

Warm Welcome Matches the Weather in East Timor

March 4, 2015 | 3:04 AM

What a whirlwind 3 days! Radford Thomas (my North Carolina colleague) and I from the land of cheese and beer, just returned from Herminio's home village of Maliani in the Bobonaro District of East Timor, where we were received as celebrities. It was one of the most interesting experiences of my 56 years of life. It took us 5 hours to arrive over winding and mountainous roads, and probably would have been no more than 2 hours in the U.S. It felt like a NASCAR race must with Herminio behind the wheel. Somehow he managed to avoid hitting about 5000 (not an exaggeration) people, dogs, goats, pigs and chickens all while weaving around an equal number of craters and potholes in the roads. It is one chaotic yet fascinating mass of life here!



After dinner with traditional and organic local food, an overnight stay in Maliani, and breakfast at Herminio's extended family's home, we were hosted by the mountain village of Ritabou where Herminio's sister is the village chief, one of 10 women who are chiefs of the 442 in the country. They gave us a tribal ceremonial welcome complete with smiles, presents (tais which are very colorful tapestries hung around the neck) and translated speeches, before demonstrating local customs and kindly listening to our reciprocal speeches extending our country's friendship and goodwill to the multi-generations present. Herminio

appealed to Middleton (as he and I had previously discussed) to be their Sister City, and I graciously and happily accepted. Next, we toured their sacred house wherein they venerate deceased ancestors starting from the beginning of civilization here many millenia ago. For me, an avid reader of National Geographic, this was taken directly from their pages!

Most of the villagers, especially the children, had never met a white person before, and they lined up to have their pictures taken with us. I felt like a rock star celebrity must, surrounded by adoring fans. We towered over almost all of the villagers, and our pasty white skin paled in comparison to their beautiful brown complexions. It was the most surreal experience of my life!

Although my luggage had not yet arrived after 3 days, I now have gifts of handmade goods from Middleton's Senior Center and numerous pencils and sharpeners from our Tourism Department to bestow upon the village children when Herminio is next able to traverse these country roads. Our gifts however seem relatively paltry compared to the warmth and spirit of a reception of two American public servants unaccustomed to this brand of hospitality.

Learning from History

March 6, 2015 | 12:00 AM

As an amateur historian, I'm a believer in learning from the mistakes of the past. As Radford Thomas and I talk with government and NGO officials in Timor-Leste, it's critical to seek out historical truths from which we can learn as we seek to provide guidance from our nearly 60 years of combined public sector and NGO experience. Following are what I believe are some hard truths in Timor-Leste:

- 1) Portuguese colonialism and oppression lasted here for 460 years (1515-1975), nearly twice as long as slavery's repugnant reign in the U.S.
- 2) Indonesia, with the apparent encouragement of the U.S. government (1975) invaded, obliterated and oppressed the native population for another 24 years (1975-1999) before the resistance movement in Timor-Leste proved successful in reclaiming the nation for the native people. Apparently, the U.S., in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, had a seemingly unfounded concern that the Timorese people would become Communists.
- 3) Indonesia destroyed about 80% of Timor-Leste's assets as their military exited the country due to building international pressure.
- 4) The United Nations intervened to bring some calming of tensions from 1999-2002, providing needed subsistence for the East Timorese, but continuing a culture of dependence nearly 500 years long. Rebuilding from Indonesian devastation has been slow and painful.

5) Timor-Leste's independence in a fledgling democracy has survived 13 years, including major civil unrest in 2006, two assassination attempts upon their president and prime minister within two weeks of each other in 2008, and a global financial collapse in 2008 that has gradually receded.

6) Radford and I are here to provide our experience and guidance on establishing local governance for a people who had not experienced anything but oppression for nearly 500 years. No historical framework exists for support of our mission, and practically no entrepreneurs exist in this country to provide added value to their economy.

7) While Timor-Leste is 93% dependent on oil revenues, those oil reserves are likely to be depleted in as little as 10 years.

8) For capacity building of local government to succeed, the same must occur for sustainable economic development in this young nation so that locally-produced products can be consumed within the country (instead of nearly exclusive dependence upon imports). Furthermore, such products must also be exported to sustain wealth building for future prosperity.

9) Mutually interdependent and sustainable capacity building for local governance and economic development must be inextricably linked.

In my next blog, I will discuss potential solutions in hope that all will learn from what I believe are these hard historical truths.

