

An Oath for the People of Timor

*Strengthening Unity, Ending Violence and Cherishing Culture through Customary
Timorese Belief Structures*

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A Proposal to Bring to an End the Current Conflicts in East Timor
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1 Guiding Ethos

East Timor as a nation is currently facing its most significant challenge since achieving independence. The origins of the recent civil unrest are complex and multifaceted. However, the result is clear: at this point schisms are emerging in Timorese society that threaten to divide the nation for generations to come. This proposal puts forward a strategy aimed at bringing an end to the conflict and strengthening a sense of national identity in order that the nation as a whole can take stock of what has occurred recently and step back from the brink of a conflict that threatens everyone. This strategy does not, however, pretend to provide comprehensive answers to all of the problems currently facing Timorese society. Instead what is proposed is a means to bring about a cessation to the ongoing violence in order that other processes can be initiated that address outstanding issues of security, justice and resettlement.

The term ‘reconciliation’ has been consciously avoided in the drafting of this proposal. This reflects the authors’ belief that reconciliation is a complex process in its own right, one that involves a combination of factors: social, political, judicial and moral. These are not addressed in their entirety by the strategy proposed here. Additionally in the East Timorese context ‘reconciliation’ has strong links to the Catholic Church’s interpretation and thus to concepts of repentance and forgiveness. The strategy proposed here is not one that seeks to bring people together by asking them to forgive and forget. Instead the ethos of this process is one that seeks to draw on all of the recognised authorities in the country in order to bring an end to the conflicts now being experienced. This will create an environment that enables the difficult work of healing the nation’s divisions to be undertaken.

Fundamental to the success of this strategy, and to its long-term effects of restoring social cohesion and order, is its conception of a State-led process enlisting the support of the authority of customary leaders. With this in mind this proposal does not specify structures for project management and implementation but instead focuses on principles and guidelines that should underpin such a process. If undertaken the structures and organisation of this strategy will have to be developed by a steering committee established under the auspices of the Government. Such a committee will obviously require participation from as broad a cross-section of Timorese society as possible

2 Goals and Objectives

- 1) To repair the bonds of social cohesion between Timorese people at national and communal levels.
- 2) To strengthen the social contract between the State and its citizens.

These goals will be undertaken through a State-led process that has at its heart existing traditional practices which embody concepts of reintegration, unification and peace-building. This process will address the damage and divisions inflicted on the country and its people over past months and create a new foundation from which the Government and its people can move forward together again and will be brought about by achieving the following objectives:

- 1) To encourage and empower people to provide their own solutions towards the end of the current crisis.
- 2) To restore trust and rebuild relationships between people, and between the people and their Government.
- 3) To bring about a marriage of the State's authority with that of traditional systems of governance (*lisan*) that will validate the national Government and its leaders.
- 4) To raise awareness of traditional values and morality, thus reminding people of their collective responsibilities and the importance of mutual respect.
- 5) To strengthen the sense of a Timorese national identity as a unifying, inclusive force that celebrates the differences of the different groups involved yet identifies shared common goals, objectives, dreams and a future as one nation with an overarching identity.
- 6) To engender a deeper understanding and inclusion of Timorese culture and traditions so that they can be preserved and invigorated for generations to come

3 Implementing Strategy

3.1 Guiding Principles

The solutions to the crisis must be accepted by all Timorese at all level of society, regardless of affiliation or status, and should prioritise the following:

1. People must return to their homes from the IDP camps voluntarily. This can only be achieved when their fears and uncertainties about undertaking this relocation are adequately addressed.
2. The East Timorese people with all their differences and similarities can only be united by a shared sense of identity, common goals and objectives, and a belief that they are moving forward together under a representative and democratic Government.
3. No member of Timorese society will be subject to discrimination or bias based on race, religion, ethno-linguistic grouping, region, sexual orientation, etc. This right is fundamental and will be safeguarded by the Government and its policies.
4. In order to embrace a shared future people have to accept each other's differences and be prepared to live side by side and work constructively to support their Government's efforts to provide improved living standards for now and for generations to come.
5. The relationship of the Government to its people is one of faith and trust. Restoring this means the promotion of 'Government for the people, by the people' that, in turn, requires mutual understanding between the two.
6. It is crucial that lessons are learned from the crisis. With this in mind it is important that attempts to address it produce concrete, lasting outcomes that have a symbolic as well as moral value.

