

Indonesia & East Timor News Updates - May 24, 2017

Wednesday 18 October 2017 (Date first published: 24 May 2017).

Contents

- [New police taskforce to \(...\)](#)
- [Raid on alleged gay sex \(...\)](#)
- [Gay rights in Indonesia \(...\)](#)
- [Don't meddle in Ahok's blasphem](#)
- [Lower court ready to submit](#)
- [Police turn to Rizieq's \(...\)](#)
- [The female Muslim comic \(...\)](#)
- [Luhut warns governor-elect not](#)
- [Indonesia: Jokowi approves](#)
- [Many challenges await new](#)
- [Fifteen years of freedom \(...\)](#)
- [From guerrilla fighter to](#)

- * New police taskforce to target Indonesian gays
- * Raid on alleged gay sex party not related to LGBT issues: Police
- * Gay rights in Indonesia 'ongoing and real concern': Foreign Minister Gerry Brownlee
- * Don't meddle in Ahok's blasphemy case, VP tells UN
- * Lower court ready to submit Ahok's case dossier to high court
- * Police turn to Rizieq's family to persuade him to return to Indonesia
- * The female Muslim comic standing up to extremism in Indonesia
- * Luhut warns governor-elect not to stop Jakarta Bay reclamation
- * Indonesia: Jokowi approves two-year extension of forest moratorium
- * Many challenges await new Timor-Leste president
- * Fifteen years of freedom for Timor-Leste
- * From guerrilla fighter to president: Francisco Guterres' plans to rebuild Timor-Leste

New police taskforce to target Indonesian gays

Reuters - May 24, 2017

Tom Allard and Stefano Reinard, Jakarta — Police in Indonesia's most populous province plan to deploy a taskforce to investigate lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) activity, a move likely to fuel concerns of a widening crackdown on the community in the Muslim-majority country.

West Java police chief Anton Charliyan disclosed the plan on Tuesday as two gay men in the province of Aceh were publicly flogged, and days after police raided a gay club in Jakarta and distributed photos of suspects to the media.

With the exception of Aceh, homosexuality is legal in Indonesia. Activists say, however, that police targeting of consensual gay sex has shone a light on discrimination and harassment in the world's third-largest democracy.

Indonesia's reputation for tolerance is already under scrutiny after Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Christian, was sentenced this month to two years in prison for blasphemy.

Responding to Sunday's Jakarta raid, Charliyan told reporters in Bandung, the capital of West Java, a province with a population of about 47 million, that LGBT people suffered a "disease of the body and soul".

He called on the public to report their activities. "I hope there are no followers in West Java, no gay or LGBT lifestyle or tradition, Charliyan said. "If there's anyone following it, they will face the law and heavy social sanctions. They will not be accepted in society."

'Morals police'

A leading LGBT activist slammed his remarks, which were confirmed in a recording provided to Reuters by journalists present when Charliyan spoke on Tuesday.

"Police have a mandate to follow the law. They are not the morals police," said Yuli Rustinawati, chairperson of Arus Pelangi, an Indonesian LGBT activist organization.

In remarks on Wednesday, Charliyan said the police "taskforce" would include intelligence specialists and was particularly concerned with disrupting "secret parties", the Detik news portal reported.

A national spokesman for the police, Setyo Wasisto, said the approach in West Java did not reflect a national strategy. "It is enough for us to handle it as we do regularly," he said.

Charliyan's comments follow a spate of high-profile police actions against gay clubs and parties just as the country's Constitutional Court is due to rule on a petition to outlaw homosexuality and adultery.

On Sunday, police detained 141 men and released photos of some of them in varying states of undress to the media, revealing many of their identities. Only 10 of the men have been declared suspects, five remain under investigation and 126 were released.

The police said the photos were released due to "procedural errors", the Jakarta Post reported. Rustinawati at Arus Pelangi said, however, the release of the images was part of a police pattern of publicly shaming of gay people.

Named and shamed

The two Acehnese men, caned 82 times each on Tuesday, were punished in front of a crowd of more than 1,000. Semi-autonomous Aceh province is governed by sharia Islamic law.

Earlier, a video of the men, naked and distressed as they were apprehended by sharia police, was released and viewed widely on social media.

