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José Ramos-Horta [Indonesia, President of East Timor]

José Ramos-Horta

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Interviewee: **JOSE RAMOS-HORTA**
Interviewer: Sabrina Chua
Date: 25 September 2015
Location: Singapore

00:00:20

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Dr Jose Ramos-Horta, thank you very much for speaking with the Institute for Societal Leadership. Now, activism seems to be in your blood. Your father, your grandfather, were exiled for speaking out against the Portuguese government. What was it like growing up in that kind of family?

00:00:38

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

I would not say that it's in the blood, or in the history of the family, because A) I was growing up, I knew very little about my own father, or grandfather's background in Portugal. People, human beings, sometimes if you're sensitive, if you have a soft heart, no one has to teach, or educate you about how you feel about injustices, inequality. As a child, I was always very sensitive to other people. As a teenager, I became even more aware of injustices around me.

The Portuguese colonial presence in Timor-Leste was very mild. There was no war there, and it was not like a prison camp. If anything, one can accuse of the Portuguese colonial rule in my country was, indifference and negligence. They kept Timor-Leste only so that by letting it go, it would set a precedent for the more important colonial prizes in Africa.

00:02:00

[Sabrina Chua](#)

So, you decided to speak up against the Government?

00:02:02

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

Yes, very early on I began to speak up, to write. Of course, the medium of communication there was word of mouth, because we didn't have television or radio. I would speak with many different groups, and then I ended up once, being interrogated, and deported at age nineteen or twenty, to East Africa, to Mozambique. By being there in Mozambique, when I learned more about the fallacies of Portuguese colonialism, and of course back then in Mozambique, there was already a growing insurgency against Portuguese colonial rule. It took only another four years, I was there in '70, '71, when the Carnation Revolution took place in Portugal. They put an end to the fifty-year-old autocracy, dictatorship in Portugal. We were very young at the time, very inexperienced. Motivated by pride, idealism, we decided to seize on the opportunity provided by the Carnation Revolution, by the decision of the Portuguese themselves, to relinquish the colonies, to demand, advocate for independence for Timor-Leste. Overwhelming majority of people in Timor-Leste adhered to that. This dream was short-lived because we had a brief civil war in August, September '75. By December '75, Indonesia armed forces invaded Timor-Leste. Xanana Gusmao, then a very much revered resistance leader, appointed me as his special envoy, special representative abroad.

00:04:14

[Sabrina Chua](#)

How did you feel when they told you, “You need to leave to get international support for the independence of Timor?” Leaving your homeland, your loved ones?

00:04:24

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

You have to have a lot of illusion about yourself. In a sense, here I am, inexperienced, with broken English, sent to New York to advocate, to represent our struggle at the United Nations. That I accepted, and I went there. I had some sort of illusion about myself, in that “yes you can do it.” So, there I went, and I arrived in New York, in the midst of the North American winter. I had never seen snow in my life. I stayed in the Tudor Hotel, now Hilton, on forty-second and second. Back then. I stayed in the cheapest room, which was twenty dollars. I was introduced around in the UN (United Nations) and started lobbying the Security Council. I addressed the Security Council four times during that week of the debate on East Timor. To everybody's surprise, the Security Council that was very divided throughout the Cold War, on that particular issue over Indonesian intervention in Timor-Leste, it was a unanimous condemnation. But that was also my first lesson in international hypocrisy. Those countries, all fifteen, voted for the demand of Indonesia's withdrawal from Timor-Leste. The ten non-permanent members can be forgiven, because they had very little, or no power whatsoever. You have five permanent members. Of those five, at that time, Russia and China had literally zero relation with Indonesia. France, minimum, at

that time, with Indonesia. So, the biggest partners of Indonesia were UK (United Kingdom) and US (United States), and more US than UK. That was the height of the Cold War, post-height of Vietnam. US had just been forced out of Vietnam in humiliation. They did vote for Indonesia withdrawal. However, US continued to supply weapons to Indonesia, enabling Indonesia to continue to defy the Security Council resolution. That's why I say, my first lesson in international hypocrisy. Then I learnt many lessons on international hypocrisy over the years.

00:07:16

[Sabrina Chua](#)

What did that teach you then?

00:07:19

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

You just have to continue, stay focused on the work. Be patient, swallow your pride when sometimes you are offended, you are humiliated by the hypocrisy, by arrogance of some diplomats, some countries. You know one thing, during all those years in US, in New York at the UN, when I was literally a nobody, the only diplomats from Asia, the only ones who really took time in sitting with me, and listening to me, even inviting me for lunch, were Singaporean diplomats.

