

Xanana Gusmão on conflict, development and sovereignty for Timor-Leste

By Camilla Burkot
30 March 2015

On March 16, His Excellency Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão delivered the Annual S T Lee Lecture on Asia and the Pacific before a large audience at ANU. Drawing on his experience of leading Timor-Leste through the independence struggle to its nascent statehood, the former Prime Minister and President identified fragility and conflict, rooted in political and ethnic violence, as well as climate change, as primary barriers to global development.

“The main reason,” he argued, “the Millennium Development Goals have failed the poorest and most fragile nations in the world, is because the goals did not acknowledge the link between poverty, fragility and conflict.” For this reason, he urged that the Sustainable Development Goals must incorporate a target related to building peace.

To provide context for these remarks, Minister Gusmão conveyed anecdotes of his experiences working under the auspices of the [g7+](#), a partnership of 20 conflict-affected states, to promote stability in countries including Guinea-Bissau, the Central African Republic, Yemen and Afghanistan. He characterised the g7+’s approach to peacebuilding and reconciliation as being guided by the specific culture and history of each country, in contrast to what he described as “ineffective and inept United Nations peacekeeping”.

Turning specifically to Timor-Leste, Minister Gusmão identified “extreme poverty, fragility and an oil petroleum dependent economy” as the chief challenges currently faced by his nation. Even after 12 years of independence, he remarked, his “long-held goal of achieving full sovereignty for [Timor-Leste]” remains unrealised, as the maritime boundary between Australia and Timor-Leste remains under dispute. While acknowledging his government’s inexperience in the complex negotiations over access to oil and gas resources in the Timor Sea that took place under his Presidency, Minister Gusmão was unabashedly critical of Australia for acting in bad faith. Referring to former Foreign Affairs Minister Bob Carr’s call in the [2012 S T Lee Lecture](#) for countries to pursue their territorial claims, Minister Gusmão asserted, “Australia’s demand of other nations, to do what Australia itself refuses to do, rings hollow”.

Minister Gusmão closed the lecture emphatically by calling for a renewed bilateral

relationship based on “co-operation, mutual respect, and human dignity”, and appealed for Australia and Australians to support Timor-Leste on the basis of common humanity.

In a follow-up Q and A session moderated by former Labor MP Janelle Saffin, Minister Gusmão elaborated on his vision for his new role as Minister of Planning and Strategic Investment, which will centre on delivering the [Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030](#) [pdf], enhancing service delivery and encouraging greater community cooperation at the village level. He also reflected on the prospects of integrating industries (such as agriculture and tourism), attracting private investment, and identifying niche export markets in an effort to improve Timor-Leste’s economic self-sufficiency.

The transcript of Minister Gusmão’s lecture can be read [here](#), and you can listen to an audio-recording of the lecture [here](#).

About the author/s

Camilla Burkot

Camilla Burkot was a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre, and Editor of the Devpolicy Blog, from 2015 to 2017. She has a background in social anthropology and holds a Master of Public Health from Columbia University, and has field experience in Eastern and Southern Africa, and PNG. She now works for the Burnet Institute.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/xanana-gusmao-on-conflict-development-and-sovereignty-for-timor-leste-20150330/>

Date downloaded: 30 April 2024



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