In Indonesia's second-largest city of Surabaya in East Java, 14 gay men were arrested, tested for HIV and the results made public, Indonesian media reported. "The police also release data — names and addresses," said Rustinawati. "It's humiliating and it puts LGBT people in danger."

On Tuesday, North Jakarta police chief Dwiyono, who like many Indonesians has only one name, took journalists through the gay club raided on Sunday. As they climbed three floors, he pointed out a gym, a communal jacuzzi used for "striptease" and a cluster of cubicles for sex.

"This door can only be opened if you pay 185,000 rupiah (\$14) to the receptionist," he said. "In here, there's no change room, you just tear off your clothes and use a towel."

Public disapproval

Indonesian President Joko Widodo last year gave qualified support for the gay community, telling the BBC that "there should be no discrimination against anyone", before noting that homosexuality is not popular in his country.

However, his defense minister, Ryamizard Ryacudu, suggested that homosexuality was a national security threat and part of a "proxy war" waged against Indonesia by foreign states.

A Pew Research Center poll in 2013 found 93 percent of respondents in Indonesia disagreed that "society should accept homosexuality".

Indonesia's Islamist groups have long called for the criminalization of gay sex. The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), the vigilante group that led huge rallies against the now-convicted Jakarta governor, has cooperated with police in curbing alleged vice for more than a decade.

(Additional reporting by Agustinus Beo Da Costa, Gayatri Suroyo and Fransiska Nangoy; Editing by John Chalmers and Bill Tarrant)

Source:

<http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCAKBN18K10A-OCATP?rpc=401&feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews&rpc=401&sp=true>

Raid on alleged gay sex party not related to LGBT issues: Police

Jakarta Post - May 23, 2017

Jakarta — The National Police have said a raid conducted by the North Jakarta Police on an alleged gay sex party at a gym in Kelapa Gading, North Jakarta, on Sunday, during which they arrested 141 men, has nothing to do with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) related issues. The raid was conducted primarily on concerns about indecency, they said.

"Anyone exhibiting 'pornography actions' will be arrested," National Police spokesperson Brig. Gen. Rikwanto told journalists on Tuesday. "The fact that those arrested are gay males is a coincidence," he went on.

The arrests came in the spotlight after photographs of the arrested men, who were all naked, were

leaked and went viral on social media on Monday.

Rikwanto further said the police were the investigating organizers of the event to see whether they had organized similar events in the past.

“Four organizers arranged the party. People came and paid money to participate in the event, during which the ‘pornographic actions’ happened,” Rikwanto said.

The police earlier stated that the 141 men were arrested and charged under the 2008 Pornography Law, articles 4 (2) and 30, which stipulate punishment for parties guilty of providing “pornographic” services. (hol/ebf)

Source:

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/05/23/raid-on-alleged-gay-sex-party-not-related-to-lgbt-issues-police.html>

Gay rights in Indonesia ‘ongoing and real concern’: Foreign Minister Gerry Brownlee

NZ Herald - May 24, 2017

Nicholas Jones — Foreign Minister Gerry Brownlee says gay rights in Indonesia are an “ongoing and real concern” after the public caning of two young men allegedly caught having sex.

His comments come as Australia raises “serious concerns” with Indonesia about the caning in Aceh province, and a cross-party group of New Zealand MPs seek a meeting with the Indonesian Ambassador.

Gay sex is not illegal in most of Indonesia but is in the Aceh province, which exercises Islamic law.

A group of vigilantes entered private accommodation in March and allegedly found the two men, aged 20 and 23, together. The men have now been caned 83 times each in front of a mosque, as a large crowd cheered and filmed on mobile phones.

Brownlee said the situation facing gay and lesbian people in Indonesia was an ongoing and real concern, particularly in provinces such as Aceh.

“The New Zealand Embassy in Jakarta is in regular contact with Indonesian human rights advocacy groups, which seek to raise the profile of human rights abuses and to support gay and lesbian communities affected by abuse,” Brownlee said.