Catalysts for Change

March 8, 2015 | 12:00 AM

Radford and I have come to believe that our role in Timor-Leste is to bring forth ideas that will serve as catalysts for reform. While we understand that the national government intends to decentralize authority to districts and sucos, we are not yet aware of a plan to fulfill this intent. This coming Tuesday we will be presenting to about 100 government and non-governmental organization organizations, but I don't know if many local officials will be present. Ideally they will be represented in creation of a plan or framework. Otherwise, a top-down process might be destined for failure. We are familiar with such processes in the US wherein a state legislative committee determines, without adequate knowledge of local conditions, how we will implement their well-intentioned, yet misguided directives.

My part of the presentation will focus on the structure of local governments in America; provide information on public records, open meetings, ethics and building code laws from Middleton and Wisconsin; instill the importance of comprehensive planning and seeking input from citizens; and underscore the importance of building capacity at the local level. Such capacity building will only be effective if developed and implemented strategically.

Education and training of local officials will be paramount, whether through existing programs at the national university or through combined initiatives with national government/university representation and assistance from ICMA and university programs in the US, Australia and elsewhere. The key strategic goal should be for the establishment and development of professional management at the district and suco (village) level.

Linked strongly with that goal, should be a companion initiative to spur sustainable economic and community development that capitalizes on existing economic assets. Without a thriving entrepreneurship at the local level, in the long-term local governments will continue to be dependent on central government revenues, which in turn are dependent upon oil reserves that may run their course in as few as 10 years.

In my presentation, I will recommend the social enterprise model for development of cooperatives for producing locally, as well as for export, items that are mostly imported for domestic consumption now. Sadly, East Timor imports many items that they already have in abundance--rice, honey, fruit juice, sea salt and bottled water. If cooperatives could be formed to capitalize on these assets, then entrepreneurship could work in concert with local government to create a better quality of life and future locally-based tax revenues. Additional new cooperatives could focus on solar (abundant sunshine here!) and recycling of waste (also quite abundant), particularly plastic bottles and aluminum cans which are disposed of as trash now.

Undoubtedly, the success of social enterprise would depend upon initiative from the national government working collaboratively with credit unions, banks and of course local government. One such model exists--Letefoho coffee produced by CCT. That company could serve as a role model for the nation with 400 full-time and 3000 seasonal positions.

From the Bottom Up

March 10, 2015 | 11:59 PM

Radford and I presented along with Miguel de Carvalho, Director General for the State Department of Administration, at yesterday's seminar concerning "Local Governance in Timor-Leste", at the Presidential Palace in Dili. During the question and answer session afterward, Charlie Scheiner, an American ex-pat with L'ao Hamatuk (Walking Together) asked a critical question (I paraphrase here) of the panelists: "How can/will Timor-Leste transform its local government from a top-down national approach to a bottom - up system as that in the U. S.?" Both Miguel and I attempted to answer the question, but I doubt that our answers satisfied the concerns of the about 100 participants in the seminar.

With the advantage of 24 hours reflection, I will elaborate on my thoughts here:

1) Although the U.S. has a more bottom-up approach historically, our system of government was borne of a revolution some 239 years ago wherein the colonial structure had allowed for local governance to a much greater degree than had the Portuguese and Indonesian governments over about 485 years in Timor-Leste. From what I can tell, Portuguese and Indonesian colonialism was much more paternal and very little control or local determination was granted to the native population. However, the U.S. colonies had a good deal of local determination, but that local will was curtailed by imposed laws from Great Britain, especially those like the Stamp Act and the provision governing export of tea. I think this historical reality is important when making a comparison.

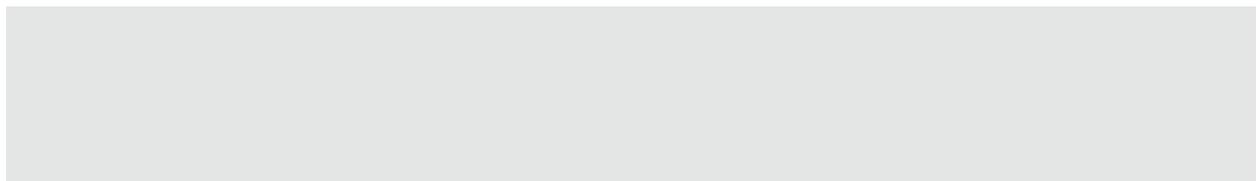
2) The devastation of Timor-Leste by the Indonesian army was about 80%. The U.S. colonies did not suffer nearly as much from its Revolutionary War. Recreating its infrastructure simultaneous with establishing a foothold for democracy at the national level has been daunting enough for Timor-Leste. Devolving responsibility to local government will take time and an effective strategy as I discussed in my last blog.

