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Driven by practical considerations

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A WESTERN-educated, American-accented Christian-Indonesian friend who frequently ribs me about the supposed lack of democracy in Malaysia compared with his "new" Indonesia recently demonstrated residual flashes of anger over perceived Western "betrayal" at the mere mention of Timor Leste, as the former Indonesian province of East Timor is today called.

I empathise completely with his sentiments, especially the fact he related that Indonesia probably saved the abandoned territory from falling into Communist-inspired mayhem in 1975 just as the Americans were making their strategic withdrawal from Vietnam, with Washington's acquiescence and Australia's explicit recognition of Indonesia's annexation of East Timor.

That Australia would withdraw its recognition of East Timor as Indonesian territory during Indonesia's difficult and confusing transition to full democracy is likely to cast a pall on Australian-Indonesian relations for a long time.

Now that full independence has been given to Timor Leste and it has suddenly dawned on the country's citizens that they have probably ended up worse off economically - at least for now - than before, the world's attention has predictably shifted.

Malaysia, which understandably shares little of Indonesia's emotional baggage over Timor Leste although we share much of our Indonesian friends' painful sentiments over their loss of the territory, may now have to pick up some slack in responsibility over the territory's future, an undertaking we have taken on almost right from the outset of the end of hostilities there.

It is therefore very fitting and even slightly touching that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's penultimate official trip abroad as Prime Minister was to Timor Leste where he created history of sorts as the first foreign leader to have officially visited the region's newest country - long after the international glamour and romance this troubled land had engendered had died down.

In so doing, Malaysia let it be known that it is driven more by practical considerations about helping a fledgling regional neighbour gain a stake in the region's overall development rather than waxing sentimental about what might have been.

According to Press reports, Timor Leste's expectations of Malaysia are so minimal - the likes of hiring more Timor Leste workers for Malaysia - that ordinary Malaysians cannot help but be moved. Not a few coffee shops in Kota Kinabalu are almost completely under the charge of quietly efficient teams of Timorese workers.

That said, it was left to Dr Mahathir to inject his usual dose of unvarnished and sober reality about the pitfalls, in addition to the more-often heralded benefits, of democracy in an address to Timor Leste's Parliament.

This is vitally important as indications point to a serious and potentially damaging fundamental debate among Timor Leste's powers-that-be about the country's economic direction.

Dr Mahathir's warning against giving democracy free rein before we are ready is again driven home as we hear that supposed beacon of regional democracy - the Philippines - lurching towards another political crisis and pushing economic renewal there ever further to the back-burner.

A Philippine political scientist, Alex Magno, was driven to comment starkly this week of his compatriots: "We are a profane people, unable to abstract principles from experience, visions from personalities. We are a hopelessly sentimental people, doomed to trusting individuals rather than institutions. We invest in charisma rather than competence, refusing to learn history's lessons."

This is an analysis borne perhaps more out of sorrow than anger against one's own. An analysis no Filipino politician would probably dare echo, much less speak of - in a country with more experience than any other in Asia in building democratic institutions. Any wonder why pushing democracy locally can be so perilous if done without taking into account prevailing local context?