“This includes a recent visit to Aceh where diplomatic staff spoke to several civil society groups on the ground. The New Zealand Embassy will endeavour to undertake regular visits to Aceh in the future to monitor the situation as well as having discussions with leading lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and Intersex groups based in Jakarta.” I assure you that the New Zealand Government will continue to advocate universal access to human rights, in New Zealand and overseas, and we will continue to emphasise that message in our interactions with the Indonesian national and provincial governments.” Green MP Jan Logie, a member of the Rainbow NZ Parliamentary Network,

a cross-party group of MPs, said the case in Aceh province was disturbing and a direct condemnation was needed. The network will seek a meeting with the Indonesian Ambassador. "It feels particularly frightening at the moment on the back of the death camps being set up in Chechnya. And I think there really needs to be a strong response in the international community to protect the lives and rights of our LGBTI people in every country in the world," Logie said.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has raised "serious concerns" with Indonesia about the Aceh caning, her office told media yesterday.

Amnesty International has condemned the caning, saying it may amount to torture and was a "cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment". Aceh has become increasingly conservative and passed strict laws against homosexuality in 2014.

In April the Rainbow NZ Parliamentary Network wrote to then Foreign Minister Murray McCully urging him to condemn violence against gay men in Chechnya, and to ask Russia to investigate the detention and alleged murders of men perceived to be gay.

The group includes National MP Paul Foster-Bell, Act Party leader David Seymour, Labour MP Louisa Wall and Logie.

[Nicholas Jones is a New Zealand Herald political reporter.]

Source: http://www.nzherald.co.nz/politics/news/article.cfm?c_id=280&objectid=11862170

Don't meddle in Ahok's blasphemy case, VP tells UN

Jakarta Post - May 24, 2017

Jakarta — Vice President Jusuf Kalla has asked the United Nations not to interfere with Indonesia's judiciary system in relation to the recent conviction of non-active Jakarta governor Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama, who was sentenced to two years in prison for blasphemy.

The statement was a response to criticism from UN experts, who had urged Indonesia to overturn Ahok's sentence on appeal or grant Ahok clemency to be released from prison.

"They cannot interfere with our home affairs, our law [...] Similarly, we can't interfere with the legal affairs of Malaysia or the United States," Kalla said on Tuesday as quoted by [kompas.com](#).

He expressed concerns that the experts' statement would only exacerbate already heightened tensions.

When asked about Ahok's decision to withdraw his appeal against the verdict, Kalla said that it was Ahok's right to do so, which must be respected.

Reuters reported on Monday that three UN experts had released a joint statement saying Ahok's sentence would serve as a setback for the Indonesian government.

Ahok was declared guilty on May 9 by a panel of judges at the North Jakarta District Court, who

sentenced him to two years in prison. His conviction and detention grabbed both national and international attention, with support growing for the Christian non-active governor of Chinese descent. (hol/rin)

Source:

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/05/24/dont-meddle-in-ahoks-blasphemy-case-vp-tells-un.html>

Lower court ready to submit Ahok's case dossier to high court

Jakarta Post - May 24, 2017

Jakarta — North Jakarta District Court is set to submit on Wednesday the case dossier of Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama to the Jakarta High Court as part of an appeals process for the non-active Jakarta governor’s two-year prison sentence, according to North Jakarta District Court spokesman Hasoloan Sianturi.

Included in the dossier are the police’s interrogation report, trial reports and documents submitted by prosecutors and lawyers throughout the trial, kompas.com reported.

The prosecutors appealed against the court’s decision on May 15 to sentence Ahok to two years in prison for blasphemy.

That sentence was harsher than the request made by prosecutors, who only asked for two years’ probation in the lesser charge of inciting hatred towards clergymen, as stipulated under Article 156 of the Criminal Code.

Meanwhile, Ahok has withdrawn his own appeal, saying it was for the “good of the public.” (cal)

Source:

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/05/24/lower-court-ready-to-submit-ahoks-case-dossier-to-high-court.html>

Police turn to Rizieq's family to persuade him to return to Indonesia

Jakarta Post - May 24, 2017

Jakarta — The Jakarta Police have asked the family of Islam Defenders Front (FPI) firebrand leader Rizieq Shihab to persuade him to return to Indonesia from Saudi Arabia to help in the investigation of a pornography case.

