



E P R E S S

Out of the Ashes: Destruction and Reconstruction of East Timor

Abstract for chapter 7

Author: Catherina Williams

‘Experiences of a district electoral officer in Suai’ is a personal account by one of the officers with UNAMET in East Timor.

The author describes the electoral processes through the following procedures: site selection, voter education, registration of voters, and the ballot. Each section has details about such matters as the categories of eligible voters; the required documentation, and the near 100 per cent turnout on the day of the ballot, notwithstanding the intimidation in the period leading to the popular consultation.

Keywords

autonomy, ballot, Beco, district electoral officer, documents, Fatululik, independence, popular consultation, registration, Suai, UNAMET

Experiences of a district electoral officer in Suai

Catharina Williams

Introduction

During July and August 1999, I was a district electoral officer with UNAMET in East Timor. In this chapter, I hope to convey some of the flavour of this experience.

The task of running the popular consultation within East Timor fell to UNAMET. For this purpose they selected 200 centres, most of which ended up being run by a multinational team of three – two district electoral officers and a member of the civilian police. The latter's tasks included keeping an eye on security, and liaising with the Indonesian police.

The entire process of preparing for the ballot was of necessity very fast. By early July, the 200 centres had been selected, regional headquarters set up, most international staff had arrived at their respective regional headquarters, and local drivers and interpreters had been appointed. In Suai it was 8 July (less than eight weeks before the ballot) before we started voter education, seeking additional local staff to help with registration, and final negotiations on which building to use in each centre. Registering the voters started just over a week later, on 16 July, and continued until 6 August. There were then less than four weeks until the ballot on 30 August. This period included two weeks of campaigning (in which district electoral officers in Suai had very little involvement, even as spectators), several days of displaying computerised lists of registrations so that people could

check the lists and object to any entries they considered fraudulent, selection and training of local staff for the ballot day, and education of voters about the mechanics of voting. The short time frame inevitably meant that some things had to be made up ‘on the run’, and led to frustration as information from Dili was sometimes received after we really needed it. Nevertheless, in retrospect, it seems to have had limited impact on the vote, with a very high percentage of the population registering, and 98.5 per cent of those turning up to vote.

As district electoral officer, I was assigned to the region of Suai, in south-west East Timor. (This was relatively close to the West Timor border, where I had earlier learned the Tetun language while working towards a PhD in linguistics.) Initially I was teamed with a Bulgarian colleague and an Irish policeman, responsible for the district of Beco I, on the plains about 30 minutes drive to the east of Suai. We travelled out every morning in a convoy of five UNAMET Landrover Discovery vehicles, accompanied by a truckload of Indonesian police. Our team would drop off the convoy first, along with one Indonesian policeman, while the others went on to the Zumalai district.

Part way through registration I was transferred to Fatululik, in the mountains over an hour’s drive north-west of Suai. This district had only just become accessible again by car after a team of 130 local men cut a bypass around a severe landslide. On account of the distance and the difficult roads, the Fatululik team lived locally in the doctor’s house for the period of registration, rather than commuting every day. For registration I was teamed with a lady from Zambia and a policeman from Uruguay, while for the ballot I was joined by a Canadian and a Swede.

Site selection

One of the first jobs of each electoral team was to approach the government heads in the area to which they were assigned, and negotiate for a suitable building to use. In some cases this had been done by an advance team. However, I did this for four centres, and was impressed with the co-operation we received. In one case, we approached the sub-district (*desa*) head on a Thursday afternoon, the day before registration was due to start, to ask for a building. Despite this short notice, he came up with the goods, and had the house next to the sub-district office cleaned and furnished in time for registration

to start. Sites included schools, government-owned houses, other empty local government buildings, and trading co-operatives.

Voter education

An important part of a district electoral officer's task was to educate the voters about registration and about voting. This was a part I particularly enjoyed, and in which my ability to speak Tetun (albeit not quite the right dialect) proved very useful. Most teams spoke through interpreters; I also sometimes used interpreters to communicate more effectively with Bunak-speaking audiences in Fatululik, as not everyone there understood Tetun well.

