

'Forgiveness Requires Courage'

An exiled Timor rebel expects independence



After nearly 25 years of violent friction between Jakarta and East Timor freedom fighters, the suddenly frank dialogue between the rival sides in recent days has been remarkable. It started when President B.J. Habibie commented in late January that he would recommend to Indonesia's next legislature that East Timor be granted independence if an offer of autonomy was rejected. Three weeks later, the discussion has progressed to how rival factions in the territory can be disarmed and whether East Timor would ever join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Key Timorese independence figures have acted swiftly to grab the reins of their suddenly invigorated movement before it veers out of their control. Foremost among these: Xanana Gusmao, the rebel leader who has recently been transferred to house arrest after six years in a Jakarta prison; Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo, who won the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize; and Belo's co-peace prize winner, exiled rebel spokesman José Ramos-Horta. Ramos-Horta recently spoke with Asiaweek's **Yenni Kwok** in Hong Kong about the prospects of an independent East Timor. Here are excerpts:

On Indonesia's all-or-nothing offer of autonomy - versus independence:

I am not much persuaded by Jakarta's statements because many promises have been broken over the years. [But no matter what anyone says] independence for East Timor is irreversible. I am campaigning more strongly than ever to reject the autonomy proposal. [Jakarta] does not deserve a second opportunity.

On East Timor's future:

The ideal scenario is for Indonesian troops to pull out by Jan. 1, 2000, as Habibie promised. If the East Timorese people reject autonomy, [administration of the territory] should be handed over to the United Nations. We would not jump to independence right away. Anyway, Indonesia is not exactly a model of stability. I find it mind-boggling to think we would fear Indonesia's withdrawal if its only [legacies] are war, abuse, humiliation, rape, corruption and mismanagement.

On the post-independence fate of pro-integrationists and Indonesians in East Timor: Xanana [Gusmao] recently spoke with many pro-integration leaders. They fear reprisals. I promise these people that I will be with them because they are now the most vulnerable. I always side with the underdogs. They can be assured that they have Xanana and me as allies.

On whether the East Timorese can forgive the Indonesian government:

I don't underestimate the problems; [the legacy] from Indonesia is a culture of violence. Revenge is easy, but forgiveness requires courage. With all due respect to copyright laws, let me quote Bill Clinton: "If you ask for forgiveness, you have to be prepared to forgive others." The resistance movement is not blameless. We must have humility and courage to say it wasn't only Indonesia that instigated tension in 1975.

On his personal relationship with Gusmao:

I communicated with him regularly long before Suharto's collapse. We are like political twin brothers. I have been abroad for 23 years, and I don't have the legitimacy that he does. I also get along very well with Bishop Belo. These two men, Bishop Belo and Xanana, are extraordinary gifts for East Timor.

On his return to Indonesia and his future in East Timor:

I will definitely return. Xanana wants me to go to Jakarta as soon as possible. I am waiting for official clearance. As for a future role, I already told Xanana and my colleagues: I don't want any formal role in government. I can contribute by running a diplomacy school to train future diplomats of Timor. I can give lectures. [Laughs] I can write for Asiaweek.

On the economic viability of an independent East Timor:

Don't underestimate the commitment of the Portuguese. They are more than willing to pay half or two-thirds of our budget [estimated at \$100 million]. We can get \$5 million from the United Nations and \$5 million from the European Union. These are very conservative estimates. We also have assurances and support from Canada, from the U.S. and many others. Even if Australia is too scared, too stingy - fine, they can keep their money. Indonesia keeps saying that East Timor cannot survive economically as an independent entity. [This is] patronizing. After 23 years, we have developed our own networks of friends who are more than willing to invest in and support us. And is Indonesia in a position to lecture anyone on economic feasibility? With his zigzag economy theory, I don't think I would trust Habibie running our economy. I'd

rather have Imelda Marcos running a shoe store in Dili.

On possible membership in ASEAN:

In the near term, the most important relationships for us are Australia and New Zealand. As much as Australia has shown a lack of support, ASEAN has not been much better. On the ground, we have tremendous popular support from the Philippines and Thailand. I presume if Myanmar and Cambodia can become ASEAN members, East Timor can make it too.

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