The police want to question Rizieq as a witness in a pornography case in which he and treason

suspect Firza Husein allegedly engaged in a steamy WhatsApp conversation.

“We really hope [his family] will talk him into returning home,” Jakarta Police spokesman Sr. Comr. Argo Yuwono said on Tuesday as reported by kompas.com.

Rizieq has ignored two police summonses for questioning in the case. The police claim he is in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. His lawyer said Rizieq and his family flew to Saudi Arabia on April 27 on the umrah (minor haj).

Rizieq previously claimed he had been framed in the case and that he would follow legal procedure once the police caught the perpetrator behind the alleged WhatsApp chat.

Source:

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/05/24/police-turn-to-rizieqs-family-to-persuade-him-to-return-to-indonesia.html>

The female Muslim comic standing up to extremism in Indonesia

Straits Times - May 24, 2017

Jakarta (AFP) — Wearing a red hijab and all-encompassing gown, Sakdiyah Maruf cuts an unusual figure in a dark, smokey Jakarta bar as she reels off taboo-breaking jokes to laughter from a rapt audience.

She is a rare character in Indonesia — a female Muslim stand-up using humour to challenge prejudice against women and rising religious intolerance.

Despite resistance from those who believe a woman’s place is not on stage cracking jokes, even within her own family, the 34-year-old has forged ahead and is winning fans at home and abroad.

In the country with the world’s biggest Muslim population, she does not shy away from sensitive subjects. Her jokes touch on topics ranging from Jakarta’s recent religiously-charged election — which saw the Christian incumbent ousted by a Muslim — to sex and alcohol.

“Hijab, niqab, burqa — it saves you from a bad hair day,” she said to laughter from the crowd in the Indonesian capital, a typical gag that gently pokes fun at her own religious customs.

Maruf jokes about how women were not allowed to attend public events in the small, conservative community on Java island where she grew up, and that she is seeking to be more progressive by trying “to have sex even though I am married”.

For the slight, unassuming lady, comedy is a playful form of resistance to a creeping conservatism she believes is eroding the rights of women in her homeland.

Indonesia has long been praised for its inclusive brand of Islam but this reputation has been tarnished by a rise in attacks on minorities and the growing influence of a vocal hardline fringe.

The comedian sees an alarming trend of “more rigid and conservative practices of religion” which

she believes tend to marginalise women, and is particularly concerned about issues including early marriage and domestic violence.

For Maruf, humour is the perfect weapon to tackle such trends. “The message can be very aggressive but it can be delivered in a very subtle way,” she told AFP. “You speak to people’s hearts instead of only their minds.”.

‘Are you for real?’

Maruf comes from a traditional family in the provincial Javanese town of Pekalongan, an unlikely background for a witty, worldly-wise stand-up.

She became interested in comedy at an early age by watching US sitcoms such as Roseanne and Full House, a love that she carried with her to university, where she started performing stand-up in 2009.

Depending on the audience she will either perform in English — which she studied at university — or the main Indonesian language of Bahasa.

Sakdiyah Maruf still has a day job working as an interpreter at conferences, but regularly performs in comedy clubs and nights in Jakarta, where she lives.

In the early days, the comic would lie to her parents when she performed at university or headed into Jakarta for shows, believing they would disapprove, but as she became successful it was far harder to conceal the truth.

She says she has managed to reach a kind of uneasy truce with her family. “We have disagreements sometimes, but they are cool with it,” she explained.

But the greatest resistance has come from conservatives who don’t think Muslim women should be comedians at all. “One woman came up to me after a show and said ‘are you for real, are you wearing this hijab for real?’,” she recalled.

Still, Maruf has not been put off and her irreverent brand of humour has won her fans outside Indonesia. In 2015 she was awarded the Vaclav Havel International Prize for Creative Dissent established by the New York-based Human Rights Foundation and last year took part in a BBC-run global stand-up jam.

Her humour seems more relevant than ever as concerns escalate about declining religious freedoms in Indonesia after the jailing this month of Jakarta’s Christian governor for blasphemy, a verdict that sparked criticism inside the country and abroad.

But Maruf remains confident that Indonesia will remain a tolerant country — not least because a devout Muslim woman like herself can still get up on stage and crack jokes.