Even though Singapore had this very important relationship with Indonesia, very delicate, nevertheless, at least they had the courtesy of treating me with respect, and even invited me to lunch, to listen to my side of the story about what's happening in Timor-Leste. The only ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) country that did that, even when Singapore still voted with Indonesia. It was understandable, it will be like almost suicidal for Singapore not to... Because in '75, in the first UN General Assembly Resolution on Timor-Leste, Singapore abstained, dissented from all the other ASEAN countries, and Indonesia was furious at that time. You have to understand that later they joined with the rest of ASEAN, but they still listened. This is a lesson of diplomacy for people, they should listen to the underdog, people who claim justice, who want to be heard. So, Singaporean diplomats in this regard, yes, they were great. As you can see, I am now much older, forty years later, and I remember that with appreciation.

00:09:45

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Did they give you any other assistance besides just listening to you?

00:09:50

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

No. Back then, there were not much Singapore can do. But later, when the time came and history changed, Singapore was on the frontline together with the UN in deploying troops, medics, police to Timor-Leste. Over the years, a lot of opportunities never negated to Timor-Leste was for training of civil servants, diplomats, etcetera. I remember talking once with Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister. He said something that remains valid for Singapore, it's that Singapore doesn't like... doesn't provide grants, cash, to anyone... handouts. Provide training, absolutely correct.

What we learn is, you can have an abundance of world wealth, but if you don't have the brain power, human resources, trained people, honest people, honest leaders, the money can be squandered, and the people remain poor, and you create social inequalities, instability and violence. It has to do with good governance, good leadership, ethical leadership.

00:11:11

[Sabrina Chua](#)

I want to bring you back to your time in the US for now. What was your most difficult time abroad?

00:11:16

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

In the beginning, in New York, getting adjusted to New York, to the UN, difficult in communication with the back of the countries. My whole family was behind, no news from any of them. It's very long, lonely years. But, never once I thought of giving up. Every time some thought of that nature surfaced... in a sense, to find a job, to work, to survive, I always thought of the trust that was placed on me by the leadership, my compatriots, and I could not fail them.

00:12:05

[Sabrina Chua](#)

In the mid-1980s you began advocating dialogue with Indonesia and in 1992, you put forward this peace plan. Why did you choose this path? Indonesia killed almost a third of the Timor population and some of your family even, your loved ones were killed by the Indonesians. So, why did you decide peace was the way to go?

00:12:29

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

That peace proposal, I crafted it after weeks, months of reflection, studying, looking at the different situations and options. I put up this three-phase peace proposal. It was in three stages that would have given Indonesia a dignified, honourable way out of Timor-Leste without further loss of lives to Timor and Indonesia. It was a pragmatic, well thought out proposal. It was that proposal that really influenced the Nobel Committee years later to award me that Peace Prize besides my background work, etcetera. It is a classic situation of leaders not knowing when to leave, when to seize the opportunity to find the peaceful, honourable exit from a particular situation. Had Indonesian leaders with greater vision, seized on that, we would have sat down, and negotiated relatively long roadmap, that would result in a referendum many, many years later, that probably would have been far more peaceful... peaceful outcome than what

happened in '99. That's what I thought when I crafted, drafted that peace proposal.

Often in conflicts, why the serious situation... because everybody underestimated each other... one thing the Indonesians totally underestimated the little Timorese people. By underestimating, Indonesia lost thousands of soldiers in Timor. We have cemeteries that are well looked after in Timor-Leste. It has to do with underestimating the other side.

00:15:09

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Timor also lost tens, if not, hundreds of thousands of people. So, how do you put aside that anger, or that resentment from the violence that the Indonesians inflicted on Timor, to advocate for peace?