Embodying these principles will require the participation of many people from all levels of Timorese society and committed assistance from the international community. Paramount in this process is the need for a Timorese driven strategy that is meaningful and relevant to all of those who it concerns. This will allow reflection on how the optimism and hope surrounding the nation's independence and the freedom of the Maubere people have so quickly degenerated into private interest and divisionism. Answers to these questions can only be provided by the Timorese people themselves but in order to do so external support will be crucial.

It is essential that in seeking to address these issues the current Government of East Timor takes into consideration existent traditional mechanisms for the resolution of conflict. By doing this, the nation as a whole can re-discover their roots, traditions and culture(s), to reinforce respect for traditional values. As a result the sense of strengthened national pride and identity will serve as a cohesive force that will be more resilient to future destabilisation.

To bring an end to the crisis the current conflicts must be resolved expediently and thoroughly. In order to achieve these goals we need a conflict resolution approach that will be well understood by all the East Timorese people; an approach that they can believe in as a fair and just process and one that makes sense culturally. With these thoughts in mind, adopting a conflict resolution strategy based on customary beliefs seems advisable.

By promoting a process based on the principles outlined earlier, binding agreements can be forged that not only bring an end to the current violence and prevent its recurrence, but also serve as a means to re-establish a broader social order. In order to achieve this it will be critical to involve as many of the nation's customary elders and spiritual leaders as possible to call upon the authority invested in each one of them. Only in this way can the agreement be seen to command the respect of all Timorese. Government patronage of this process will reinforce the state's authority by linking them to the nation's spiritual leaders.

Much of the strength of customary belief in East Timor originates from the fact that the spiritual authority that it commands is one that is above the disputes and struggles of this world. With this in mind it is essential that the development of the process should be as all inclusive as possible and that the ceremonies that are its outcome are not subject to any political agenda. There is also a likelihood that expectations of the delivery of justice will be placed on such a process and its outcomes. This sensitive issue will need to be handled carefully as it is clear that the investigation and accountability of those who instigated recent events remain matters for the State's judicial institutions to undertake.

3.2 Procedural Stages¹

In order to hold a national-level Juramentu (binding oath) ceremony a significant amount of preparations need to be carried out. In their most basic form these are:

1. The integration of this strategy with other initiatives targeting the resolution of the current crisis. Critical to the success of this program is its potential compatibility with other processes of peace and dialogue building, such as the *Simu Malu* program currently being developed by the Government.
2. Key groups and institutions involved in the conflict and its resolution must be contacted in order that they can help develop and coordinate the strategy and its implementation. Ultimately they will be required to participate in the ceremonies involved. These should include as many respected institutions and individuals as possible and span a broad spectrum, from the President, Prime Minister and Government officials of the country, the leaders of the Armed Forces and those alienated from them, youth and women's representatives, to Church leaders and representatives of Civil Society.

¹ For an explanation of the Tetum terms describing aspects of customary practice in this and following sections see Section 4.2 'Existent Conflict Resolution Strategies'

3. Preparatory dialogue needs to be conducted to gain the support of the nation's customary leaders (Ind: *Tokoh Adat*) and secure their involvement in activities.
4. A process of socialisation needs to take place, with an emphasis on Dili, to encourage public support and understanding for the idea and identify any customary elders whose participation is thought to be crucial by those who they influence.
5. An *Uma Lulik* (sacred house) needs to be created to house the ceremonies and as a temporary home for the *Sasan Lulik* (sacred materials) that will need to be brought in order to lend authority to the proceedings.
6. A national-level *Nahe Biti* (spreading the mat) ceremony focussed on creating a national level *Juramentu* will be conducted in the nation's capital Dili in the prepared *Uma Lulik*. This will involve participation of Timorese from all thirteen districts, from Government and from the capital itself. The ceremonies performed will represent the traditions of the entire country in methods deemed fitting by the elders involved
7. A follow-up, longer term strategy needs to be developed that allows for each of the remaining 12 districts to construct an *Uma Lulik* after the close of ceremonies in Dili. This will allow the impact of the national process to be disseminated and provide a reminder to all of the decisions that were reached. Each *Uma Lulik* will also serve as a repository for items of *Sasan Lulik* that are produced during the national ceremony.
8. Additionally, after the close of ceremonial proceedings, the *Uma Lulik* will remain as a symbol of national unification and can be used as a centre for the preservation and exhibition of East Timorese culture and tradition

3.3 Construction of the *Uma Lulik*

By building the *Uma Lulik* at the national and district level a connection will be made between people, their culture and the State. Each building will serve as a lasting reminder that the anger that has fuelled much of the recent unrest and the regional animosity that was enflamed is inappropriate. As such it will be seen as behaviour that is no longer acceptable by people who share a common national identity.

