

East Timor Constituent Assembly Elections

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Public Information Strategies and Activities

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**Overview and Assessment of OCPI Electoral Activities
for the 30 August 2001 Constituent Assembly Elections
in East Timor**

UNTAET's Office of Communication and Public Information (OCPI) faced a complex set of challenges during the nine-week period preceding and following the 30 August 2001 Constituent Assembly elections. Radio UNTAET, Televizaun Timor Lorosa'e, and the Publication Unit, the main OCPI media outlets, informed Timorese regarding a variety of national campaigns including Civil and Voter Registration, Civic Education and Electoral Process and Procedures. During the same period, they were called upon to cover a national electoral campaign and to give fair and balanced reporting, as well as direct access spots, to 16 political parties and 5 independent candidates and to their platforms. In addition, OCPI's Press Office faced a sharp increase in international and Timorese media interest in the elections.

The following report details OCPI activities and strategies during the Registration, Civic Education, Electoral and Post-electoral periods. The conclusion of the report looks at some of the lessons learned to insure that needed adjustments are incorporated in future media efforts in East Timor and in other UN missions.

Dili, East Timor, October 2001

The Challenge of Covering a National Campaign

OCPI's Radio, Television, Publication and Press Units, supported by the Technical Unit and along with its Public Information Officers (PIOs) in the districts played extensive roles in implementing and giving outreach to the Voter Registration, Civic Education and Electoral Campaigns. They coordinated closely with the Voter Registration, Civic Education teams and with the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) in the shape and timing of messages. OCPI, with a permanent staff of 117¹ and an additional temporary staff of 11², did all of this while maintaining its routine editorial and newsgathering functions, including a major coordinated campaign by Radio, TV and the Publication Unit to inform the 80,000 refugees in West Timor about the elections and other events in East Timor.

Here are the accomplishments of OCPI during the period.

The Press Office

Through daily printed and electronic press notes, thrice-weekly press briefings, and frequent guest briefings, the Press Office kept the local and international media informed regarding Voter Registration, Civic Education and the Electoral Process. It provided the media regularly updated schedules of events and arranged for local and international media to accompany the SRSG and other East Timorese leaders throughout East Timor.

In anticipation of a surge in media interest, the Press Office was reinforced with two additional staff. It also updated a set of 20 "Fact Sheets" originally produced for the June 2001 Canberra Donors Conference - on UNTAET achievements. These were distributed in Tetum, English, Bahasa Indonesia and Portuguese, and proved extremely useful to resident and visiting journalists and others. They succeeded in answering a wide range of questions before they were asked.

During the election period, an English language digest of the coverage of the international and Timorese press was produced daily by the OCPI Media Development Unit and distributed via the

¹ 56 international staff (incl. 29 UNVs) and 61 local staff

² Two graphic artists, seven Civic Education UNVs, and, for 3 weeks with the press office, A Fawci, UNIC, London; and E Moorthy, UNTAET, Jakarta

Intranet. This insured that those in the mission, in the press and others could stay informed regarding what was being reported.

In August, many of the Press Office's briefings featured special speakers who could bring substantive background and information to the issues. They included SRSG Sergio Vieira de Mello and the IEC's Chief Electoral Officer Carlos Valenzuela, who briefed the press once a week, as well as the Chief of Staff, N Parameswaran who briefed regarding West Timor refugee returns and the elections.

The Press Office registered close to 200 visiting journalists in August and coordinated interviews for many of them with the SRSG, Deputy SRSG Dennis McNamara, Xanana Gusmão and Cabinet Member for Foreign Affairs José Ramos-Horta. In anticipation of the large number of journalists visiting for the elections, the lobby of GPA and the press office itself were refurbished and video, audio and print displays installed with OCPI-produced information.



Some effort was made, starting in late July, to get some journalistic luminaries from the United States and Europe to come at short notice to cover the elections. Ultimately, most publications and other media relied on their Asia-based correspondents to cover the story. Had a climate of violence, not peace and tolerance, infused the electoral campaign, more respected journalists would no doubt have come from the United States and Europe.

The Press Office provided no direct access to electoral candidates, although it routinely reported on events at which they gathered to reiterate their adherence to the Pact of National Unity. The Press Office issued a fact sheet with basic information about each of the political parties and independent candidates. It also posted and issued a schedule of their rallies. On other matters related to the political campaign, the Press Office referred journalists to the Political Parties Resource Center where they could contact the political parties and electoral candidates directly.



