

11/12/2002

Asean's prospective 11th member needs our help

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THERE are things we should know about East Timor, and there are things they should know about us, because we both know things about Indonesia and Australia.

First, it is now "Timor Lorosae", its homeland name, or "Timor Leste", its name in the United Nations. Next, the President's name is spelled Xanana Gusmao but pronounced Sha-NA-na GOOSE-mung.

We know this because he took his name from the retro American rock band Sha Na Na. (Who took their name from the backing vocals of the 1958 hit by the Silhouettes, Get A Job, which Jose Alexandre Xanana Gusmao finally did.)

If this doesn't render the 56-year-old former freedom fighter and political prisoner, like, totally cool, he sustained himself through six years imprisonment in Jakarta with painting, poetry, and Mariah Carey's 1993 hit song, Hero.

Freed from house arrest after the people of East Timor voted for independence from Indonesia in August 1999, Gusmao reluctantly stood as an independent candidate for president last April. (He told the BBC he would rather grow pumpkins.)

Overwhelmingly elected, Gusmao now presides over an 88-member Constituent Assembly comprising mostly members of Fretilin, the party that expended a generation fighting for East Timor's independence from first Portuguese and then Indonesian rule.

The head of Timor Leste's Government is Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, 52, a Muslim of Yemeni descent. The country's five per cent Muslim minority is pleased that Alkatiri is PM, but he and Gusmao differ on some basic things.

Gusmao, seeking national unity, would grant an amnesty to those who sided with Indonesia in their independence struggle. Alkatiri is wary of enemies in the blanket. Gusmao wants his country to be happy, free and easy, and a little socialist. Alkatiri is more conservative.

In a best-case scenario, they would seem to make a good double-act, possibly finding for East Timor a negotiable middle path to development.

Last week's rampage of youths in Dili, however, veered closer to the worst-case scenario, which has Gusmao growing pumpkins after all. The riots boost the contention that the occupation-addled, poverty-stricken and politically naive people of East Timor need security, to enable economic development to begin.

Alkatiri may be forgiven for taking recent events personally. Among the targets of the rioters' wrath were a mosque, which was vandalised, a supermarket patronised by foreigners, which was looted - and Alkatiri's house, which was burned to the ground.

Attempts to suppress minorities and expel foreigners are classic early spasms of nationalism, of course, but what happened in East Timor last week was the notable alternative to Malaysian-style co-optation. Having been there and done that, Malaysia could show East Timor something about the politics of consociation.

Gusmao blamed last week's riots on poverty. He and Alkatiri at least agree that, once independence is attained, the only freedom left worth fighting for is the freedom to prosper. Gusmao would like to alleviate poverty through micro-credit, as in Bangladesh and a few other less-developed countries.

Alkatiri prefers to think oil and gas, which is something else on which Malaysia might advise. Just as it once was for us, East Timor has oil wealth offshore and someone else is getting it.

Last May, Australia and East Timor agreed that East Timor will receive 90 per cent of the revenues from the oil and gas Australia produces from East Timor's 75,000-sq-km share of the Timor Sea between the archipelago and Australia. This should mean an income of some RM400 million a year for the next 20 years - about a 30 per cent increase in per capita GDP for East Timor's 800,000 people.

The 105,000 people of Darwin, Australia, however, will receive RM26 billion in government spending on onshore facilities to receive Timorese oil and gas - along with the rest of the Timor Sea resources.

Australia can afford to be this generous because East Timor's piece of the seabed was determined by a maritime boundary agreed between Indonesia and Australia 30 years ago, along the line of the continental shelf. Australia's fulsome support of Timor Leste does not extend to reconsidering this boundary, which gives Australia 80 per cent of the seabed between Darwin and Dili.

The UN Convention on Rights of the Sea asks that countries separated by less than 400km of ocean accept a boundary midway between them (as Malaysia and Indonesia do with the Straits of Malacca). Earlier this year, Australia declared it would not recognise the International Court of Justice on maritime border disputes (as Malaysia and Indonesia do with Sipadan and Ligitan).

East Timor now owns less than 30 per cent of the Timor Sea oil and gas fields, with the rest taken by Australia and a dozen oil multinationals. If the midway convention were applied, East Timor would own upwards of 90 per cent of those resources - and earn about 10 times more in revenue under the terms of the present deal with Australia.

Some 30 years ago, Malaysia's Petronas made Third World history as a national oil company by turning oil concessionaires into contractors, and itself into a full-service petro-conglomerate and not just a rent collector. Petronas has since helped a host of other developing countries gain control of their hydrocarbon resources. We should do the same for East Timor.

When Mari Alkatiri visited Malaysia last August, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was enthusiastic about Malaysian involvement in East Timor, including having Petronas "plan and establish the structure of their own national oil company".

That offer should be remembered and followed through. If there is a decent future for East Timor, it will most certainly be as a member of Asean. Gusmao and Alkatiri are also united in hoping for Asean membership and assistance.

We should redouble that assistance - which surely we owe East Timor after so long having had to sit on our hands in obeisance to Asean's ironclad principle of non-interference while it was part of Suharto's Indonesia.

The Republic of Timor Leste is no longer Indonesia's 27th province, but the 191st member of the United Nations and the 184th member of the IMF and World Bank. It must also be the 11th member of Asean.

Or we could leave it to the tender mercies of Australian resource management, which has worked such wonders for Papua New Guinea and Bougainville.