It will be extremely important to ensure that the national *Uma Lulik* employs a design and utilises materials representative of all thirteen districts in the country. Representatives nominated by elders of each of the country's main *Uma Lulik* from each of the districts will work together in designing and building it as symbol of unity. Likewise the collection of the raw materials from each of the districts should be done according to the traditions of that area and the customary rituals of the local *Uma Lulik*.

A national prayer (*Hamulak*) should be incorporated into the rituals accompanying preparations for the construction of the *Uma Lulik*. This *Hamulak* should incorporate the following guiding principles:

From this day forward;

- the sacred land of East Timor and everything in it is united as one. There shall be no more division between “Lorosae” or “Loromonu”, nor any other form of discrimination based on race, religion, gender, language, ethnic grouping, sexual orientation, etc...
- the words “Lorosae” and “Loromonu” and any other words that have come to represent differences between those from the East and those from the West are sacred and cannot be used to divide the country and its people.
- everyone in East Timor is required to work and live together hand in hand and side by side in a peaceful fashion; to enable a better future for everyone, now and for the generations to come.
- no one will harbour feelings of vengeance and animosity concerning what has happened in recent times.
- the Government of the nation and its institutions will make efforts to bring prosperity and to create a better way of life for the people of East Timor and for future generations.

Once collected, the materials should be transported to Dili and ceremonially brought through the streets to the chosen location according to the custom of those who have gathered them.

Although the *Uma Lulik* in the style made in Los Palos is the most widely known, the design of the national *Uma Lulik* should reflect elements of all traditions. Consultation between chosen representatives from each of the districts should facilitate this process. It is suggested however, that as customarily most *Uma Lulik* employ 12 large pieces of wood as structural support each district should provide (amongst other materials) one of these logs, with Dili contributing the land on which they stand. The design should incorporate representations of aspects of national identity as well as the diverse cultural identities.

It is proposed that the national *Uma Lulik* be built at Tasi Tolu. This site would accommodate the large numbers of people expected to attend and also has a strong link to two other important ceremonies in East Timor’s history: The visit of Pope John Paul II and the celebration of Timorese Independence on the 20th May 2002.

3.4 *The Juramentu Ceremonies*

Once the *Uma Lulik* is completed, the building can be inaugurated through a *Nahe Biti* ceremony. The ceremonies that accompany this inauguration will be formulated by the *Tokoh Adat* representatives and will be crucial to the success of this undertaking. During this process, those conducting the proceedings will call on the power and authority of all of the *Uma Lulik* in the country to issue a *Juramentu* that binds all present to obey the principles outlined earlier in the *Hamulak*

The way in which the inauguration of the *Uma Lulik* is structured will require input from many groups. However, it is proposed that it is either preceded or followed by a Mass conducted by the Bishops of East Timor. The *Juramentu* must be performed by the *Tokoh Adat*. If possible should be conducted in the presence of the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Members, the President of the Parliament and its members, representatives of the 13 districts, leaders of the FFDTL, PNTL, the Petitioners and others felt to be appropriate for inclusion in such an event.

The *Tokoh Adat* will read the *Juramentu*, which should then be distributed publicly, together with Betel nut that has been sanctified during the ceremonies. Copies of the *Juramentu* and supplies of Betel nut should be made available to the *Tokoh Adat* after the ceremony in order that they can be distributed through each *Uma Lulik* in the country. It is also recommended that other objects are sanctified and distributed as *Sasan Lulik* following the ceremony that can subsequently be placed in each *Uma Lulik* in the country. Amongst these objects it is recommended that the national flag and a copy of the constitution of the RDTL are included.

3.5 Closing Ceremony/Opening the Centre for Timorese Culture

If possible, the transformation of the *Uma Lulik* to a centre for Timorese culture will be carried out immediately following the inauguration ceremony. This should allow a celebration of the divergent cultures present and an opportunity for all present to express and enjoy themselves in an atmosphere free from threat or violence. Following the opening day a two-week long cultural exhibition should take place, allocating a day each to the 13 districts to show their culture, traditional products, traditional dances and other performances.

4 Background

4.1 *The Current Situation*

As a nation East Timor is currently facing a crisis of internal conflict, primarily between those from the East and those from the West. These violent divisions have emerged out of a widespread perception that discrimination had permeated State institutions (particularly in the armed forces). The violence that followed in the wake of the levelling of these accusations centred around disgruntled former F-FDTL soldiers (the Petitioners) and other armed groups, whose exact membership is as yet unclear. This rapidly spread into civil unrest in Dili as well as to other parts of the country. The outcome of this violence has been a relatively large-scale displacement of the city's population to camps in the immediate area as well as to their home villages in the outlying districts.