We varied our approach from running pre-planned meetings to just walking through the villages, speaking to whomever was available. Response to both varied enormously, both in terms of the numbers attending, and in terms of how freely they expressed interest and asked questions. At one extreme was a village in Suai Loro where it seemed our team was invisible – nobody acknowledged our presence as we walked through, even though we could clearly see women sitting in the doorways of the traditional houses. At the other extreme was the village of Fatuloro, in the district of Fatululik, where 80 people came to listen to us even though we hadn't called a meeting. We never worked out why the response varied so much; certainly in some villages people were strongly warned by the militias against talking with or listening to UNAMET ('or else ...'), but Fatuloro, where the response was so good, was one such village. Perhaps it is no accident that their village head, a prominent member of the militias, was absent the day we went. The fact that many people were afraid to go and work in their more distant gardens no doubt contributed to the high attendances in some villages.

Prior to registration, our primary messages concerned the categories of people who could vote (namely those born in East Timor, with a parent born in East Timor, or married to someone in one of those two categories), the necessity of registering before one could vote, and what documents they needed to show in order to register.

Between registration and the ballot, the focus shifted to the secrecy of the vote, and the assurance that the UN would stay on in East Timor for a period, regardless of the outcome. Both were important in encouraging people to vote; in our absence they were instructed by government and military leaders to vote for autonomy, and the

militias constantly threatened that if the people voted for independence, all would die. The message was backed up by displays of guns, shooting into the air, and many other forms of intimidation, all done when foreigners were safely out of the way.

Of particular importance to people was the fact that nobody would ever know how their district had voted; it would thus be impossible for revenge to be taken on any one pro-independence village. In retrospect, with the whole territory voting strongly for independence, this fact did not protect them, but it was very important at the time.

Prior to voting we also gave practical information about the technicalities of voting. In a society with high levels of illiteracy, people were most interested in which symbols would be used for autonomy and which for independence – information that only became available just over two weeks before the ballot. Thankfully the pro-autonomy symbol included the red-and-white Indonesian flag, such that people could readily learn which was which. Three days before the ballot I did a walk-through of several villages in Fatululik to assure myself that the messages had got through. One elderly lady, on being shown the two symbols, insisted that she didn't know which was for autonomy, and which for independence. My heart sank, but then she livened up and said, 'But this one is for Timor, and this one for Indonesia?'. In my efforts at presenting all information neutrally and in a politically correct manner (keeping in mind that there were often unsympathetic observers) I had never dared present the issue so baldly, even though I recognised that for many people the Indonesian word *otonomi* ('autonomy') must have been a foreign way of saying 'pro-Indonesia'.

Another issue was how to mark the ballot. At one stage we told people that they would have to mark the ballot with a pen or pencil. This led to considerable unease, and to some humorous sessions in which practise proved that even the elderly *could* in fact draw an 'X' inside a box. Nevertheless it was a great relief when, a few days before the ballot, we were able to tell people that they could punch a hole in the symbol of their choice, just as they had done in the recent Indonesian general elections.

Registration

Registration of voters took place over 22 consecutive days. Each day we were required to be at our offices from 7.00 am to 4.00 pm.

Although some centres remained busy for most of this time, in many it was very quiet for the last week or more. In Fatululik we managed to register 240 people on our busiest day; in Beco the maximum was only about half that, as most registrations were less straightforward.

People born in East Timor needed two documents in order to register. A common combination was an identity card (with photo) and a document from the Catholic church which stated the names of their parents, birth place, and baptism details. The need for these papers led to a document-producing binge, both in local government offices and in the church. It was not unusual for people to drop by the sub-district (*desa*) office to collect their new temporary identity card, and then to go directly to the UNAMET office to register.