She said: “If you can write ‘Indonesian conservative Muslim female stand-up’ in one sentence, why be so pessimistic?”

Source:

<http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/the-female-muslim-comic-standing-up-to-extremism-in-indonesia>

Luhut warns governor-elect not to stop Jakarta Bay reclamation

Jakarta Post - May 23, 2017

Jakarta — Maritime Coordinating Minister Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan has warned Jakarta Governor-elect Anies Rasyid Baswedan over the latter's plan to stop the Jakarta Bay reclamation project, saying the Jakarta administration may face a legal challenge from developers.

The administration may have to pay compensation to the developers, he added. "This is a state that is based on law. They will surely file a lawsuit," said Luhut, commenting on the termination of the project as promised by Anies during the election campaign.

Reclamation in Jakarta Bay has been planned since the 1990s and is based on a 1995 presidential decree issued by the late president Soeharto, which formed the legal basis for the project.

According to kompas.com, from the total 17 isles planned to be constructed, developers had finished constructing Isles C, D, K and N, while isle G remained under construction.

Isle C and D were constructed by PT Kapuk Naga Indah, a subsidiary of property developer PT Agung Sedayu Group. Isle K was developed by PT Pembangunan Jaya and Isle N was developed by state-owned port operator PT Pelindo II.

Meanwhile, Isle G was constructed by PT Muara Wisesa Samudera, a subsidiary of another privately — owned property giant PT Agung Podomoro Land.

Anies' camp, however, said the Jakarta city administration would not give compensation to the developers because the isles were not constructed on the basis of the original plans, while properties on the isles were constructed without permits.

"If you do something without a legal basis, you have no right to ask compensation," said Marco Kusumawijaya, a team member of Anies and his running mate Sandiaga Uno. (bbn)

Source:

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/05/23/luhut-warns-governor-elect-not-to-stop-jakarta-bay-reclamation.html>

Indonesia: Jokowi approves two-year extension of forest moratorium

Asia Correspondent - May 24, 2017

Indonesian President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo has approved a two-year extension to a moratorium on issuing new licences to use land designated as primary forest and peatland, the environment and

forestry minister said on Wednesday.

This is the third extension of the moratorium, which was established in 2011 under the previous administration of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, in an effort to reduce emissions from fires caused by deforestation.

The previous extension expired on May 20 and the latest rollover would give authorities more time to pin down regulations on forest use, environment and forestry minister Siti Nurbaya Bakar said in a text message.

“While we are gathering enough material to decide on licensing and primary forest and peatland governance, the presidential instruction is extended for now,” Siti Nurbaya told Reuters.

By November 2016, the government’s forest moratorium covered an area of more than 66 million hectares (163 million acres).

Indonesia is prone to outbreaks of forest fires during dry seasons, often blamed on the draining of peatland forests and land clearance for agriculture.

The resulting choking smoke often blows across to neighbouring countries such as Singapore and Malaysia, slashing visibility and causing a health hazard.

There were massive forest fires in 2015, affecting mainly the island of Sumatra and Kalimantan, the Indonesian portion of Borneo island. The World Bank estimated that 2.6 million hectares of land in Indonesia was destroyed at that time, causing US\$16 billion of damage.

Indonesia is the world’s biggest palm oil producer and environmentalists blame much of the forest destruction on land clearance for the crop.

An executive at the Indonesian Palm Oil Association (GAPKI) said he hoped the government would provide more certainty for plantation industries such as palm oil.

“After completing all these (policies), the government has to have a masterplan for national palm oil,” Eddy Martono of GAPKI said. “The reality now is Indonesian palm oil has become an economic backbone.” — Reuters

Source:

<https://asiancorrespondent.com/2017/05/indonesia-jokowi-approves-two-year-extension-forest-moratorium/>

Many challenges await new Timor-Leste president

UCA News - May 24, 2017

Thomas Ora, Dili — Timor Leste’s new president Francisco Guterres inherits a nation beset by critical problems, including poor education, high employment, and abject poverty.

During a 12-hour inauguration ceremony in the capital Dili on May 20, Guterres popularly known as

Lu-Olo vowed to overcome these problems, pursue sustainable development and promote national unity.