The unrest is still ongoing. Since the temporary suspension of operations of East Timor's National Police force (PNTL) in Dili, and even with the arrival of international military personnel, the sense of a breakdown of the rule of law is, if not destroyed, severely disrupted. Presently groups are still targeting civilians and their homes. At times this is apparently for personal gain, and at times apparently with the intention of 'cleansing' their areas of those who are seen as 'other', either as 'Loromonu' Westerners, or 'Lorosae' Easterners. As such the current situation is one which has seen the rise of a disturbing tendency towards a regional type of separatism as well as one of blatant disregard of the laws of the land and of principles of mutual respect.

This crisis has affected society at all levels causing both physical and mental damage. For many Timorese people the recent unrest has rekindled their feelings of trauma that are the legacy of long years of political conflict. Unfortunately there is a widespread feeling of distrust towards the Government as it is seen to be heavily implicated in failing to take decisive action to prevent the recent period of unrest. At this stage many are uncertain of their future, as a clear solution to conflict has yet to be found.

The most significant damage caused by this crisis is to the internal relationships that have up till now bound the country together. This damage threatens relations between the institutions of governance and those that they govern as well as interpersonal relationships. If this situation continues unabated the wounds will deepen to leave scars that will continue to affect the country as a whole. The long term implications of this will certainly impede national development, something that is critical to a nation still in its infancy. The legacy of a failure to adequately address the current crisis will be one of fear and mistrust, one that could certainly provide fertile ground for future civil conflict.

Worryingly there is talk that those currently involved in the violence, as both perpetrators and victims, see this as a precursor to a larger-scale conflict. Such a conflict could jeopardise the future of the nation and the lives of all of those living here. If this conflict is not resolved promptly there is a danger that the country may become embroiled in a war that could prove long and costly, a war that would prove difficult to end and that could undo much of the progress made since 1999.

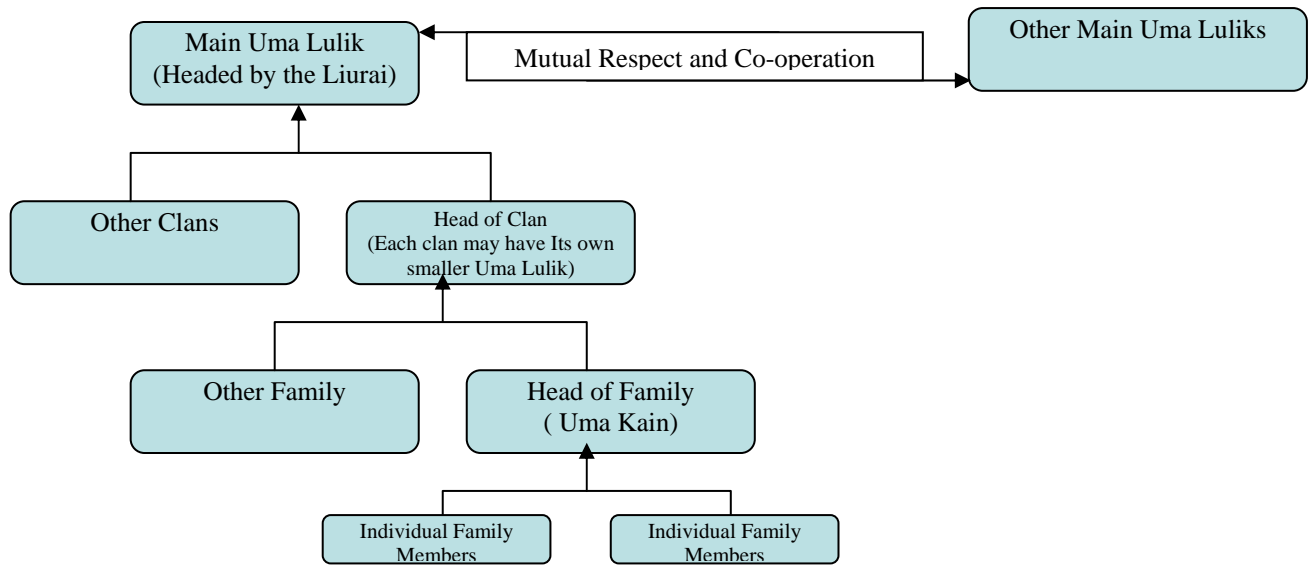
As yet there is no clear indication that the current internal civil conflict in East Timor is coming to an end. Efforts have been initiated by the East Timorese Government, the UN, local and international NGOs. At this point however, despite the hard work and good intentions of all of those involved, there seems little indication that the conflict and beliefs that underpin it are abating. With no disrespect to the attempts made so far it seems that the measures being implemented have yet to significantly influence those involved in the conflict - if anything the fissures dividing the groups involved seem to be deepening rapidly. It is clear that a solution must be found soon if the fragile security that presently exists is not to be lost completely, and potentially, irrevocably.