Each person was asked their name, place of birth, and place of residence. They then had to show their documents to prove this, before being issued with a registration card. In most cases this was a straightforward matter. There were, however, many mismatches between documents. A common one in Beco (but not in Fatululik, for some reason) was that the two documents shown by the voter had different 'family names'. The fact is that the name which we called a 'family name' could be inherited from a variety of sources, including one's mother, father or one of the godparents. It was not at all uncommon for one of the documents to use the mother's name, and another the name of the godmother. One elderly lady in Fatululik had got someone to write her so-called 'family name' down so that she could pass it to me; clearly it was not a name she ever used.

Another common discrepancy was in birth date, with ages according to the two documents differing by up to 20 years! In practise, age was only an issue if the person was possibly under the minimum age of 17. I saw four cases in which the person was under 17 according to one document, and over 17 according to another. Deciding which one to believe was a problem in such cases. Denying people registration because they were marginally too young was always sad, especially as in most cases the young people didn't seem to realise that they were not yet 17, and at least one was already a wife and mother.

Illiteracy was very high, with the result that most people were unaware of the discrepancies between their documents. However, some younger literate people in Beco recognised the problems, and took it into their own hands to white-out the differences and type the 'correct' name (or age, or whatever) over the top. I don't know how

well I convinced them that this was not a good policy, and that they should tell their friends not to do this!

One phenomenon that surprised me was that brand new documents issued by one of the *desa* heads in Fatululik invariably had dates on them that were 12-18 months old. On being questioned about this, he replied that the district (*camat*) head had told him to put old dates on them. From then on he dated his new documents with dates that were six months or so in the future ...

The astonishing thing to me was that virtually everyone turned up with two acceptable documents. This was true even for people who had walked for five hours from villages which were off the road and which the Indonesian police consequently did not want us to visit for security reasons. Clearly, people other than UNAMET were passing the news around in time for people to act on it. One such person was Father Hilario, the senior Catholic priest in Suai. Each week he would speak about the popular consultation after mass, at various times telling people what they needed to do, encouraging them to resist intimidation and vote according to their conscience, and urging the winning side to treat the losing side well.

At Fatululik, which is right on the border with West Timor, we had expected to get a significant number of West Timorese people attempting to register as if they were East Timorese. In the end it seems this did happen, but even the most pessimistic of local informants judged the false registrations to be no more than five per cent of the total. The 'false' papers were genuine documents produced by the sub-district (*desa*) heads, but giving false information. I later heard that both these men were sorry for having issued such documents; one said he had refused twice to give documents to West Timorese, but had succumbed when the militias stood over him until he did it.

As time wore on, we had more and more time in which we had to be present at the registration site, but had nothing to do. At Beco, we always had an Indonesian policeman on guard outside the school, sometimes aided by the local military man. The policeman was a pleasant West Timorese man who was supposed to protect us from attack. He also effectively 'protected' us from anyone who might want to come and talk about the intimidation that was going on in Beco ... In Fatululik, we managed to avoid having an Indonesian policeman on guard, and more often had people come to visit, even though we were within easy sight of the militia headquarters up the

road. Here we got to hear complaints of pro-autonomy pressure applied in many ways, requests for help with practical matters like the improvement of the road and the provision of teachers, and the number and distribution of guns. Nevertheless, there were many light-hearted times too, telling 'horror stories', listening to music cassettes, or playing chess with the doctor when he came to visit.

As time went on it became clear that, as in the rest of East Timor, virtually every eligible person who could possibly make it to the registration site had registered to vote. The first few days of registration in both Beco and Fatululik had been chaos, as everyone pushed to get in. Young couples walked five hours each way with infants; old people also walked that far. Some must have walked on empty stomachs – at least one woman who fainted while waiting to register at Fatululik turned out to have walked two to three hours without any breakfast. At Fatululik I was struck by how well dressed most people were, turning up in their Sunday best. This was especially evident one day when some students turned up to collect elderly and infirm people in a truck and bring them in to register. Even people such as militia and government heads, who had previously threatened people that they must not register, themselves turned up and joined the queues (or rather, the crush!). Nevertheless, there were people who were disenfranchised by the requirement (a non-negotiable part of the 5 May Agreement) that people turn up in person to register and to vote, particularly as there was no public transport in Fatululik, some very rough roads, and extremely few vehicles.

