

# Rui Graça Feijó – Timor-Leste upcoming presidential elections: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs?

Rui Graça Feijó is Lecturer at CES/UCoimbra and IHC/UNLisboa

Timor-Leste will hold its fourth presidential elections on March 20. In spite of the lack of opinion polls, it is possible to suggest that they will reveal a new political landscape, the extent of whose novelty is still to be decided. To start with, these elections will confirm the Timorese “rule” that no incumbent succeeds in obtaining a second term in office

The field of candidates is composed of 8 individuals who submitted at least 5,000 endorsements with a regional distribution of at least 100 in each of the country's 213 districts. This is the same number as in 2007, and 5 less than in 2012. Underneath the “normality” of this picture, a major change is occurring: there is a very strong candidate alongside seven others with little or no chance of actually fighting for anything more than a modest result, at best an honourable second. The presidential elections will thus fulfil two purposes: one is the official task of choosing a president; the other is to help contenders ascertain their hold on popular vote and their chances in the legislative elections scheduled for June, allowing for tactical decisions. On top of that, internal party struggles, a show of personal vanity, and access to the generous public support to candidates (at least US\$ 10,000 per candidate regardless of their electoral score) will play a minor part in the circus.

FRETILIN proposed Lu Olo, its chairman (not its leader, the secretary-general Mari Alkatiri), as it had done in 2007 and 2012. Both times Lu Olo came first on the initial round only to see all other candidates rally against him in the decisive one. He has now received the formal backing of the largest parliamentary party, CNRT, and most of all, of the charismatic leader of the young nation, Xanana Gusmão. He is “Snow White” surrounded by seven dwarfs.

The main rival seems to be António Conceição. He is a member of Partido Democrático, a party that suffered a heavy blow with the death of its historical leader Fernando Lasama de Araújo (2015), followed by internal strife. The party as such ceased to be part of the governmental coalition, although his ministers were allowed to remain in functions as “independent”. António Conceição is one of those, and his bid at the presidency is partly a test for a presumed bid for the party leadership. He may have the backing of a new party, Partido da Libertação do Povo, inspired by the outgoing president Taur Matan Ruak, who declined to seek re-election and is widely believed to be preparing a bid for the premiership (if the presidential elections allow for such presumption).

Former minister José Luis Guterres, whose party Frente-Mudança is the smaller one in the governmental coalition, has also declared his intention to run.

Two non-parliamentary parties have also fielded candidates. Partido Trabalhista supports its leader, Angela Freitas, and Partido Socialista Timorense backs António Maher Lopes. Although PST has no MP, its leader, Avelino Coelho, holds an important position in government.

A former deputy commissioner in the Anti-Corruption Commission, José Neves, is among those who seek the popular vote without party support – a circumstance that in the past has been critical in winning the second ballot, as candidates in these circumstances were able to build coalitions of all the defeated runners against the “danger” of a partisan candidate. Two others fall in this category: Amorim Vieira, of whom very little is known apart from the fact that he lived in Scotland where he joined SNP; and Luis Tilman, a virtually unknown individual who also presents himself as “independent”.

A few things emerge from this picture. Against what is expectable in two-round elections in fragmented party systems (Timor has 4 parliamentary parties, about 30 legal ones, and the 2012 elections had 21 parties or coalitions running), which induce the presentation of candidates on an identity affirmation basis in view of a negotiation for the second ballot (as was the case in Timor in 2007 and 2012), this time the two largest parties negotiated a common candidate *before* the first round, significantly increasing the likelihood that he will be elected on March 20.

It thus highly probable that Timor-Leste will have for the first time a president who is a member of a political party. The experience of three non-partisan presidents comes to an end not because the rules of the game have been changed, but rather because the political scenario has moved considerably. Back in 2015, a government of “national inclusion” replaced the one led by Xanana with the backing of all parties in the House, even if FRETILIN, who offered one of its members for the premiership, still claims to be “in the opposition”. The move has been called by a senior minister “a transformation of belligerent democracy into consensus democracy”. Although the outgoing president is supposed to have facilitated this development, he soon turned sides and became a bitter and very outspoken critic of Rui Maria de Araújo’s executive and the political entente that sustains it.

Now the two major partners of the entente agreed to go together to the presidential elections, signalling that they wish to continue the current government formula after this year’s cycle of elections (even if the place of smaller parties in the coalition is not secure, and a question mark hangs above the score that the new opposition PLP may obtain). More than this, they assume that the role of the president has somehow changed from being the guarantor of impartiality discharging a “neutral” function as “president of all Timorese” to be a player in the partisan game, throwing his political and institutional support behind the government coalition.

A question emerges when one considers that CNRT is the largest party in the House, and that it has relinquished the right to appoint the prime minister (who is a member of FRETILIN acting in an “individual capacity”) and now forfeits the chance of securing the presidency, offering it to its rival/partner. Will it maintain this low-key attitude after the parliamentary elections if it remains the largest party?

The CNRT/FRETILIN entente suggests that Timorese politics lives in a double stage: the official one with state officers discharging their functions, and the one behind the curtains where *de facto* Xanana (who is simply a minister) and Mari Alkatiri (who holds a leading position in a regional development entity) tend to retain the reins of actual power. In this light, public efforts to promote the “gerasaun foun” (younger generation) in lieu of the “gerasaun tuan” (the old guard that was already present back in 1975) by offering the premiership and other jobs to those who are relatively younger needs to be carefully held in check.

In Dili, I was told that Timorese presidents tend to suffer the “syndrome of the wrong palace”. This expression is meant to convey the idea that they become frustrated with the (allegedly limited) powers bestowed upon them by the constitution, and consider that the legitimacy conferred on them by a two round election that guarantees an absolute majority is sort of “kidnapped”. They are prisoners in their palace. They believe they have the right to determine strategic orientations and cannot find the actual means to implement them. So they look at the premiership in the palace next door. Xanana stepped down from the presidency and launched a party and a successful bid to head government; Taur Matan Ruak is trying to follow suit – but his chances are not deemed so high. If Lu Olo manages to get elected, the sort of relations he is likely to establish with the prime-minister are totally different, as he is compromised with “one majority, one government, one president” – only the president is not likely to be the one who leads. Will this resolve the syndrome issue? Interesting times lay ahead.

This entry was posted in Asia, Timor-Leste and tagged presidential election, Timor-Leste on February 21, 2017 [<http://presidential-power.com/?p=6063>] by Robert Elgie.

---

**00241443**