In the absence of any concrete strategy to resolve the current violence those that are at its mercy are becoming increasingly worried that its effects will be lasting and represent a return to the years of terrorisation that have already affected the country for so long. This proposal seeks to address this absence by putting forward a clear and structured methodology that first and foremost represents a Timorese solution to what is in essence a Timorese problem.

4.2 *Existent Conflict Resolution Strategies*

East Timor has always been a nation of great diversity. Prior to colonisation social cohesion was maintained between the many kingdoms and ethno-linguistic groups that constituted the country. Conflict was subject to systems of checks and balances that maintained order through customary processes centring on the *Uma Lulik* (sacred house). The *Uma Lulik* is fundamental to East Timorese spirituality and its influence reaches into all aspects of life, governing social norms and clan relations as well as resolving conflict at the individual, family and group levels. As such these traditions and values represent a unifying force for the lives of Timorese people. Although these structures were subject to coercion by the Portuguese and Indonesian administrations, their influence still pervades life in the cities towns and villages of East Timor. Although many of the *Uma Lulik* were destroyed in the Indonesian occupation; communities across the country have prioritised their rebuilding, a clear indication of their importance and their integral place in the lives of East Timorese people.

Each Kingdom has a main *Uma Lulik* headed by a King (*Liurai*) who is the head of several clans. Each *Liurai* is invested with the authority to take decisions in the interests of those clans. An abbreviated scheme of typical *Uma Lulik* organisation is shown below:



As shown in the above figure, each main *Uma Lulik* maintains relations of mutual respect and co-operation with the other main *Uma Lulik* from different groups. In this way peace, stability and harmonisation of individual and group needs are maintained. The rights of each individual are in this way considered in terms of their membership of the family; each family as part of the clan; each clan as part of a wider social network governed by the *Uma Lulik*. All this whilst representatives of the main *Uma Lulik* coordinate with others of a similar standing. This structured, holistic approach establishes order through creating a structure that allows each individual to know themselves to be part of a whole, with systems in place to address their respective needs.

The *Uma Lulik* system provides governance, customary judicial mechanisms, and conflict resolution methods that are integrated into the lives of all members of the group. At the heart of the conflict resolution carried out under the authority of the *Uma Lulik* is a practice commonly known as *Nahe Biti* (spreading the mat) This method of resolving conflict predates the Portuguese colonisation of East Timor and is still prevalent today. The structure of the *Nahe Biti* ceremony depends on the nature of the conflict being discussed and the relationship between the conflicting parties. Minor disagreements between two members of the same family can normally be resolved by the head of the family unit, often using the *Uma Lulik* as the venue for negotiation. However, larger conflicts involving individuals from multiple family groups or conflict of a more severe or violent nature may require the participation of more senior elders from a different *Uma Lulik*.

The specific practices that are involved in conducting a *Nahe Biti* ceremony vary according to the customary beliefs of each *Uma Lulik*. However, the traditional *Juramentu* that serves as an oath at the end of the ritual, binding those who have participated to honour the decisions brokered is a universal practice. Many of the *Juramentu* issued in past *Nahe Biti* ceremonies are still enforced today. The respect that these oaths engender in those who undertake them represents a powerful force to bring a permanent end to conflict.

The closure of many of the ceremonies conducted under the authority of the *Uma Lulik* is commonly accompanied by the sacrifice of animals, sealing what has occurred. Similarly, the ritualised drinking of the blood of those animals often enters into the closure of *Nahe Biti* rituals. These practices serve to symbolise the death of the conflict and the reestablishment of relations between those who had previously been divided. Finally, all present are often required to chew Betel nut (*Mama Buah Malus*) as a sign that all present recognise the end of the conflict and once again are free to enjoy normal community relations.

Until these processes are undertaken, the parties involved in the unresolved conflicts customarily avoid mixing with each other socially. Those thought to be responsible for creating divisions are often shunned and excluded from the wider group. *Nahe Biti* as such represents a method for transforming prejudice and suspicion into a process of reintegration and acceptance; providing a lasting end to social unrest by virtue of the authority invested in it.