The Election Press Center

The upsurge in media interest in East Timor throughout the election period required new strategies to accommodate those seeking to cover the story. A dilapidated amphitheater adjoining UNTAET's Media Center was extensively renovated to serve as the Election Press Center. It became the media focal point from election day through to 10 September when the final election results were announced. The Election Press Center was used jointly by the UNTAET Press Office and the Independent Electoral Commission with at least twice-daily briefing at which election results were announced. The success of the Election Press Center was enhanced by the continuous, live coverage of briefings by TVTL and Radio UNTAET.

The Publications Unit

The Publications Unit produced three special issues of Tais Timor in the months leading up to the election. Each had a 100,000 circulation in four languages, Tetun, Bahasa Indonesia, English and Portuguese. Each issue was on a special theme related to Civic Education; to Peace and Tolerance and an End to Violence; and the Electoral Process. Basic electoral information

about how to register and when, why, and where to vote was issued repeatedly in Tais Timor and posted on OCPI's 86 information/notice boards throughout the country. A regular "Vox Pop" column in Tais Timor aired the views of ordinary Timorese about democracy and participation in the electoral process. The "Tiu" column in Tais Timor explored in a popular way the significance of the elections for Timorese young and old.

The Publications Unit also produced 11 different posters, 6 booklets and brochures, 8 banners, 9 stickers, 2 buttons and 2 T-shirts in quantities ranging from 10,000 for T-shirts up to 100,000 for posters. These reinforced the key campaign themes of the period. Two UN Volunteers (UNVs) were added to the Publications staff during this period to focus principally on Civic Education and the elections. One was a graphic designer, the other a journalist.

In addition, the Publications Unit created a traveling photography exhibition, Our Nation, Our Words, which included images by Timorese photographers with the words of ordinary Timorese speaking about democracy, the constitutional process and their hopes for their new nation. The exhibit has been seen nationwide, at the June 2001 Canberra Donors Conference and will be at UN Headquarters in New York in December.



A special election issue of Tais Timor was published in August with sample ballots identifying District candidates and candidates for the national contest. The issue also featured profiles and photographs of the three female independent candidates. A complete list of every candidate for each political party, plus the parties' logos and flags were also reproduced. Initially 100,000 copies were produced. An additional 60,000 were printed because it was in such demand.

A new publication, "Photos Timor," was launched by the Publications Unit in July. It consisted of photo essays that were both printed and distributed electronically and captured visually the electoral and post-electoral process and other key events and achievements during the period. Many of these photographs came from OCPI's District Public Information Officers (PIOs) using Japanese Government-donated digital cameras and laptop computers. The Japanese also provided a graphic design/computer technician who trained international and Timorese staff and NGOs throughout the country on computer software, VCD systems and the digital cameras. He also established a Photo Archive of the Publication Unit's work that will be turned over to the government at the time of independence. Photos Timor and other information were also posted on the notice boards throughout the country.



Television Timor Lorosae (TVTL)

In addition to its regular programming, TVTL continued and intensified the airing of spots and programmes focusing on civic and voter education themes (such as "What is an Election?" and "Who Can Vote?"). The first of ten specially produced VCD's was completed

and distributed in April, and others were completed thereafter at three-week intervals. UNTAET was the first UN mission to develop such VCD's and air them nationwide. They were shown on TVTL and broadcast in the districts via 30 mobile cinemas and some sixty smaller VCD kits. They were also aired at every Civil Registration site throughout East Timor. Four UN Volunteers were added to the TVTL staff during this period to focus principally on Civic Education and the elections.



In terms of the elections, both TVTL and Radio UNTAET decided prior to the campaign to focus on a cumulative approach to covering electoral news events, which entailed keeping track of how much airtime was given to each party and adjusting its coverage to give less-covered parties more adequate airtime. Three-minute profiles of each political party were also produced.

On election day, TVTL broadcast an unprecedented five live broadcasts from the Election Press Center as the preliminary voter turnout results were announced. During the vote counting period, virtually every announcement made at the Election Press Center was broadcast live. TVTL also produced two 5-minute segments on the elections and results, which were beamed to UN Headquarters in New York, distributed to media and broadcast in the United States and Europe.

Radio UNTAET

In addition to its regular programming, Radio UNTAET produced a total of sixteen 30 to 45-second spots on simple Civic Education

themes with an emphasis on Constitutional issues, mass participation, and the need for a peaceful voting process. The spots were created in close coordination with the IEC and the Civic Education Unit. Radio UNTAET, with TVTL, also produced a wide-range of hour-long shows – totaling 15 hours per week – that included interviews with Bishop Belo and officials from the IEC, Civic Education, and the Constitutional Commissions. Shorter segments of these were aired on TVTL. Two UN Volunteers were added to the Publications staff during this period to focus principally on Civic Education and the elections.



