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Elections in Timor-Leste

July 7 Parliamentary Elections

Frequently Asked Questions

Europe and Asia

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

1850 K Street, NW | Fifth Floor | Washington, DC 20006 | www.IFES.org

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Frequently Asked Questions

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Disclosure:
These FAQs reflect decisions made by the Timor-Leste elections authorities as of July 3, 2012, to the best of our knowledge. This document does not represent any IFES policy or technical recommendations.

Who will the Timorese elect on July 7, 2012?

The people of Timor-Leste (East Timor) will vote in an entirely new parliament on July 7, 2012. Citizens will cast ballots for all 65 members of the unicameral national parliament; one term is for five-years. The winning party of this election will get control of government or form a ruling government through coalitions.

Members of parliament subsequently elect the prime minister, who serves as head of government. Timor-Leste also has a president who is elected every five years and serves as head of state. The president's role is largely ceremonial, but he/she has the power to veto certain types of legislation. The most recent presidential election took place over two rounds on March 17 and April 16, 2012.

Why are these elections important?

Due to an outbreak of violence in 2006, the subsequent elections in 2007 were held in a tense – and at times violent – atmosphere. The United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) and the International Stabilization Force (ISF) were deployed to stabilize the country and still maintain a presence. Currently, the UNMIT and the ISF are scheduled to wind down operations, provided the 2012 parliamentary elections are peaceful and a new government attains legitimacy.

The winning party of this election will get to control government or form a ruling government through coalitions. The ruling majority also has a greater influence on who becomes prime minister.

Taur Matan Ruak, elected as president through two rounds of peaceful, well-managed elections in March and April of this year is a former army general who received backing from Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão. The successful conduct and transition of power during the presidential election makes it all the more important that these upcoming parliamentary elections are also held in a fair, peaceful manner.

Some have cautioned that, despite peaceful presidential elections, many of the underlying tensions that existed in 2006 are still present and are open to exploitation in these coming polls.

Who is contesting these elections?

There are 18 official parties and three coalition parties contesting these elections, including the main governing party, the *Congress Nacional da Reconstrucao de Timor* (National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction, CNRT) and the main opposition party, *Frente Revolucionaria de Timor-Leste Independente* (Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor-Leste, FRETILIN).

The CNRT is led by Prime Minister Gusmão, whose government has overseen a 346 percent expansion in public spending since 2008, most notably in the form of popular cash transfers. FRETILIN, on the other hand, benefits from a long history of organization rooted in the Timorese struggle for independence. Both parties hope to win a majority (33 seats) and govern alone. However, given the nature of the

electoral system, this outcome may be unlikely. Most of the parties remain reliant on the influence of candidate personalities rather than issue-based platforms.

Who is eligible to vote?

Timorese citizens aged 17 and older are eligible to vote. As of June 12, 2012, there were 647,814 registered voters. Voting is not compulsory.

Who administers elections in Timor-Leste?

Timor-Leste's two electoral management bodies are the *Secretariado Tecnico da Administracao Eleitoral*, or the Technical Secretariat for Electoral Administration (STAE), and the *Comissao Nacional de Eleicoes*, or the National Election Commission (CNE).

The STAE is a government body organized under the Ministry of State Administration and Territorial Management, whose responsibilities include drafting electoral regulations and codes of conduct; organization of voter registration; and administration of voting. The CNE is an independent body comprised of 15 commissioners who oversee this work, approve statutes prepared by the STAE and handle procedural complaints.

What type of electoral system will be used in these elections?

Timor-Leste uses a closed-list proportional representation system for its national legislative elections. Parties that receive 3 percent or more of the total vote are eligible for seats in parliament.

At least one in every four names on each party list must be of a female candidate.

What are the prospects for free and fair elections?

Several issues from the presidential election remain potential logistical and technical challenges ahead of the July 7 elections and will require redress by the authorities ahead of and during polling.

During the two rounds of presidential elections held in March and April 2012, irregularities arose. Some areas of the country experienced a shortage of ballot papers due to an underestimation of voter turnout. Additionally, poor weather spoiled some ballot papers and complicated logistical arrangements. There were also instances reported regarding the quality of indelible ink and voters using camera phones to photograph marked ballots.

Voters were also required to vote in the *sucos* (local areas) in which they registered, which led some voters to incur significant costs. Despite these issues, international observers praised the conduct of the presidential elections and marked it a step toward peace and democratic consolidation.

What are the likely outcomes of this election?

With 18 parties and three coalition parties contesting these elections and all 65 seats on offer, it is likely a coalition government will be the result, with either FRETILIN or CNRT maintaining a majority. While there has been some discussion about a grand compromise in which FRETILIN and CNRT would agree to share power – given their history, this seems unlikely.

In 2007, following the last parliamentary elections, FRETILIN was unable to form a coalition government despite winning the most votes. Instead, then President Jose Ramos Horta asked the CNRT to form a government after they negotiated effectively with other minority parties to form a coalition –the Alliance with a Parliamentary Majority.

How will election disputes be managed?

Administrative violations during the elections will be handled by the election commission, while criminal violations are handed by the Court of Appeal.

Revisions to the electoral laws passed in 2011 mean that a three-judge panel, constituted during the election period, will hear complaints and improve the responsiveness of the court. The panel will have 48 hours to respond.

The STAE has also worked with political parties to develop codes of conduct that cover peaceful campaigning, respecting freedom of the press, refraining from incitement to violence and resolving disputes through dialogue.

Resources

- Constitution of Timor-Leste ([English](#) | [Bahasa](#))
- Election Law ([English](#) | [Portuguese](#))
- Election Commission, CNE ([English](#) | [Tetum](#) | [Portuguese](#))
- Ministry of State Administration and Territorial Management ([English](#) | [Tetum](#))
- United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste, UNMIT ([English](#))
- International Stabilization Force, ISF ([English](#))