00:15:24

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

For background first, Indonesia is the largest Muslim majority country in the world. In Asia, Timor-Leste is the most Catholic, in terms of percentage. Philippines is eighty percent, we are ninety-seven percent Catholic. Yet, in the course of our struggle, never we demonised Indonesia, Indonesians as a people. We always respect the people of Indonesia as a people. For twenty-four years in our struggle, we never touched an Indonesian civilian in my country. Not a single Indonesian soldier captured by the resistance was executed. After a few months, a year or two, depends, they were set on the road back to their army barrack. That was our philosophy, our practice. Then situations change in Indonesia, not of our making. We contributed to it, but Indonesian people, particularly students went to the streets. So, the Indonesians themselves were the ones that brought down the Suharto regime. Indonesians freed themselves from Suharto, and by freeing themselves from the Suharto regime, they helped free Timor-Leste. Negotiations began with the UN for a quick transition. From day one of our independence, we started working with Indonesian leaders to normalise relations. We resisted the pressure to set up an international tribunal. We said, "No, Indonesia is experiencing a difficult transition. They themselves have just been liberated from dictatorship. If we were to impose, to force through a special tribunal, we would further destabilise Indonesia, and make very difficult the management of the relation between us and Indonesia." Justice will happen, will take its course, but on Indonesia's own time. The Indonesian side appreciated this. That's why we have a great relationship people to people, and official level.

00:18:05

[Sabrina Chua](#)

That's quite a remarkable achievement. You were awarded the Peace Prize in 1996 for your efforts towards achieving independence for Timor. What does the award mean to you?

00:18:21

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

First, I was surprised and embarrassed, I thought Bishop Belo, at that time I was actually discreetly lobbying for him to get the prize, I didn't know that my name was also under consideration while I was respectfully doing the lobbying for Bishop Belo. I thought Xanana was bound to win himself. But, the Nobel Committee decide to award me the prize. I never thought of it, really, this is not false modesty. I care for Timor-Leste to be free. I didn't care about the Nobel Peace Prize. If Timor was to be free without Nobel Peace Prize, so what? This is what is important. But I am eternally grateful to the Nobel Committee in Oslo, because thanks to that decision, Timor-Leste's cause was on the front page on the international agenda. That contributed enormously to facilitate the dialogue with Indonesia once the circumstances arose.

00:19:30

[Sabrina Chua](#)

I found it interesting that in your speech, your acceptance speech when you received the prize, you highlighted US President Roosevelt's message in 1939, just months before World War Two, about moral re-armament. You said that at the same time when President Roosevelt was saying this, the US actually turned away 900 Jewish refugees from Germany. Why did you feel the need to highlight this, and what does this say to you about leadership?

00:19:59

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

Today with the refugee crisis in Europe... it's so revealing about moral leadership. Europeans, for hundreds of years in the past, fled to what today is North America, US, Canada. For hundreds of years, they flocked to South America from all over Europe. Europeans have been extraordinarily generous over these many years, accommodating millions of people from their ex-colonies, and elsewhere. The European Union was in the forefront of the advocacy for human rights and democracy. So, I have a great respect for European Union, and Europeans in that regard. But with the expansion of the European Union, and with countries from Central, Eastern Europe joining the European Union with very different history of relationship with the Arab world and Africa, they are far more insensitive, less sensitive to migration and refugees.

Fortunately, Angela Merkel, who was very much criticised, demonised over her handling of the Greek financial crisis, she has now taken the moral leadership in dealing with this issue, and she has to be applauded or commended. It is showing the importance of leaders, showing moral courage, political courage in handling very difficult situations.

00:22:00

[Sabrina Chua](#)

This issue of moral leadership, moral standing, seems to be very important to you. In 2006, when you were Foreign Minister, there was this crisis in Timor with the rebel soldiers, and you actually decided to resign, because you felt that Mari Alkatiri, who was Prime Minister at the time, that he did not have the moral standing to lead. Why is moral standing, moral leadership so important to you?

00:22:32

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

Leaders, being leaders, have to have the courage, compassion, humility. If you fail, you have to say, "Yes, I have failed." We failed the people in 2006. It was our collective failure as leaders. I resigned as Foreign Minister. But soon after... it lasted only a few days of my resignation, I was asked to serve as Prime Minister. So, I served for one year more, or less, as Prime Minister. I made every effort to reconcile the country, to calm down the tensions slowly, with help from the UN, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Portugal. The situation security-wise was classified, and then we had elections. I was asked to run for President, and I did, because I was asked to. I had to continue the process of healing the wounds, because for the government to govern, you have to have conditions of peace and security. To do that, I engage in dialogue with everybody. You listen to people. For me, qualities of leadership are, besides being smart, besides being intelligent, and intellect doesn't come necessarily only from your academic background. How intelligent you are, you will not succeed if you are not humble, if you don't show compassion.

