

Timor Leste's 'David and Goliath' clash with Australia

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Australia's plans to tackle the growing waves of immigration reaching its shores suffered a massive setback with the rejection by the Timor Leste Parliament of a proposal to set up a refugee processing centre in that country. Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard had hoped this project would be approved and implemented, as Australia appears to have just a handful of options left to solve its immigrant challenges.

Australia had already been strongly criticized due to former Prime Minister John Howard's Pacific Solution, which envisioned an indirect system of aid assistance to small Pacific islands in exchange for hosting refugees and other migrants. With Kevin Rudd, the Pacific Solution was scrapped and confusingly substituted by Julia Gillard's regional processing centre project in Timor Leste. Now, Australia is forced to look to Malaysia to serve as a buffer zone between incoming migrants and the Australian mainland. But Malaysia has been broadly accused of committing several human rights abuses. The Law Council of Australia stated it was notified by its Malaysian colleagues, suggesting the country is well-known for making use of 'caning' to torture prisoners including inmates who have broken immigration rules and regulations.¹ Yet, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, perhaps refusing to acknowledge the brutal truth

concerning Malaysian inmates or simply lacking viable options to set a proper system of triage and containment of Australian-targeted immigration, said she was confident Malaysia would not mistreat asylum seekers,² even when Amnesty International reported otherwise.³ Amidst Australia's decaying solutions and unilateral approaches to the problem, Timor Leste refused to host the centre while offering to help fund a regional processing facility in a more suitable country. Indeed, the word suitable is plausibly adequate. Timor Leste is a poor country, with very little infrastructure and delicate security arrangements. Building such a facility in Timor Leste would only further aggravate social upheaval, as poverty is so omnipresent that refugees being hosted in the potential centre would have better access to living conditions than the general Timorese population, a situation set to create social problems.

Regardless of the country's ability to follow such a controversial idea, it is important to notice how the Timorese Parliament unanimously rejected the proposal and all Timorese politicians remained united and accepted the Parliament's decision, especially after the 2007 events. Even when Prime Minister Julia Gillard was building pressure on Timor Leste to accept the deal,

¹ "Australia abandons East Timor refugee centre plans" (*ABC Radio*, 13 May 2011).

² *Ibid.*

³ "Malaysia: torture practiced systematically in widespread caning" (*Amnesty International*, 6 December 2010).



the rejection forced her to alter the initial plan from an exclusively bilateral stance to the multilateral Bali Process forum, where Julia Gillard knows that whatever agreement is reached, it will be much less effective and take longer to materialize. On his part, Timorese deputy Prime Minister José Luís Guterres suggested Australia had the capacity to deal with the problem itself,⁴ in a possible attempt to close down discussions of the centre in the Bali Process. However, by exhausting the bilateral route with Timor Leste, Australia managed to alienate the Timorese Parliament and its constituents from remaining open to any viable multilateral solution implemented on Timorese soil, only able to count with the timid support of President José Ramos-Horta, whose role is not executive but purely ceremonial.

Perhaps Australia intended to put its weight on tiny Timor Leste when it vouched for the bilateral route. As a regional power with security forces deployed in Timorese territory, Australia was sure to gain the upper hand in any negotiations with the Timorese government. Conversely, this platform of power quickly became obsolete, as the very young Timorese Parliament did not give into Australia's pressure and unanimously rejected the proposal, a rejection which also shed light on the drive and prowess of Timorese institutions and political thinking.

It is not common for countries to ardently defend their national interest when a key state in the region pushes for a policy to become a reality, especially when that country is not only a powerful close neighbor, but also a relevant partner on several projects, including security, which always plays heavily into a country's openness to ideas that would otherwise not be considered beneficial. Nevertheless, the Timorese Parliament demonstrated remarkable maturity and a strong sense of statehood and national interest when it privileged its country's own interests above those of regional powers. The importance

of the Parliament's decision plays directly into how Timor Leste managed not to exceed its domestic capabilities when the international community expected that it do so, even with dire consequences. Often a country's capabilities do not match international expectations. It is usually the case that countries have an international image which is stronger and more influential than in reality, thus not corresponding to its actual capabilities. In the Timorese case, this expectation was quite pessimistic, as it was assumed Timor Leste would disregard its domestic capabilities and come to terms with Australia's own expectations, by moving forward with the refugee centre. But the Parliament's rejection of the centre sent a vivid indication that Timor Leste will not surrender its fragile social order in favor of Australia's individual comfort. Instead, the Timorese government went on to balance this capabilities-expectations dichotomy, by offering to help fund a regional initiative to solve not an Australian problem, but a regional one. What started out being a David versus Goliath venture, ended in a very clear and mature decision by the nine year old Timorese Parliament, which was ironically constructed by Australia. Meanwhile, the issues of illegal immigration and human trafficking remain a harsh reality devoid of an ample, viable solution. Nevertheless, having the Bali Process take over the debate while shutting down the remaining bilateral connections is a considerable step forward to help tackle the recurrent social order problems brought on by the forced displacement of peoples.

⁴ Julie Bishop, "East Timor is no answer to Australia's problems" (*National Times*, 26 January 2011).

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