

This In Brief flags a new mantra in Timorese politics — *national interest ahead of partisan interests* — and considers its political and institutional context and the prospects for its outlasting the current government.

When Timor-Leste's prime minister since 2007, Xanana Gusmão, stepped down mid-term in February 2015 he surprised and shocked his coalition colleagues and many Timor-watchers by anointing as his successor a member of the political party forming the parliamentary opposition, Dr Rui Araújo. Gusmão explained his choice as one which placed the national interest ahead of partisan interests: Dr Araújo was the person best equipped to lead the government. Many agreed with him and the appointment has been widely acclaimed. The newly formed government that Araújo heads has been described as bringing in some of the best talents from the opposition, reinforcing capacity over partisanship.

Prime Minister Araújo has repeated the dictum of national interest over partisan interests in major speeches to parliament, and his government's program, which he presented to parliament in March 2015, spells out the 'pragmatic logic of aiming to serve the national interest above any other political and partisan interests, in order to meet the challenges faced by the country'. Senior leaders, from the president down, have praised this pioneering approach to politics as a better fit for a new state emerging from a turbulent history.

This development is not completely out of the blue. A more inclusive approach to the business of government has been taking shape over the past two years, supported behind the scenes by President Taur Matan Ruak and evident in the increasing engagement between Prime Minister Gusmão and Mari Alkatiri, the secretary-general of the opposition party FRETILIN and formerly Gusmão's bitter political foe. Since 2013, both sides of politics have come together over the budget process, and the last three annual budgets were approved unanimously by parliament after analysis and some amendment. Critics of this process decried it as a compromise to democracy, arguing that with all the

parliamentary benches singing from the same song sheet, there was no effective opposition and hence there could be no effective parliamentary scrutiny of government.

This criticism has been firmly rejected by senior political figures. Fidelis Magalhães, chief of staff to the president, has commended the constructive engagement of an opposition that supports government programs it considers to be well-based while continuing to challenge those it considers unsound (Magalhães 2013). Agio Pereira, the minister of state, in an opinion piece headed 'Timor-Leste transforming belligerent democracy into consensus democracy' has also endorsed the emergence of constructive consensus and, in language foreshadowing that of Gusmão in 2015, described the new political dynamic as one which focused on the national interest over and above the partisanship of politics (Pereira 2014).

Alkatiri was also forced to defend the approach within his own party. Describing it as a 'regime pact' with the Gusmão government, he explained that it represented a new political posture of maintaining opposition on the one hand while intervening in the process of government on the other in order to advance important policy positions. The results, he observed, were evident: a reduction in inflation and a strengthening of the sustainability of the economy. In a media interview, he characterised the regime pact as a vehicle for the structural elements of the state to reach consensus (*Diário de Notícias* 2014).

What lies behind this supra-partisan approach? One view suggests a self-serving convergence of elite interests in order to consolidate power and rents (Belo 2014). Viewed another way, a new government has been on the cards for some time and, after the unhappy track record of Gusmão's bloated executive, a commitment to choosing the best available ministers is a sensible response to the fiscal and development challenges that the country is facing. Those close to the political centre also suggest that the leaders of the 'generation of '75', after the conflicts of the past, are concerned to leave a legacy of political entente for the next generation.

Prime Minister Araújo is clearly mindful of accountability to the parliamentary parties. He has reportedly encouraged the members of parliament from the largest party bench, CNRT, to actively critique the programs of the government rather than automatically voting in support of whatever the government puts to them. This suggests a significantly more muscular role for parliament than has been the case in the past.

To those grounded in a Westminster system of government, all of this seems highly unusual. In a Westminster system, the leader of the majority party in the parliament automatically becomes prime minister and the ministers are selected from among the members of parliament included in the majority party or coalition. As a result, the composition of the legislature and the executive significantly overlap and parliament is dominated by the majoritarian interests of the governing party or coalition.

Timor-Leste's constitution provides a very different model of government formation and a much sharper separation of powers. The constitution creates four organs of sovereignty: the president, the parliament, the government and the courts, and each organ is expressly separate from the others (Articles 67 and 69). After a parliamentary election, the prime minister is designated by the political party with the most votes or the coalition of parties with a parliamentary majority and the president appoints the prime minister after consulting with the executives of the political parties represented in the parliament (Article 106). Where a member of parliament is appointed to the government, he or she is required by law to step down from the parliament.¹ This arrangement creates a very sharp separation of personnel and function between parliament and government which, in theory at least, permits parliament to operate quite independently of government and to provide a fundamental check on the government's legislative program and executive action.

For critics of majoritarian politics, the promise of governments that put the national interest first and parliaments that act as a considered check on governments has considerable allure. The rhetoric

of Prime Minister Araújo and his appreciation of the challenges facing his country hold real promise. Whether this translates into more robust, evidence-based policymaking and greater parliamentary oversight and legislative independence remains to be seen.

While the principle of national interest over partisan interests is defining the modus operandi of the Araújo government, it will be sorely challenged by the next electoral contest, due in 2017. The character of the parliamentary electoral system in Timor-Leste is quintessentially partisan. The voting system uses a single national constituency and a closed candidate list whereby voters select a party rather than named candidates. The electoral law, furthermore, makes no provision for independent candidates: only those affiliated with a party may stand for parliament. Once an election period begins, partisan politics perforce take over. Whether the inclusive composition of the current government could be replicated in a government formed immediately after a parliamentary election fought on party lines is an open question.

Author Notes

Sue Ingram is a PhD scholar at SSGM, researching political settlements and stability in Timor-Leste and Bougainville. Armino Maia is a PhD scholar at SSGM, researching post-independence nationalism in Timor-Leste.

Endnote

- 1 Law 6/2006, Electoral Law for the National Parliament, Article 15(5).

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