In his inaugural speech Lu-Olo, who became Timor-Leste's fourth president - succeeding Taur Matan Ruak - called for the people of Timor-Leste to unite and work to improve their lives.

"Now 15 years after independence, we are facing difficult challenges to liberate people from poverty," he said. "Let's work together to improve the lives of our people," he added.

Poverty in Timor-Leste is decreasing, according to the government, with the national poverty rate having fallen from 50.4 percent in 2007 to 41.8 percent in 2014.

However, the rate is still high with many people still living without electricity or sanitation, malnutrition, unemployment and poor education.

The new president said the country had come a long way since independence 15 years ago but still had a long way to go. One area urgent concern is the poor standard of education

Luis Ribeiro Goncalves, 40, a teacher at Bazartete High School in Liquica district, west of Dili, said schools in his area and in many other districts are in poor condition, lacking facilities and textbooks. "I hope the new president will pay serious attention to these issues," Goncalves said.

He expressed hope the government would provide more money for education on top of this year's \$26 million increase from \$103 million to \$129 million. Timor-Leste's national budget for 2017 was set at \$1.3 billion.

Another issue facing Lu-Olo is what to do with the country's petroleum fund, which provides 90 percent of the country's annual budget. The fund was set up to help develop the nation from surplus revenue from oil and gas sales that are expected to run dry in the next few years.

During his speech Lu-Olo also said he would establish a demarcation of permanent maritime and land borders, referring to a long-running dispute with Australia over rights to an estimated US\$40 billion oil and gas reserve in the Timor Sea.

However, the new government, according to NGO Lao Hamutuk, needs to reduce its dependency on oil and gas and "develop a non-oil economy, increase domestic revenue and use public funds wisely."

"There is need to capitalize on agriculture and tourism," it said, since the majority of Timor-Leste citizens are farmers. "State budget should be spent more on health, education, agriculture and road construction in rural areas so that farmers can transport their products easily to cities," Adilson da Costa, a Lao Hamutuk researcher said.

Father Julio Crispim Ximenes Belo, head of Dili Diocese's justice and peace commission called for the government not to forget the poor. "The president should push for economic development that does not alienate poor people," Father Belo said.

Although his role is mainly ceremonial, he should be able to create national stability, a condition that enables economic growth, the priest said.

Source: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/many-challenges-await-new-timor-leste-president/79296>

Fifteen years of freedom for Timor-Leste

Asia Times - May 24, 2017

David Hutt — On May 19, as dignitaries gathered in Dili for the inauguration of Timor-Leste's new president, Francisco "Lu-Olo" Guterres, the ceremony had an added significance as the new nation celebrated 15 years of independence from repressive and conflict-plagued Indonesian rule.

"We should be proud of so much that has been done during the last 15 years, but we should be aware that there is still much to be done," Lu-Olo said in his first presidential address.

March's presidential election was the first to take place in Timor-Leste, also known as East Timor, without the presence of international peacekeepers, a significant step for Asia's youngest nation. As the small country transitions from conflict to peace, unmistakable progress has been made.

Timor-Leste now outranks many of its neighbors on international measures of good governance and human rights. In the Economist Intelligence Unit's latest Democracy Index, for instance, Timor-Leste ranked higher than any other Southeast Asian country in 43rd place worldwide.

"Timor-Leste is a modern-day miracle: In 15 years, we have been one of only a handful of fragile states to manage to consolidate peace and sustain development," Agio Pereira, Minister of State and government spokesman, told Asia Times.

Lu-Olo's electoral victory was a vote of confidence in Timor-Leste's previous "unity government", formed in 2015 when Xanana Gusmao, leader of the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT), stepped down as prime minister and allowed Rui Maria de Araujo, a member of the rival Fretilin party, to take his place.

Lu-Olo is the president of Fretilin, formally known as the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor, a former armed group fighting for independence from Indonesian rule. That debilitating conflict took between 200,000 to 300,000 lives, or around one-third of the island nation's population.

Critics contend that consensus politics between the two main parties has intensified corruption and nepotism, as well as massive government misspending and a lack of accountability, without an effective opposition in parliament.

