will remember when they look back at 2021. During a week when people would have otherwise been celebrating Easter, torrential rains associated with **Cyclone Seroja** swept across the region causing roads to collapse, mountainsides to fall away and rivers to burst their banks. Dili was particularly hard hit. By the time it was over at least 45 were dead and thousands homeless.

In the aftermath two things became very clear

One is that although floods are nothing new in Dili, the urbanisation, erosion, population growth and climate change that exacerbate the threat they pose are all becoming more pronounced. Prior governments could have **heeded** calls to mitigate some of this risk through better **civil engineering**, urban planning and disaster preparedness, but for the most part simply didn't. They need to do better. People shouldn't need to die to reinforce the necessity for this, but considering they have let's hope it's not a lesson lost.

The other is that, in 2021, Timorese citizens were better able to organise disaster relief for themselves than ever. Almost immediately – well before the government in Dili declared a **state of calamity** – workers abroad were **sending** money earned

washing dishes, plucking chickens or picking blueberries to help volunteers on the ground set up shelters, kitchens and clean-up crews. This is a vivid example of what Peake and Forsyth have called the **relational state**, the socially contingent business of how things in a country like Timor-Leste get done in reality, as opposed to how an outsider with an 'org' chart might assume they do (or worse, think they should). For those with an interest in what Timor-Leste's next decade will look like, this can't be ignored.

Timorese villages have always been communal, and the resistance was sustained by heroic self-sacrifice, but over the past two decades, widespread education, a free press (powered by and blurred with social media), the consolidation of a unifying **national identity**, the growth of the **working diaspora**, a thriving **ethic** of voluntary service, and perhaps too many bitter experiences with underperforming government, have fed into the emergence of a peacetime social compact that both values supporting kin, neighbours and compatriots in times of need, and spurs people to do so with impressive speed and scale. The floods of 2021 were a disaster that demonstrated this spirit – arguably Timor-Leste's greatest and most characteristic strength – in action.

While few in Timor-Leste were impressed by the government's response to the April floods, its reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic left far more to be positive about.

When the seriousness of the pandemic became apparent in early 2020, it closed Timor-Leste's international borders and instituted quarantine measures for returning residents. The lockdown that was imposed when community transmission was eventually **confirmed** in March 2021 tested the limits of what was practical in a place of large families, small houses and few savings, and became nearly impossible after thousands were forced into flood shelters. In the aftermath the virus began to spread, albeit in parallel with a vigorous and generally well-received **COVAX-powered** vaccination effort. It was in many ways a race against time.

The result has been a public health policy success. The sort of mass casualty event which many feared would overwhelm the national health system seems to have been avoided. At the time of writing the official **death toll stands at 122** – a tragedy, but one that could have been so much worse. Admittedly none of this occurred without a degree of political drama and administrative chaos, but nor can it be denied that this success is an example of how a nation that 20 years ago was in ruins is now able to stand on its own two feet.

The jailing of former priest Richard Daschbach at the end of 2021 rounded the year off with another example of how far Timor-Leste has come in being able to address its own issues.

Daschbach, an American-born Indonesian citizen and a former Catholic priest had lived and worked in the highlands of West Timor since the 1960s, relocating full-time to Timor-Leste's Oecussi Enclave in the early 1990s. A beloved figure, in 2018 his friends and supporters were shocked when he **confessed** to being a serial paedophile before being defrocked and later arrested. This seems to have been the first time a case of clerical abuse had been tried by a Timorese civil court.

To say Daschbach's prosecution was challenging is an understatement. Those seeking justice (or even perceived to be doing so) endured harassment, replete with a **death threat** and at least one episode of **physical violence**. The accused **absconded** from house arrest. The trial was delayed **twice**. Political figures unhelpfully became involved. Many that had revered Daschbach as a father figure, living saint or national hero found it difficult to accept he had betrayed them.

On December 21st Daschbach was **sentenced** to 12 years in prison. Bringing him to justice has been a traumatic reckoning on several levels, but also a milestone. In spite of the pressure they must have been under, the judiciary was steadfast in pursuing a fair outcome. The precedent it sets means this: the days of powerful, charismatic men, like Daschbach, being able to abuse women and girls with near total impunity are at an end. As Timor-Leste enters its third decade this is a huge step forward.

As I write this the presidential elections have been **announced** for March 2022. They are undoubtably important, but maybe not so much it might at first appear. The resilience that we saw in Timor-Leste throughout 2021 owed far less to politics than the everyday work of administrators and young volunteers, migrant meat-packers and students, lawyers and abuse survivors, police and health workers and the hundreds of thousands of people who tend gardens and children every day. Whether or not these people will get the leadership they deserve in 2022 is a **good question**, but looking back at 2021 there is no question that the nation they have built against all odds has firmly staked its place in the world.

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