

# Friends of Suai/Covalima



**August 2023 – Special edition**

Dear Friends

This special edition newsletter includes reflections from recent visits to Timor-Leste by international election observers and a reminder of the important work of the Covalima Community Centre in Suai.

Parliamentary elections were held in Timor-Leste on Sunday 21 May 2023. Australian East Timor Association (AETA) together with Victoria University (VU) and the VU Alumni Association organised a group to volunteer as election observers, with the aim to promote democracy in support of free and fair elections. Friends of Suai and contributors to this newsletter would like to acknowledge the work of Jean McLean AM, Ann Wigglesworth and Glenda Lasslett for organising the observer mission and for facilitating a report back at the St Kilda Town Hall on 30 May. It was wonderful to hear from participants and we thank Martin Foley for his thoughtful reflection and for allowing us to share it in this newsletter.



We are also grateful that Susan Attrill has shared her impressions on her visit to Timor-Leste and her time spent in Suai. Her reflection on her time spent at the Covalima Community Centre (CCC) in Suai is a reminder of the importance of the work they do and the high regard for our friendship.

The ongoing operational costs of the CCC, including core staff salaries have been funded through an annual grant from the City of Port Phillip. As a result of the Council's decision in 2021 to gradually reduce this grant by 25% each financial year, this is the final year of funding with the grant reduced to \$15,000 this year. Although we continue to work towards our goal of assisting the CCC to become

sustainable and financially independent, we need to fundraise for the Centre to continue operations, and we are seeking your support. There is more information on the last page of this newsletter.



We hope you enjoy this newsletter and thank you for your support of our friendship. Together, we can create lasting, positive change in the lives of those who deserve it the most.

Best wishes from Friends of Suai/Covalima

*Photos: (top right): A polling centre on election day. (above) Commission (board) and staff members at the CCC.*

## Reflections on the recent East Timorese election mission

by Martin Foley

The people of Timor Leste have built a rare thing. In an age where populism, polarization and the Post-Truth politics of anti-democratic authoritarianism have become a global template – this small, poor neighbor has built out of a struggle for self-determination and independence a representative, robust but fragile democracy.

It is something the people of this now 21-year -old state clearly value and see as a defining feature of their polity. It offers the foundations of a participative representative democracy – and a possible bottom-up model of development and planning for the future.

***The achievement of peaceful, deeply embedded and valued, representational politics seemingly has occurred against the odds of the mounting crises the tiny nation faces. So that the people and the leadership of Timor Leste have much to be proud of. And clearly, they are.***

The big challenge, in my superficial understanding, is how to sustain confidence and participation in that progressive model of national institution building, whilst addressing the many issues the small, poor but strong willed, nation faces. How can the fragile system of quite recent independent democratic institution building and the culture of participation it grows from, be seen to be the engine of a different approach to development and growth: a grass roots local model, as opposed to the top-down, authoritarian models that increasingly surround Timor Leste and present themselves internationally as alternative models of development?

My reflections on the fragile nature of this achievement are not particularly mine – I thank those people better briefed from AETA for their advice and views. I thank people from the President of Timor Leste to the impressive young people from civil society organisations that we chanced upon for their strong views.

Everyone we spoke to acknowledge the challenges the people of Timor-Leste face. For a nation of 1.3 million, the challenges are many. Consider a few.

Timor-Leste ranks 155th out of 192 on GDP per capita rankings.

Food security and malnutrition as a particular reflection of that poverty plays out very specifically amongst children and women – with Timor-Leste having one of the highest levels of malnutrition globally and ranking 108<sup>th</sup> of 116 on the Global health index (WHO/ World Bank). Education participation, whilst high, has many quality and participation challenges.



*Photo: Election observer mission participants met with President Jose Ramos Horta*



Their health system is fragile, with high death rates for children and mothers, and many treatable communicable diseases still prevalent and killing people.

Gender inequality reflects itself culturally, socially and politically as well as in the delivery of health, education, and income.

The environmental challenges of natural hazards, environmental degradation and climate change impacts have a disproportionate impact on the poor and marginalized - with recovery from recent floods still underway and impact on the agricultural sector and food production - need to be better understood.



There is criticism in Timor-Leste of transparency of government processes and the generational leadership of the old grey beards of the national independence movement, where half the nation is aged under 21 and only knows independence. Whilst young people are engaged, they are by nature impatient in seeing the world they are building meeting new challenges. The older leadership from all parts of political and civil society seemingly recognise this. How the generational changes play out will be an important element of Timor-Leste's future.

What sets Timor-Leste apart, from my brief encounter, is how embedded and important they see the participation and democratic involvement in the solutions to their many challenges. Perhaps at the heart of this there is a recognition that in building a culture of institutional, representative democratic systems there lies wider opportunity.

**In a nation only 21 years old and dealing with so many existential challenges all at once, the sense of difference and pride in their democracy creates a platform for wider reconsideration of models of responding to the many challenges.**

I am hardly an expert on Timor-Leste, but the overwhelmingly calm, peaceful and successful democratic outcomes that flowed from the election process are a priceless asset and a launching pad for nation building.

I saw prisoners vote (very slowly I thought). I saw processes of voting in hospital that sought to address criticisms of how people in hospital voted in the last election. I saw the elderly quietly smile with pride as they voted and displayed their purple dyed finger to the wider world. I saw young people assisting the disabled to cast their ballot and then cast their own purposefully. I saw the Timor-Leste National Police provide discreet and understated security for the ballot that was very rarely needed. I saw counting and scrutineering of ballots that was both communal

***Our role, the role of the many friends that Timor-Leste has, is to support them in that chance for a rare achievement – independent, democratic, participatory development flowing from the government of the people of Timor-Leste, by the people of Timor-Leste and for the people of Timor-Leste.***

theatre and promoted a level of participation that was beyond anything we would see in our apparently mature democratic system.