The ballot

To run the ballot at Fatululik, it was determined that we needed eleven local staff. Some of these were selected from a list of available people prepared by the office of the *Bupati* ('governor') of Covalima; however about half the people on this list were ineligible to work for UNAMET because they were members of the pro-autonomy party FPDK (which was furthermore strongly connected to the militia). Most of the other staff were mature literate people who had held paying jobs (as opposed to being subsistence farmers). As it turns out, all were men. This was perhaps just as well, since as soon as their appointment became known, all started to receive death threats from militiamen, reinforced by shots (usually in the air) and rocks being

thrown at their homes. Most spent a few days sleeping in the jungles at night, while spending the days in their villages. However, all ended up running away to Suai, six hours' walk away, either joining the 2500 refugees in the church, or joining the ranks of some 3500 refugees who were staying with family or friends in the town. When we reported one instance of this to the Fatululik police, we were duly assured that it was merely a problem between brothers, with no political connotations.

As the ballot day approached all our local staff insisted that they were committed to returning to Fatululik to help run the ballot. In this we were fortunate, as local staff at some other centres succumbed to very strong pressure to resign. Nevertheless, we appointed two more people (including a woman this time) in case some wouldn't make it back. Fortunately all reported for work by the evening before the vote. Most had in fact been driven back from Suai by the head of the Fatululik militia (who was, incidentally, also a member of the Covalima parliament). This man had been absent from Fatululik when his members had threatened the UNAMET local staff. Over the few days preceding the ballot, he had participated in reconciliation meetings organised by the Catholic church, and he told us he had promised Bishop Belo to behave well towards our staff.

Since voting was to start at 6.30 am, and our preparatory work had to start at 5.30 am, we spent the afternoon before setting up at the polling site, and slept there overnight. Dinner that evening was a simple but pleasant one hosted by our police guards. In return they thoroughly enjoyed inspecting and devouring one of our ration packs, which we had brought as there were at the time no shops, eating houses or even markets at Fatululik.

We weren't the only people to arrive the evening before. Over the course of the afternoon and evening, people from more distant villages started arriving to spend the night with friends. Two old women who were rubbing their aching legs that afternoon after a two-hour walk up the hill explained to me: 'We knew we couldn't make it up here tomorrow, so decided to come today.'

By 6.30 am on the day of the ballot, the local staff had voted and we were ready for the crowd who had gathered on the hillside in the early morning sun. We had agreed that the first ones to vote would be the East Timorese police and military (out of uniform) and any other men who had been appointed by their village heads to stand

guard duty at their villages (as many people had expressed concern that their cattle and goods might disappear over the border into West Timor if their villages were left empty and unguarded). The local staff had built a nice bamboo fence to separate the people into two queues. This was, however, rendered useless within five minutes as old women pushed under it, and others climbed through it. The crush was enormous! Our nicely planned queue control system soon degenerated to some strong men standing either side of the door with a pole between them, letting people through one at a time. (Seeing orderly queues in Dili on TV later filled me with amazement!) By 11.30 am virtually everyone had voted; in the afternoon only one person turned up – a sick but very determined man brought in on the back of a motorbike. Voter turn-out in Fatululik was as impressive as it was elsewhere in East Timor; only ten people out of a total of about 880 failed to turn up, and most of these were known to be ill.

At 4.00 pm we were finally free to do the necessary paperwork and return to Suai with the ballot boxes. We were accompanied by a police escort of half a dozen fully-armed men sitting on back-to-back benches on the back of an open police utility. It was certainly good to hand the ballot boxes on to our supervisors at the end of the day. I was amazed at how exhausted I was!

All the horrors that have occurred since the ballot only serve to emphasise the courage of the East Timorese people as they turned up to vote for what they wanted in the face of constant threats. May they yet receive their heart's desire, along with the peace required to enjoy it.