Taur Matan Ruak, a former president who is expected to run in July's parliamentary election on the ticket of the newly-formed People's Liberation Party (PLP), is among the government's detractors. He said to parliament last year that the state was "far too centralized" and "excessively wastes resources, allowing thousands of Timorese to become second class citizens."

The country's political divide in some ways boils down to two different concepts of economic development. The "unity government", which commentators believe Gusmao still controls from behind the scenes, favors large-scale infrastructure projects and high levels of government spending.

Opponents, on the other hand, say not enough is being spent on public services and grassroots

infrastructure and that large state contracts are being doled out to family members of politicians and an entrenched economic elite.

The former path is arguably unsustainable. Since 2004, the country has earned more than US\$18 billion from the Bayu-Undan oil and gas field, the country's largest. The field, however, is expected to run dry as early as 2023.

While there is an estimated US\$16 billion in Timor-Leste's sovereign wealth fund, at current levels of state spending it may also be depleted within the next decade, according to independent industry analysts. Approximately 90% of the country's GDP and budget is derived from oil and gas revenues.

The government still hopes to get a better deal from Australia on the Greater Sunrise oil and gas field, though it's not clear Canberra has any intention of amending the 50%-50% revenue sharing arrangement. The Greater Sunrise field's oil and gas resources have been estimated as high as US\$53 billion.

Even if Timor-Leste gets its way at the negotiating table, which still appears unlikely, it might not be able to reap profits from the field for another six or seven years due to high initial investment costs.

The political differences over how best to develop the nation are rooted in history. Once independence was achieved, the government had to quickly establish a new historical narrative to replace the one imposed by Indonesia. The new nationalism thus predictably centered on the struggle for independence.

But when a new bout of violence spread across the country in 2006, police, army and disaffected veterans of the independence struggle were pitted against one another on political lines, a paroxysm that displaced more than 100,000 Dili residents.

Much of the violence was driven by those who felt they had been left out of the country's new start and denied the expected material rewards of independence. When Gusmao became prime minister in 2007, his government responded to the crisis by what some independent analysts dubbed as "buying peace."

"[It] gave rewards to the surrendering 'petitioners', whose desertions from the army had set the [2006] crisis in motion," the International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based conflict resolution outfit, reported.

"[It] offered cash grants to persuade the displaced to return; funded lavish pensions for disgruntled veterans; and put potential spoilers to work pursuant to lucrative construction contracts."

The government also altered the laws on tendering state contracts. All those that met the government's criteria were automatically awarded contracts, even if they were not cost competitive. A decade on, this practice is still thought to continue to placate dissent.

"As a consequence, corruption has set in," Damien Kingsbury, professor of international politics at Australia's Deakin University, recently wrote. "Government tenders were initially overpriced and companies with close connections to senior government members disproportionately benefitted from government business."

Gusmao also appeased Fretilin general-secretary Mari Alkatari, who was forced to resign as prime minister in 2006, by making him the president of the Special Administrative Region of Oecusse, a coastal enclave in the country's western region. The government provides ample funds to run the

special economic zone.

“Brother [Gusmao] takes care of Timor while brother [Alkatari] takes care of Oecusse,” former president Ruak said last year.

The government grasps the risks of enduring divisions. In 2015, it implemented an initiative known “National Mourning-End”, which, according to commentators, maintained that while the past won’t be forgotten, Timor-Leste needs to look ahead for the sake of national development.

That future faces demographic challenges. Between 1999 and 2002, Timor-Leste had one of the world’s highest birth rates with around seven births per mother. As a result, almost 60% of the population is currently below the age of 25. With youth unemployment now around 25%, the government is under heavy pressure to create new jobs.

Low corporate tax rates and other incentives have lured some new foreign investments in construction, manufacturing and tourism. But political stability and strong state spending has not yet sparked a virtuous cycle of private sector-led investment and job creation.

The unity government’s version of stability will be tested in July’s parliamentary election. During his presidential campaign, Lu-Olo won the backing of the CNRT, which was thought to have swung the vote in his favor given that he only received around 30% of votes in the 2007 and 2012 presidential elections.

Second placed Antonio da Conceicao — backed by the Democratic Party (DP) and the PLP, both opposed to the “unity government” — secured almost 30% of the vote. Some analysts anticipate that result could provide the two opposition parties a solid launch pad into July’s parliamentary election.

