

Portugal and East Timor: Revisiting the Tyranny of Distance

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On 3 November, East Timor's government announced the expulsion of seven Portuguese judges, to take effect within a period of 48 hours. In response, the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expressed "concern and unease with the decision taken by East Timor's government", considering it "entirely disproportionate".¹ The crisis deepened as the Ministry of Justice suspended cooperation with East Timor due to "the absence of adequate conditions to proceed with judicial cooperation".² Meanwhile, the Timorese Prime-Minister acknowledged having mismanaged the affair. Without advanced notice from Díli, which would have allowed Lisbon to take a different approach, Xanana Gusmão argued that "he had been preoccupied with other matters",³ and that the "shock caused was greater than he had intended".⁴

Whether it was intended or not, the truth is that the political damage has been done and the wound will now require time to heal. Having a clearer notion of the impact the decision had in Portugal, Xanana Gusmão has now asked for emotion to be removed from the equation.⁵ Unfortunately, it will be hard to grant that request since bilateral relations with East Timor receive a high level of attention within Portugal and therefore shape public opinion. Thus, the decision to expel Portuguese judges—and above all, the way it was done—was met with great unease. The Portuguese reaction was therefore inevitable: "there are rules and limits which have to be respected", the Portuguese Prime-Minister affirmed. When that does not happen, as was the case here, there are "consequences".⁶

Nevertheless, there is no point crying over spilt milk. It does not matter much if at the heart of the Timorese decision is "incompetence" by the Portuguese judges, as has been alleged by Xanana Gusmão,⁷ or the "investigation of corruption by several Timorese ministers", as stated by the Portuguese press.⁸ One way or the other, the final result is the same. Although the Timorese Prime-Minister

1 "Portugal considera grave a revogação de vistos de permanência a funcionários judiciais internacionais em Timor-Leste" (*Governo de Portugal: Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros*, 3 November 2014).

2 "Não estão criadas as condições adequadas para prosseguir a política de cooperação na área judiciária com Timor-Leste" (*Governo de Portugal: Ministério da Justiça*, 5 November 2014).

3 "Xanana admite que surpreendeu Passos com expulsão de juizes" (*Lusa via Diário Económico*, 4 November 2014).

4 "Xanana garante que não tem "nada contra Portugal", pede menos emoção e manda um abraço" (*Lusa via Expresso online*, 5 November 2014).

* Published also in Portuguese: Paulo Gorjão, "Portugal e Timor-Leste: revisitando a tirania da distância" (*IPRIS Comentário*, No. 10, Novembro de 2014).

5 *Idem*.

6 Raquel Pinto, "Passos. "Somos um país irmão de Timor, mas há limites"" (*Expresso online*, 5 November 2014).

7 "Xanana garante que não tem "nada contra Portugal", pede menos emoção e manda um abraço" (*Lusa via Expresso online*, 5 November 2014).

8 Filipa Ambrósio de Sousa e Rute Coelho, "Investigação a ministros timorenses força saída de magistrados" (*Diário de Notícias*, 5 November 2014), p. 2.



may affirm that there was “no intention to cool relations with Portugal”⁹, that was the consequence.

Having said this, the deterioration in relations between the two countries came as no surprise to the informed observer. It has been evident for a long time that relations have been on the decline. In 2011, I wrote an article precisely on this matter.¹⁰ In the end, what we have been witnessing is collateral damage resulting from the tyranny of distance, under different guises.¹¹ Twelve years after East Timor’s independence, bilateral relations between Lisbon and Díli remain, to a large extent, grounded in emotional and historical ties which, despite being relevant, are insufficient for the strengthening and solidification of the relationship. Strictly speaking, this gradual detachment is understandable. In a certain way, such a tendency corresponds to the normalization of a relationship that has for long been atypically emotive, the result of historical circumstances that reached an epilogue with the 1999 referendum and East Timor’s independence in 2002. However, this distancing is somewhat irrational, as it reflects the absence of a multidimensional strategy; above all on Díli’s part, as it is the side which has more to lose with a gradual bilateral detachment.

Situated between two powerful neighboring states, it would make sense for East Timor to prioritize the diversification of its alliances, in a way to attenuate the impact of Australian and Indonesian hegemony. Thus, to invest in the consolidation of bilateral relations with China, Ja-

pan, or Portugal—to cite only three—would make more political sense. Hence, this week’s developments confirm that East Timor is far from doing everything within its reach to sustain—and cherish—bilateral relations with Portugal.

As the goodwill cycle, which shaped the post-independence period, has become a thing of the past, and now against a backdrop of scarce common political and economic interests, bilateral relations will continue to deteriorate unless something is done. It remains to be seen whether both countries accept this inevitable downgrading in the relationship, or decide to swim against the tide driven by the tyranny of distance. The manner in which the Portuguese judges were expelled does not bode well for the future.

9 “Xanana garante que não tem “nada contra Portugal”, pede menos emoção e manda um abraço” [*Lusa via Expresso online*, 5 November 2014].

10 Paulo Gorjão, “Portugal e Timor-Leste: a tirania da distância” [*i*, 8 March 2011].

11 This expression was coined by the Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey, whom, in a book with that title, analysed the way with which the distance between Australia and the English metropolis was decisive in shaping its identity and history.

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