Radio UNTAET covered each political party at least once in the districts, and conducted a wide range of interviews with observers as well as panel discussions and "Vox Pop" segments.

Along with TVTL, Radio UNTAET benefited from the use of a team of reporters dispatched to do special district coverage. The project was funded by USAID and the World Bank. On election day, Radio UNTAET broadcast a series of live press briefings from the Election Press Center as the preliminary voter turnout results were announced, and in the weeks following the election, virtually every election announcement made at the Election Press Center was broadcast live.

It should be noted that Radio UNTAET's outreach was considerably enhanced by the distribution to Timorese nationwide of 8,000 Japanese government-donated, wind-up, solar powered radios early in the year and by 4,000 Australian-government-donated wind-up, solar powered radios distributed in August.

Media Access Given to Electoral Candidates

OCPI produced a set of "Broadcast Media Guidelines" to insure the integrity of its coverage. The Broadcast Media Guidelines provided for electoral candidates to have ample and equal direct access to OCPI broadcast and print facilities in order to reach a nationwide audience. It also stipulated that news coverage of political activity during the electoral campaign be done on a daily basis. This conforms to routine reporting standards. It also stipulated that UNTAET media would seek to adequately cover and balance all reports on the campaign activities of the political parties, including those of the smaller parties and independent candidates.

OCPI was also the catalyst in creating a three-member, independent Media Mediation Panel. It is similar to those created on other UN missions. It was funded by UNDP and existed to respond to any complaints from political parties, candidate and others regarding the fairness of UNTAET media coverage. The original intention was to create a monitoring component to the panel as well. It would register the duration and content of all UNTAET broadcasts and made this information available to all political parties, candidates and others. Due to budgetary, staff and time constraints, formal monitoring was not feasible - although both Radio UNTAET and TVTL kept logs of their programming which were made available, as were the recorded programmes, to the MMP.



Televizaun Timor Lorosae (TVTL) and Radio UNTAET undertook three main programming initiatives to give all political parties and independent candidates fair and balanced access to their

airwaves. These were consistent with the "Strategy for the Equality of Women" outlined by the SRSG that provided for additional airtime to be allocated to women candidates of those parties with a higher number of women running in the elections. Thus political parties with at least 30 per cent women candidates contesting in winnable positions, and all female independent candidates received twice the airtime of those who did not meet the criteria.

Direct Access Programming

This was funded by UNDP and produced by independent producers and gave each political party and independent candidate five minutes per week for six weeks to present their political platforms on television and radio. These messages were broadcast in an unedited block segment that was aired for an average of 90 minutes each day. A new programme was made each weekend that was broadcast on each of the following seven days. Over the course of the election campaign, each political party and independent women candidate received more than three hours and 30 minutes of Direct Access broadcast time, with male independent candidates receiving half that amount. The Fretilin, UDT and Kota parties met the specific quota for women candidates in winnable positions and thus received extra programming time.

Soro Muto (Meet-the-Press) Programming

Soro Muto gave each party a 30-minute opportunity to take questions from media and civic society groups. These were aired twice each day. The Fretilin, UDT and Kota parties met the specific quota for women candidates in winnable positions and were thus given an extra programme featuring women representatives. Male independent candidates received 15 minutes of Soro Muto time, with female independent candidates receiving twice that amount.



Political Party Debates

Four were held with one solely for women electoral candidates. They provided political parties and independent candidates with more than 40 hours of UNTAET media access. All were aired in their entirety on television and radio, including three of them live. All the debates were aired at least twice.

In addition to Direct Access, Soro Muto, and the Political Debates, Radio UNTAET worked to ensure that all parties had more than one hour of interview time, and independent candidates had at least 45 minutes. Direct Access, Soro Muto, and the Political Debates accounted for roughly 90 percent of TVTL's in-house production over the election period, with its total amount of programming increasing by 300 per cent.



OCPI Coverage of the Constituent Assembly

Since the election results were announced, all of OCPI's media units have been involved in covering the inauguration of the 2nd Transitional Cabinet and of the Constituent Assembly and developments in the East Timorese Public Administration. Both Radio UNTAET and TVTL have been providing daily coverage of proceedings in the Constituent Assembly, much of it live.

An Assessment

The Media Mediation Panel in its final report correctly stressed OCPI's need to serve two masters: both the public information function of UNTAET and East Timor's need for independent reporting as a model for the future. The MMP members went on to state that "we were impressed with OCPI's overall commitment to fairness and balanced coverage of the political process."