Although neither party is expected to win a parliamentary majority, there are suggestions they could win enough to ensure Timor-Leste once again has a functioning opposition in parliament and a heartier debate on the country’s political direction and economic model.

Source: <http://www.atimes.com/article/fifteen-years-freedom-timor-leste/>

From guerrilla fighter to president: Francisco Guterres’ plans to rebuild Timor-Leste

SBS News - May 24, 2017

Rhiannon Elston — In Timor-Leste’s western enclave of Oecusse, change is coming fast. Reuban Landos and his family run a tiny village store on the edge of a paddy field.

Vast mountains decorate the horizon, but soon the landscape will have another defining feature — a 56-room hotel with six presidential suites is under construction nearby.

Mr Landos supports the development. “It’s good for Oecusse Timorese because they didn’t have the work,” he said. “Now they all have work.”

Timor-Leste’s new President, former guerrilla fighter Francisco “Lu Olo” Guterres, plans to continue

a government strategy of spending on infrastructure, in the hope of attracting tourism and foreign investment.

"We need to have more investment in infrastructure, there is no point bringing tourists to Timor-Leste without more infrastructure," he told SBS World News through a translator.

The new President takes the helm of a country that has made tremendous improvements to development since independence in 2002. But he inherits a dilemma: An economy heavily reliant on oil and gas, and reserves that may run out within a decade.

Mr Guterres is used to fighting for his country, and says he is ready to do it again. "Even though I spent 24 years in the jungle fighting for my country, I considered that it wasn't completed," he said. "There is much more to be done."

Oecusse, where Portuguese settlers first landed in Timor, is cut off from the rest of the country, surrounded by coast and the Indonesian border. It's the poorest region in the country. Most of the population survives off subsistence farming, pulling water from wells.

The Timorese government plans to spend \$400 million over five years to turn the 815 square-kilometre enclave into a small city, hoping to create a hub for tourism and foreign investment.

Former prime minister Mari Alkatiri is now the head of the Oecusse Special Economic Zone, in charge of development. "The triangle for development is tourism, financial centre and agribusiness industries," he said.

It's a lofty plan that would see an international airport replace the unpaved airstrip that currently serves the region.

An irrigation project has just been completed. New roads, a health clinic and a monument depicting the Portuguese landing are already under construction, while a water park features in longer-term plans.

Regional secretary Arsenio Bano says projects to improve the lives of Oecusse residents are happening alongside development. "We combine the infrastructure construction with the development of agriculture, health and education," he said.

But Charlie Scheiner, from Dili-based think tank La'o Hamutuk, questions the government's priorities. "It's unfortunate that the government focuses on things like institutions, which is important, but it doesn't improve daily lives," he said.

He believes there should be more weight given to areas such as sanitation, education and child nutrition. "This is a very young country and it has tremendous challenges," he said. "We think investing in things that will make people's lives better in the short-term will also help development in the long term."

President Guterres says he will "look into" priorities but will continue to support spending on infrastructure. "The observers do not believe in the capacity of us in developing our country," he said. "We know that we've committed some failures and we learn from our experience."

With a wry smile he adds that the government doesn't draw on its considerable oil money investments without careful consideration. "We don't withdraw money from the petroleum fund to shop for vegetables," he said.

But for Mr Alkatiri, in charge of the staggering Oecusse project, optimism overrides cautious analysis.

He insists there is data to show spending in the region will offer a return for the people of Timor-Leste, but he doesn't know the figures by heart. "I'm not an economist," he said. "I don't use excel paper. I'm using my feeling."

The new President will lead Timor-Leste at a critical juncture. Economic change is inevitable — and the decisions made from here could make all the difference to a young nation's future.

[Rhannon Elston travelled to Dili at the invitation of the government of Timor-Leste.]

*

<http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2017/05/24/guerrilla-fighter-president-francisco-guterres-plans-rebuild-timor-leste>

P.S.

* Asia Pacific Solidarity Network (APSN)

Email: apsn@asia-pacific-solidarity.net

Web: <http://www.asia-pacific-solidarity.net>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/asiapacificsolidaritynet>