For me, two greatest qualities of a leader are humility and compassion. Humility when you are strong, that's when you should be even more humble. When you are at the peak of power, of privileges, you should show humility. Come down from the mountains to meet the people at the valley. I have warned my country's fellow leaders in meetings before the crisis in 2006, I said we have to be humble, we have to listen to people, we have to reach out, particularly to those who are not in power. Because I said governments often fall not because of bad governance. Sometimes, very competent, but heartless. Those who are leaders, and they have to have feelings. Often some good leaders lead good in the sense of good technocrats, they produce results. They're not very popular, because they are perceived to be arrogant. The more successful they are in producing figures,

the more arrogant they are. One day people get tired of them. Some of the best examples of humble leaders, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, these are some of the best, and unfortunately, very few examples.

00:26:00

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Anybody in living memory at the moment?

00:26:06

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

I have to say, for me Lee Kuan Yew, for the circumstances of Singapore, as it was born, painful birth, in the midst of those Cold War challenges. Lee Kuan Yew did the right thing. Singapore wouldn't be what it is today if Singapore had a weak leader, without vision and without firmness in dealing with the political, social, security challenges at that time. You ask living figures. He died recently, but his influence is still very alive. A real giant in this world. Imagine, Singapore, with due respect to my Singaporean brothers and sisters and cousins, is not exactly a major demographic power, or territorial power, but Lee Kuan Yew's influence is felt all over the world.

00:27:25

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Your time as President, one of the significant moments was that you suffered an assassination attack in 2008. But instead of... you actually pardoned the assassin and his accomplices, and you asked the country to forgive them, and you wanted reconciliation. Why?

00:27:47

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

The situation of 2008 where I was victimised, was the prolongation, the end-result of the 2006 political security crisis of Timorese leadership making. The 2008 situation, today in retrospect, knowing what I know, of course the gentleman who went to my house, and did what they did, he was, I knew him well, a lunatic character. Even though I was involved in talking with him, even as President, he came to my house unannounced, and proceeded to disarm two soldiers who were there. But a third soldier saw, was more alert, and fired two shots. He was killed. Then the fighting broke out, and I was away, I was doing my morning exercise. God wanted me to leave the house earlier than I usually did. That particular morning, I left earlier. I would go out normally around six, but that particular morning, I went out like 5:30 or something like that. When I heard the shots, I knew coming from my house, I went. When I was shot, the people who came to my house, the renegade soldiers, were totally disoriented. When

they heard that I had been shot, they were disoriented. Soon after they issued a statement: When the President returns from hospital, we will surrender. They did surrender a few days after I returned. All of them, not one. Of course, they were arrested. They surrendered, they were taken to prison, they were tried. Some were sentenced to fourteen years in prison. Then you have the Presidential prerogative of evaluating, putting everything in balance. I said, "Well they had been tried, sentenced. Now it's my turn to address this under our law, our constitution." I decided to pardon them off, because these are small people, this would not have happened if leaders had not failed in 2006.

00:30:32

[Sabrina Chua](#)

It's been more than a decade since Timor has achieved its independence, but some people actually feel that the government has not delivered, that they haven't reaped the rewards of this independence. Many healthcare services are not accessible to people in the remote areas, some fifty percent of children are malnourished. What is your take on that?

00:30:55

[Jose Ramos-Horta](#)

Some of the criticisms are valid. We could have done more, particularly with the money that is available to us from our own Petroleum Sovereign Fund. But knowing what Timor-Leste was in '99, 2000, 2002, what country we inherited, what infrastructures, what basis of human resources, education, health we inherited in 2002. Looking back, I would say we have achieved far more than most countries in similar circumstances, and a longer independent state. Look, Timor-Leste is only thirteen years independent. If you look at the United Nations Human Development Report Index, Timor-Leste is far better, with all indicators higher than all African countries Sub Sahara, with the exception of South Africa, and Cape Verde. Child mortality, infant mortality reduced by half already. By 2017, we will have more doctors as percentage of population than any country in Asia, with the exception of Singapore, Korea, Japan. You mentioned about malnutrition, yes, still a huge challenge. The Government has been thoroughly incompetent in implementing the School Feeding Programme. The budget is there, the government committed the money to provide a hot meal a day for every child in school in my country, something like 400,000 kids. But we cannot also make miracles, and making everybody overnight competent, hardworking. Unfortunately, many of our officials, government leaders, ministers, have done a very poor job in two areas: education and health. We could have done far better. We should have done even better if there had been less corruption and less incompetence.

00:33:27

Sabrina Chua

Well thank you very much, sir, for speaking with us.

00:33:29

Jose Ramos-Horta

Thank you.