This overall assessment has in fact been reinforced by general praise from all sectors of East Timor, and from the fact that since the election results were announced there has not been a single complaint from a political party, candidate, or anyone else for that matter, about UNTAET's media coverage.

The high electoral turnout of 91.3 per cent is at least in part attributable to the success of OCPI's media and its cooperative efforts with the Civil Registration Unit, the Civic Education Unit and the IEC. It is also due no doubt to the hard work and secure climate fostered by the Peace Keepers, CivPol and both East Timor's National Police Service and its Defense Force.



The high turnout also has to be put in context: Only as recently as April 2001, the Asia Foundation issued a report declaring how ill-informed the Timorese people were about the elections and their participation. The data was from well before the time UNTAET Civil Registration and Civic Education efforts had started. The high voter turn-out clearly demonstrates that these campaigns proved highly effective in informing Timorese about the process.

The election results - a large but not sweeping victory for Fretilin and a respectable showing by a handful of other parties - attest to the informed basis on which people voted. An overwhelming victory by Fretilin would have signaled that the electorate voted out of blind loyalty and had little knowledge of other viable options. The results suggest the opposite, an informed voter population that was well aware of its options.



Another sign that UNTAET Media may have proved responsive and effective during the electoral period is the absence of criticism post-election. Before the campaign period began on 15 July, political parties had raised serious doubts and suspicions about UNTAET's ability to be impartial. Those concerns prove to be completely unjustified. The Media Mediation Panel, itself, asserted in its final report that there remains "a deep suspicion on the part of many electoral parties regarding the underlying fairness of the UN media." We have to date found no evidence of this. Radio UNTAET and TVTL have regularly interviewed members of the political parties since the election and the issue of UNTAET media fairness has not once been raised. The unanimity in which all the political parties have accepted the election results attests to the fairness of the entire process.

OCPI's media units covered the elections with a limited number of staff and lean resources. TVTL and Radio UNTAET have a fraction of the employees that would be found in normal broadcast newsrooms, particularly during a national election. What is surprising is that they both were able to exponentially increase, at existing staff levels, their editorial output during the election period. Much of this new programming,



such as the large political debates and Soto Muto, had never been previously attempted by them. And remarkably, it was being done in newsrooms and production facilities in which training and capacity building was an on-going process.

One effective way that OCPI increased its coverage was to have TV, Radio and Print journalists share vehicles together on stories. Often it was a necessity given the dearth of OCPI vehicles, particularly in the districts.

The challenges OCPI has confronted in recent months have provided a valuable learning experience, with surprisingly few errors. OCPI is well prepared now to cover the Presidential elections. Nonetheless, there are adjustments that need to be made in anticipation of that election and others to follow. Here are some concerns that need to be addressed:

- It would be desirable that staffing levels and training be increased at Radio UNTAET, the Publications Unit and particularly TVTL well before the elections so that they can better respond to the challenges of a national campaign. Increasing staff levels may be difficult however given mission downsizing.
- A Media Monitoring and Mediation Panel as well as any other support programmes must be in place well before the campaign begins. Next round the Panel must include a fully functioning media monitoring component to track the duration and content of all broadcasts.
- District reporting capabilities, including equipment, should be enhanced and in operation much earlier to provide better planned and more extensive and systematic coverage of candidates and electoral activities in all districts.

- Some communication mistakes emerged at TVTL during the elections, due principally to it being understaffed. The problems are being addressed by the introduction of better communication procedures, particularly in regards to programme schedules and in terms of more clearly defined areas of responsibility.

- The final election issue of Tais Timor was delayed in transport from Darwin, so that copies for the districts arriving too late. This is both a logistics and a production problem that calls for better overall coordination and for all sections of the mission to understand the priority such publications should be given at crucial times.

- OCPI had an inadequate number of vehicles to the task - particularly in the districts where the PIO's beg and borrow for transport, often without success. More and better distribution of vehicles is essential in covering future campaigns.

- The political parties and candidates were briefed as to OCPI's election media plan. But there was still some misunderstanding. In future elections, even greater effort needs to be made to insure they clearly understand, well in advance of the campaign, OCPI's capabilities and its limitations. The same applies to their understanding of the role and function of the Media Monitoring and Mediation Panel.

- The political parties and candidates should have been better organized and supported in providing useful information about themselves and their platforms. The Publications Unit, in particular, was hampered in publishing substantive information because it was not being provided.

