



**A road less travelled:  
Parliamentary approaches to conflict prevention,  
reconciliation, and peace building**



*Annual Parliamentary Hearing  
United Nations Headquarters  
6-7 December 2012*

**Timor-Leste: peace building through national and international cooperation**

**Background to conflict:** The Timor-Leste (formerly, East Timor) secession conflict lasted for 25 years. The territory had been placed on the international agenda of the United Nations General Assembly as a Non-Self-Governing Territory in 1960. During that time, East Timor was administered by Portugal, which, in 1974, attempted to establish a provisional government and popular assembly to determine the status of the territory. Portugal withdrew after failing to control a civil war that was driven by three political parties that represented conflicting ideologies – the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT) promoted the continued linkages with Portugal, the Timorese Popular Democratic Association (APODETI) argued for greater integration with Indonesia, and the Timorese Social Democratic Association (ASDT; later FRETILIN) advocated for total independence. Portugal's withdrawal led to the military invasion by Indonesia, which caused the death of approximately 200,000 people. Indonesia subsequently annexed East Timor in 1976 – an annexation that was not recognized by the United Nations nor the International Court of Justice.

As a result of a severe financial crisis, which brought about President Suharto's fall from power in 1998, Indonesia opened the doors to discussion about limited autonomy for East Timor. In May 1999, the Portuguese and Indonesian governments signed an agreement with the UN to support a UN-facilitated referendum, a "popular consultation," which would allow the people of East Timor to decide whether to accept the status of autonomy within Indonesia and, thus, solve the territorial dispute between Portugal and Indonesia. A month later, the Security Council passed a resolution establishing an observer mission (UNAMET) to oversee the referendum. The outcome of the referendum saw almost 80 per cent of voters reject integration into Indonesia – widespread violence ensued. This wave of violence caused massive displacement and destruction generating severe consequences for East Timor's economic and social development. An estimated 75 per cent of the population was displaced and nearly 70 per cent of all buildings, homes, and schools were destroyed.

By September 1999, the Security Council had authorized a multinational peacekeeping force to use all necessary measures to restore stability in the country. A month later, the United Nations established the UN Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET). East Timor gained independence in May 2002.

During 2006, violence once again erupted initially as a result of conflict between elements of the military of Timor-Leste over discrimination within the military. A failed coup d'état led to violence throughout the country. The violence caused the displacement of around 150,000 people in and around the capital, Dili. The government requested military assistance from neighboring countries and humanitarian and security assistance from the United Nations. Timor-Leste's economy was severed and poverty levels increased significantly as a result of the reoccurrence of violence.

**Achievements:** While the country remains fragile and a number of underlying issues still need to be addressed, the Parliamentary Majority Alliance (AMP) – a coalition government comprised of five political parties and under the leadership of Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao – made progress in achieving political and economic stability since 2007. Some of the achievements include the return of displaced people to their homes and building of new homes, the establishment and use of auditing public bodies to promote transparency and reform of the civil service, payments of pensions to combatants for national liberation, legislation granting social protection to the most vulnerable groups, especially the elderly, and the construction of a power plant to provide electricity to the country. The AMP's achievements are all the more noteworthy given that, according to the World Development Report 2011, post-conflict countries usually take between 15 and 30 years to transition out of fragility and to build resilience. Overall, the efforts of the AMP government have contributed to the reduction of the national poverty rate by 9 per cent.

Presidential and Parliamentary elections in July 2012, which led to another coalition government with FRETILIN as the official opposition, caused no apparent violence. The United Nations Integrated Mission in East Timor (UNMIT), which was set up in 2006 by a Security Council resolution mandated to support the Government in consolidating stability, enhancing a culture of democratic governance, and facilitating political dialogue among Timorese stakeholders, in their efforts to bring about a process of national reconciliation and to foster social cohesion, is leaving at the end of 2012.

**Parliamentary involvement in peace building:** The IPU, in close cooperation with, UNDP has supported strengthening the capacity of the National Parliament since 2000. IPU support included the provision of technical and legal support for the drafting of the constitution and the development of protocol rules, and numerous workshops on issues such as gender sensitive budget processes, parliamentary diplomacy, orientation for newly elected members and strategic planning for parliament. While much of this support was capacity development for the nascent legislature, it will have helped the National Parliament become a stronger agent of change in support of the development of Timor-Leste.

**Questions:**

- What enabled the effective cooperation among the five political parties under the AMP government between 2007 and 2012?
- How did the speedy responses by the International Community to violence in the country, both in 1999 and again in 2006, contribute to AMP's peace building efforts?
- What has the presence of UNMIT contributed to the AMP's work? What measures have been taken to prevent possible backlashes resulting from the end of the Mission?