3) American colonialism prior to independence took root for less than 160 years wherein Timor-Leste's endured for 485. Moreover, British colonialism was directed against European immigrants and not against the native population as in Timor-Leste. A common language, history and racial roots characterized British colonialism. Whereas, the Portuguese imposed their race, religion and form of government over Timor-Leste.

4) I note this history not to apologize for a lack of progress in Timor-Leste, but to better explain its challenges ahead. The government has taken great steps toward expressing its intent for devolution of responsibilities, yet it still needs to fully incorporate local determination into its strategy.

5) One major obstacle to free will and self-determination locally in Timor-Leste will also be the ability to work within the embedded family superstructure of local villages and sacred houses that express historic preferences for familial rule which is entrenched.

6) My hope for Timor-Leste is that the development of local government professional training as well as that of social enterprise locally will bring greater literacy and freedom of social movement within the villages, thereby leading to a better quality of life for all citizens. Patience and enduring resilience, like that exhibited during the Timor-Leste Resistance (during the Indonesian imposition, 1975-1999), will be critical. I know their people have endured much pain, and their reconciliation initiative with Indonesia gives me hope for the future of this fledgling democracy.



Fond Memories & Warm Thoughts of Timor-Leste

March 11, 2015 | 8:38 PM

Memories . . .

Visiting a sacred house and learning the ancient customs in Ritabou while teenage girls chuckled and snapped pictures of us.

Dining and socializing with Herminio's extended family in Maliani with chickens clucking in the next room.

Arriving at an international airport no larger than the municipal airport in Middleton.

Surviving harrowing escapades of our guest drivers while narrowly avoiding thousands of people and critters.

Celebrating our welcome dinner with our host fellows while enjoying a pleasant and bountiful local spread at the home of Benicia and Miguel.

Enjoying fresh grilled fish provided by Angelo and his colleagues while soaking in the sun and warmth of the beach west of Manututo.

Laughing at Radford's stories and Southern colloquialisms.

Meeting Herminio's adorable young children with unique names--Enclave, Excel and Kirana--and Angelo's young son Peter.

Engaging in refreshingly candid discussions with government officials such as Fidelis, Josh, Miguel, Elizario, the entire staff of the Ombudsman's office, facilitated by Gida, and the USAID staff.

Appreciating the linguistic skills of many of our hosts, especially interpreters like Mateus, Matteo and Angelo, who are proficient in Tetum, Indonesian, Portugese, and English.

Kibbitzing with American ex-pats Charlie Scheiner, Jill Sternberg, Hector Hill, Colleen Coy, Dr. Dan Murphy, all with Madison, Wisconsin ties.

Sharing our experiences with U. S. Ambassador Karen Stanton, a sensible and quite approachable fellow Midwesterner, from Michigan.

Serving as American goodwill ambassadors while being the featured speakers on Local Governance in Timor-Leste before an audience of nearly 100 government officials.

Meetings of chance with friendly Aussies and an American woman Heather leading to dinner invitations.

Enthusiastic reception and outstanding demonstrations of hands-on science experiments by Dili primary school students, one with the most radiant smile I've ever seen.

Surprisingly friendly border guards at the Indonesian crossing who posed for pictures with us and an East Timorese guard.

Savoring delicious East Timorese coffee everywhere we turned and visiting CCT production facility for Letefoho coffee.

Tais!! 10 given to each of us. These are the traditional, colorful, hand-woven fabric placed around the neck.

Escaping to Black Rock Restaurant on the ocean with Marco, Radford and Sanco and a few beers.

Reminiscing with the Timor-Leste fellows--Benicia, Herminio, Angelo, Josh, Gida, Mateus (Marco) and Matteo--while enjoying a spectacular dinner oceanfront at Vitorio's, exchanging gifts and saying farewell to these outstanding young leaders of a fledgling democracy.

Dogs, goats, pigs, chickens everywhere, even in Dili . . .