Our Observation Mission assessment of the election could only be that it was free, fair, and reflecting the collective democratic will of the people of Timor-Leste.

That **is** an achievement in itself.

But I understood that to the people of Timor-Leste that it is not enough. That it is only really a precondition. It is an enabler that needs to empower all those from the President – who shared a very long discussion with us about the political and social challenges facing the Nation – to the young people emerging, demanding a say and a role in civil and political society. The process we saw, the culture it reflects, provides the people of Timor-Leste with a rare opportunity. The nation's debate about a model of sustainable development, underpinned by the ethical framework of a representative democracy, will be the business of the people of Timor-Leste.

Our role, the role of the many friends that Timor-Leste has, is to support them in that chance for a rare achievement – independent, democratic, participatory development flowing from the government of the people of Timor-Leste, by the people of Timor-Leste and for the people of Timor-Leste.

It was a privilege to be part of the Observer Mission.

### **A moving trip to the Covalima Community Centre by Susan Attrill**

While in Timor Leste on an election observation mission in May I was lucky to accompany Ann Wigglesworth on a visit to Suai a village on the South Coast. Passing on the 6hr road trip, on the albeit new highway, we took a 23-minute flight from Dili on 20-seater. I was immediately delighted by the contrast to Dili with lush green countryside and hills. Cows, chickens, pigs and dogs roamed freely outside the village homes and in the streets.

Our arrival at the Covalima Community Centre was much anticipated. Around 10 staff members came out of the Centre to greet us, very respectfully standing in a row and taking turns to come up to welcome us formally. One elderly woman actually kissed my hand, which I found very moving at the time and still do. It was clear that Mana Ann was very revered and by association I enjoyed VIP status.



*Photo: Susan Attrill with students at the CCC in Suai.*

While Ann delivered training in the finer points of report writing inside a green walled meeting room, I drew the long straw and had the outdoor covered classroom, which has been renovated thanks to Friends of Suai. I held English conversation with some 30 students 16 or 17 years old and adult staff of the Covalima Community Centre including drivers and the English teacher herself.



I learned a lot about the students and the society from their answers to my questions. When asked about hobbies many of the girls said their hobby was “study” when asked about what they did on the weekend some of the girls said they “clean the church”. Boys mainly said “football” a few said “study”. On the topic of siblings, I found out that many had for instance 3 younger sisters and 4 younger brothers. They had mostly come from other villages to go to school in Suai staying with other families or relatives.

***With 37% of rural youth 15-24 years in Timor Leste being illiterate, compared to 6% in urban areas, the students valued their opportunity for additional education at Covalima Community Centre highly.***

The students were excited and at first shy to see a real native English speaker - a “Malai”. So attentive and respectful they were hanging on my every word and writing down everything I wrote on the whiteboard. I didn’t see one single mobile phone on the first day and only one on the second day at the end of class. Apparently, they sign a contract when enrolling not to have phones in class. The students were lovely people, when they became comfortable, they laughed naturally

and were very affectionate and friendly with one another. It actually brings a tear to my eye when recalling these bright young people.

***Half of the population in Timor Leste is under 21 years. What I found impressive in the country is that the young people, most of whom were born since independence take responsibility and have a good attitude to the development of their country, which includes the democratic process. The voting age in Timor Leste is 17 and most of the polling officials we observed on the election day Sunday 21st May, particularly in rural areas, were young people in their teens or 20s.***

Seeing the important work of the Covalima Community Centre and meeting the young people made it clear why assisting with funding such a centre is very worthwhile.

As a consultant in the employment sector, I was happy to learn about graduates of the Covalima Community Centre being successful in obtaining scholarships for further study and being placed in employment, which has the potential to turn their lives and that of their families around. Secure employment is hard to achieve.

It was a privilege to observe the election in Timor Leste and to interact with the young people at the Covalima Community Centre in Suai. For me it was a deeply heart-warming and unforgettable experience.



*Photo: CCC English trainer Juliana (left) with students learning English at the CCC.*

## Covalima Community Centre - Appeal

For many years, the Covalima Community Centre (CCC) in Suai has been a vital source of education and empowerment for the local population, and it has touched the lives of many people. It is a highly respected and trusted community organisation and seen as a major player in the development of the community.

Despite the unwavering commitment of the staff, the reduction in funding of operations means that resources are stretched thin and the CCC faces significant challenges in maintaining its crucial services.

**We need your support to sustain the invaluable work carried out by the CCC.**

## Donations

All funds raised will ensure the Covalima Community Centre in Suai can continue to implement community development programs.

Donations can be made via the following methods:

- Direct deposit into our Commonwealth Bank account.  
Acct Name: Friends of Suai Donations BSB: 063 243 Acct: 1034 3552
- On-line via the Friends of Suai Covalima Give Now webpage:  
<https://www.givenow.com.au/cause1266>

We are grateful for any amount that you can contribute. Thank you!



*Photo: Many young women have participated in leadership training at the CCC through the Rural Women's Development Program*

***“Seeing the important work of the Covalima Community Centre and meeting the young people made it clear why assisting with funding such a centre is very worthwhile.”***

***Susan Attrill***