



Timor as a Failed State: A Slap in the Face for ASEAN?

by Yang Razali Kassim

Within days of the first-ever ASEAN defense ministers meeting in Kuala Lumpur on May 9, 2006, Timor-Leste went into a freefall of violence and mayhem. This tiny state, situated just on ASEAN's eastern doorstep, won its independence from Indonesia in 2002 following a UN-sponsored referendum in 1999. But it has been struggling to be a viable nation-state ever since.

Timor's civil war is a tragic story that puts to an immediate test the relevance of ASEAN at two levels. The first is on the ASEAN defense ministers meeting (ADMM) as the latest forum for security in the region. The second is on the larger ASEAN grouping as the primary facilitator of peace in Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific. But the test is most severe on Timor-Leste, or East Timor as it was formerly known. Can it survive as a nation-state? And should it fail, how will that affect ASEAN as a grouping?

Timor as a failing state

Timor is the youngest member of the United Nations as well as one of the poorest countries in the world. Despite the discovery of oil in the Timor Sea, the potential wealth has not really flowed to the Dili Government, not to mention to the Timorese people. That potential wealth has also attracted the strategic attention of Australia, which has always maintained an interest in Timor even before it fell into the hands of Indonesia in 1975 following the exit of Portugal as a colonial power.

Today, Timor has all the attributes of a "collapsing state" or a state on the verge of failure. If not for the potential oil wealth, it does not have any major natural resources that could be the lifeline of the incipient nation. Its population base is small, its economy weak; people are lowly-educated and its national infrastructure poorly-developed. Most critical of all, as has been amply exposed by the recent violence, its leadership is divided and worse, at loggerheads. The Australian defense minister Brendan Nelson reflected the private fears of many when he warned on June 4 that Timor could fail as a nation-state. "It is in all our interests to see we do not have failed states in the region. We cannot afford to have Timor-Leste become one of those," he told the *Shangri-La Dialogue* in Singapore.

Yet, if Timor collapsed as a state, no-one is to be blamed but the Timorese themselves. The tipping point would be the current leadership crisis – if not power struggle – in Dili. It would be disingenuous for anyone to point an accusing finger at Jakarta. In fact, the Indonesians have been studiously staying out of harm's way, lest they be accused of instigating the current civil strife.

It is actually in the interest of many parties that President Xanana Gusmao and Foreign Minister Jose Ramos-Horta asserted their leadership. At the very least, this will prevent the disintegration of the Timorese state. For Indonesia, a stabilization of Timor will prevent unnecessary distraction for the Yudhoyono government, which already has its hands full with domestic challenges, such as the Yogyakarta disaster. For Australia, it will reduce skepticism that Canberra has always wanted Timor to fall under its sway. But a failed Timor state, as Defense Minister Nelson said, could also be a haven for crime and terrorism that could threaten the region.

For ASEAN, the failure of Timor will not make the regional grouping look good at all. ASEAN cannot afford to go down in history as having failed to step in to help stabilize the small country in its hour of need. Yet, the Timorese crisis is raising serious questions about ASEAN's relevance as a peace-maker. The challenge to ASEAN's credibility manifested itself on June 1, just days before the Shangri-La Dialogue, when representatives of ASEAN and Asia Pacific think tanks met Najib Tun Razak, the Malaysian deputy prime minister and defense minister.

ASEAN helplessness?

Mr. Najib was asked to explain how Malaysia ended up as the only ASEAN country with peacekeeping troops in Timor, aside from Australia, New Zealand, and Portugal. He identified at least three factors behind the Malaysian decision. The first was a personal appeal from Timorese Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri. The second was KL's concern over the lack of an ASEAN presence in Timor to help quell the crisis. This, he said, "would be a shame", especially at a time when "we talk so much about an ASEAN Security Community."

The third factor, perhaps the most worrisome one, was the possible disintegration of the Timorese political structure. "What worries us is the state of disintegration of the political structure. It is crumbling. Right now, it is divided right down the line. Until and unless there is a strong government there, the situation could linger on," said the Malaysian deputy premier. His concern over the possible disintegration of Timor was expressed just days before his Australian defense counterpart voiced worry about Timor going the way of a failed state.

In a sense, the current crisis in Timor mirrors the scenario of the 1970s when the territory descended into civil strife following the withdrawal of Portugal as a colonial power. The ensuing mayhem gave rise to fears in the region of a possible spread of communist influence, which was already expanding in Indochina. Indeed, the fear of a communist take-over in East Timor was one of the major reasons for Jakarta's decision to annex East Timor, with the tacit support of the United States. Indonesia however suffered diplomatically for that

move over the next 25 years. According to the Indonesian view, it was the desire to end the international diplomatic pressure that led Jakarta to grant the Timorese a referendum. Yet, some Timorese leaders knew very well that they were not prepared for immediate independence.

While the current imbroglio in Timor is a throwback to the 1970s scenario, a major difference lies in the players who intervened. The civil war of the 1970s led to the annexation of East Timor by Indonesia. In 1999, the civil strife led to the intervention of the United Nations, although Australia was quick to move in first. In the current civil war, it is Australia that was first to move in, although Canberra clearly knows how sensitive this is and now prefers a UN mandate for the move.

ASEAN Security Community

Mr. Najib's comment about the embarrassing lack of ASEAN presence in Timor is instructive. The need for an ASEAN peacekeeping force has been well exposed by the Timor crisis. If it is not something immediate, it is a prospect for the future that cannot be sidestepped. This is certainly the view of some ASEAN analysts who attended the dialogue in Kuala Lumpur as part of the 20th Asia Pacific Roundtable organized by the ASEAN think tanks.

The irony is that ASEAN has committed itself to the creation of an ASEAN Security Community. A manifestation of that commitment was the unprecedented ASEAN defence ministers' meeting on May 9. But what is the use of striving towards an ASEAN Security Community if ASEAN cannot play any significant role to help a nascent nation-state in crisis right on its very doorstep? In that respect, it is not surprising that on June 4, Singapore's defense minister Teo Chee Hean proposed peace-keeping as one the future roles of military forces in a globalised world.

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[Editor's note: It is with great sadness that we report the recent passing of a dear friend and fellow Asia-watcher, Dr. Tom Robinson, who succumbed to cancer at the age of 71 on June 13th. Memorial services will be held on July 19, at 1:30 PM, at St. Peter's Episcopal Church, 4250 Glebe Rd., Arlington, VA. His family has requested that in lieu of flowers, donations be made to St. Peter's Generation to Generation Fund. Personal condolences may be sent to his wife, Young-hsin, and son Aaron, at 1437 Laburnum St., McLean, VA 22101.]