

The Crisis in Democracy in East Timor

© 2006 Joseph George Caldwell. All rights reserved. Posted at Internet web sites <http://www.foundation.bw> and <http://www.foundationwebsite.org> . May be copied or reposted for non-commercial use, with attribution. (16 June 2006; updated 13 July 2006)

I have commented a number of times about the fact that the US government ceaselessly promotes democracy for others, when our own Founding Fathers would have nothing to do with it (although George Bush and many other Americans seem ignorant of the fact, the Founding Fathers set the US up as a republic, not a democracy). They agreed with Plato (author of *The Republic*) that democracy is an extremely poor form of government, in which the elected leaders will pander to the desires of the masses. The word “democracy” does not even appear in either of the country’s two founding documents, the US Declaration of Independence or the US Constitution. Whenever democracy fails to produce the “desired” result, such as the takeover of Algeria or Palestine by radical Islamists, or the loss of power of indigenous peoples to migrants, such as in the case of Fiji or the Solomon Islands, the US government is quick to assert that the problem is not with democracy but with some other factor.

The most recent example of democracy producing unintended results may be East Timor. East Timor was a Portuguese colony until 1975, when Portugal abandoned all of its colonies. Indonesia promptly invaded East Timor until it gained its independence on 20 May 2002 after a bloody war. Ethnically, East Timor is overwhelmingly Catholic, whereas Indonesia is overwhelmingly Moslem. It is an interesting development that the current prime minister of East Timor, Dr. Mari Alkatiri, is a Moslem. He traces his roots in East Timor several hundred years, back to the time of Arab traders.

The people who promote democracy are generally the same ones who espouse tolerance, inclusiveness, egalitarianism, and multiculturalism. In the case of East Timor, they did not comment on the curiousness of the situation in which a country that is 95 percent Catholic and had just won its independence in a bloody war from a Moslem nation would elect a Moslem as its prime minister.

The strangeness of this situation is now being reflected in the continuing occurrence of public demonstrations demanding the resignation of Mr. Alkatiri. But Mr. Alkatiri refuses to resign. Why should he? He was chosen by democratic elections in full compliance with the East Timor Constitution. The “powers that be” are now scrambling around, trying to figure out how to suspend the Constitution, or parts of it, to allow a new election in which Alkatiri will be removed.

As I have observed on several occasions, democracy is a system that is useful only for governing bodies that don’t really matter, such as social clubs. It works well only with an electorate that is relatively well-educated and homogeneous, so that most of the electorate have about the same values and points of view on the issues to be resolved. It is not a good system for managing anything that really matters, such as operating a ship, an aircraft, a business, or a planet.

In addition to the problem of democracy, East Timor has other serious problems. It has a small population – under a million people. It is very small in size, and it has limited agricultural resources (it is the eastern two-thirds of the mountainous tropical island of Timor). Its population is very poor and largely uneducated. Its only sizable economic resource is offshore oil deposits, which are worth an estimated USD16 billion over the next several decades. Quite

frankly, East Timor is so small, both in terms of population, geographic size, and economic development that it is hard to see how it can afford to have the “overhead” of all of the institutions required by a democratic system of government. It would make much more sense if it were operated as a fiefdom, such as Bahrain or the Arab oil states, or simply agreed to be a protectorate of some other large country (such as nearby Australia) and managed / administered by that other country, such as is the case with a number of other small islands (e.g., the island of Guadeloupe, which is simply a French overseas department).

The current government of Timor-Leste is very intent on preserving and maintaining its Portuguese heritage, at least with respect to language. Under Indonesian rule, Bahasa Indonesia was taught in all schools. Today, Timor-Leste has two official languages – Portuguese and Tetum – and two working languages – English and Bahasa Indonesia. It is interesting to note that the Portuguese ruled Timor-Leste for 450 years as a stable colony. It did this by keeping the indigenous people uneducated and occupied essentially as slaves in subsistence agriculture. When Portugal abandoned all of its colonies in 1975 and Indonesia took over, it started a program of education and raised the level of expectations of the people. They now want to be “free” and live under “democracy.” That approach will destroy Timor-Leste, just as surely as it has destroyed Haiti and numerous other countries.

For the past six years, the United Nations and other development agencies have been promoting democracy in Timor-Leste. Over the past two months, civil law and order have collapsed, along with the country’s government’s authority. People are now desperately hoping for a return to stability and law and order. It is interesting to observe that under 450 years of Portuguese rule, stability and law and order were relatively strong, and that since Timor-Leste was abandoned by the Portuguese, it has seen nothing but civil strife and now, a near-total collapse of social structure and government. Evidently “freedom” and “democracy” come with a price – anarchy. Or perhaps democracy is not the right “country model” for Timor-Leste.

It is interesting to draw a parallel of the Timor-Leste experience to that of China. Chinese culture values social stability more than it values individuality (personal freedom, individual rights). Today, it exists as essentially two parallel nations – a very poor rural, agricultural nation, and a modern, technological urban nation. (See the recent book by Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao, *Will the Boat Sink the Water?* (Public Affairs, 2006) for a description of the system.) This scheme will likely continue, since it is not possible for China (or India, in a similar situation) to raise the standard of living of its billion people to western standards without totally destroying the planet’s biosphere (from industrial pollution and its effects, such as mass species extinction and global warming). With this approach, which is reminiscent of the Portuguese approach to rule of East Timor, there is stability and progress – China is set to become the world’s greatest superpower. It is also interesting to draw a comparison between the Portuguese colonial approach, the Chinese two-nation approach, and the “minimal-regret” synarchic-government approach to planetary management that I proposed some time ago (in my book, *Can America Survive?*). Under the minimal-regret concept, the planet’s human population consists of a single-nation high-technology population of five million and a globally distributed low-technology (hunter-gatherer) population of five million.

As I have commented before (in “A Country Model for East Timor,” in *Miscellany24*), Timor-Leste is so small, its terrain so mountainous, and its people so ethnically diverse and uneducated (and likely to remain so, if they have to master four languages!), that it does not seem rational to attempt to impose a modern democratic system of government on it, as the UN and other development agencies have been attempting to do for the past six years. That six-year effort has resulted in a total collapse. In fact, the country is far worse off now than it was

six years ago, following its independence from Indonesia. At that time, following its long, bloody, and successful revolution, it was relatively cohesive, and the population, although very poor and ethnically diverse, had been bonded by the challenge of combating a common enemy and were looking forward to building a nation. Now, the cohesiveness is gone, and the major ethnic groups are killing each other, burning each other's homes. The people have lost respect for the government, and are looting not only private stores and markets, but government facilities as well.

After the spectacular failure of a concerted six-year effort to impose a modern market-oriented democracy on Timor-Leste, it is time to reconsider whether that type of society and government is right for this country. The fact that Portugal ruled it with a high degree of stability – and little environmental damage – for 450 years must be considered. Democracy is not the right country model for Timor-Leste. It is time to consider a different country model.