

# President Xanana Gusmão: A transforming leadership

*Sara Niner, Alola Foundation*

I was born in Manatuto. My mother said it was either on the night of the 20<sup>th</sup> of June or in the early hours of the 21<sup>st</sup>, 1946, in the scorching heat that ripens the rice. By then, my sister Felismina, born two years earlier, was probably enjoying childhood delights in the balmy afternoon of a coastal village: an earthenware bowl of steaming chicken soup, with locusts from the plains at harvest time, or with balichao: seafood preserves whose aroma of algae would waft even into a child's dreams, interrupted by the shrieks of fright at the sticky touch of dead octopus and amid stories of crocodiles. Only the Bible and the civilization of colonialism were able to destroy the bonds that tied the Timorese to their pair of goats, their vegetable plot and their beliefs in sacred sites (Gusmão 1994:4).

Evocative with joyful indigenous imagery the opening epigraph above comes from the autobiography of the first President of Timor-Leste, Xanana Gusmão. It was a text written secretly in his Indonesian prison cell in 1994. Xanana's birth in 1946 was attended not only by the native midwives of his hometown of Manatuto on the north coast, but also by the ghostly figure of the *Grande Dame* of European colonialism, Portugal. This light-skinned baby was delivered into the old world of Portuguese Timor, a society founded on the greatness of Portugal's early discoveries and fed by racism and colonial oppression.

The conflict between the two worlds, native and colonial, framed his early years. Xanana developed an ambivalent and conciliatory relationship to his Portuguese colonisers, encompassing both a hatred of their racism and repression, and a great love of their culture and language. As a young man Xanana's ever growing disenchantment with his white masters became channelled into the positive but competitive projects of succeeding in the civil service and building up an exclusive Timorese soccer team who could beat the Portuguese at their own game. In fact when some Timorese were told of his leadership in the early 1980s they said, 'Who? The goalkeeper?' (Niner 2004:34).

His habit of transcending conventional boundaries from an early age and his uncompromising determination to follow his own unique vision remain strong elements of his personality in leadership. Xanana expresses his vision articulately and convincingly not just through his political writings but also passionately through his poetry. A key element of his leadership is an ability to communicate a vision that people can relate to and commit themselves to.

Until the 1970s the Portuguese colony of Timor was in a colonial time warp in the midst of newly independent Southeast Asian neighbours. But on 5 May 1974 the new Portuguese regime authorised the establishment of political parties as part

of the long overdue process of decolonisation. In his 1994 autobiography, Xanana recalls his scepticism about this new political process that was creating tensions and divisions in Timorese society: 'I struggled between getting involved and keeping to the sidelines. It was not that I did not want to join in, but I could see that the situation could get completely out of hand.' But months later he says he realised that, 'if I wanted to fight for my Homeland there was only one way to do so,' and during FRETILIN's first year anniversary celebrations on 20 May 1975 he joined them (Gusmão 1994:21). Yet as he further details in his autobiography he was always uncomfortable with open conflict and always sought to negotiate and compromise.

## Resistance

On 28 November 1975, FRETILIN declared East Timor independent at a formal ceremony outside the palace in Dili and named Xavier do Amaral the first President of the Democratic Republic of East Timor (RD'TL) and Nicolau Lobato Prime Minister. Xanana, who was then working for the new Department of Information as a journalist and newspaper editor, was nominated to the Central Committee, FRETILIN's 50-member policy making council. Nine days later, on 7 December 1975, the Indonesian military invaded Dili.

Armed with a recently augmented arsenal of modern NATO weapons taken from Portuguese stocks, 20,000 FRETILIN troops put up substantial resistance for the next three years. Behind FRETILIN lines life was easier than in occupied areas: food was still adequate and people were united. Xanana, previously trained during a three-year period of national service in the Portuguese Army, became a Falintil fighter, then commander. He lived in the mountain and bush camps alongside rural peasants who still today make up the mass of the Timorese population.

Day-to-day life in the traditional villages was organised by kinship and locality in a strictly hierarchical society. The local hereditary king or *Luirai* was regarded as having divine attributes and his power was almost absolute. The Timorese lived according to animist *Lulik* belief systems where the living and ancestor spirits co-existed. A growing intimacy with indigenous culture during the war profoundly affected his conception and promotion of Timorese or '*Maubere*' nationalism. This resulted in acceptance of his leadership by traditional society, a privilege not extended to many other leaders, and to Xanana's belief that he possessed a deep intuitive knowledge of the desires of the average Timorese.

Sacred home to the souls of Timorese ancestors, Mount Matebian was the site where Xanana Gusmão's life changed and he was transformed forever into an *aswain Timor*, a warrior son of Timor. It was this crisis that transformed Xanana from an apprentice leader to a serious and hardened reorganiser and military commander of the remaining resistance forces. There can be little doubt that the gruesome events he witnessed during the endless bombardments had a dramatic effect on him. They forced him to take the initiative, escaping the terrifying encirclement down the back of the mountain with other surviving Falintil.

## The dark years

This period and the years to follow, which the East Timorese describe as the really 'dark years' of the struggle, can be described as a crisis transformation and they undoubtedly toughened him. During the brutal 24-year war with Indonesia Xanana was transformed from a young apolitical outsider into a hardened guerrilla commander and keen political strategist who ultimately became the central unifying figure of East Timorese nationalism.

Throughout 1979 and 1980 Xanana and his Falintil accomplices walked from village to village through enemy strongholds to consult with the people about whether to continue or end the war and to contact remnant resistance forces. This period of grassroots consultation became the basis for his decision to reorganise the battered resistance. What Xanana learnt about guerrilla war during this time served him as 'the base for an organizational structure of the resistance' (Gusmão 1994: 58). His unilateral decision on Matebian to trust in people who had surrendered and nurture a clandestine network provided him with the first essential building block in the task of reconstructing the resistance. A mark of his leadership style evident from this time was a willingness to include, and an ability to negotiate with, anyone who was willing to serve the resistance.

## The National Council for Revolutionary Resistance

In March 1981 the First National Conference for the Re-organization of the Country was held near Lacluta. Clandestine grassroots organisations were set up inside the camps and population centres of the Indonesian occupied zones to support the armed resistance in the bush. Xanana was elected National Political Commissar, President of the CRRN (the *Conselho Revolucionária de Resistência Nacional*, the National Council for Revolutionary Resistance) and Commander in Chief of Falintil, thereby assuming the top leadership positions in all spheres of activity. Xanana explained his central role and the acceptance of his leadership at the conference:

At the conference there were thirty or more political cadres. There were two or three guerrilla companies but they didn't participate. I directed the conference explaining the past and the structure for the future; tracing new strategies, new policies. As part of my proposal I appointed each of the cadres to an activity. They all agreed to the proposals I put to them. When we referred to the leadership evidently they accepted me; there was no voting. I was unanimously acclaimed leader. I am not trying to justify the method, but since we had escaped Matebian on 22 November 1978, I was the one who had been responsible ... this was why I was already accepted as the leader at the conference. You can understand if you see the process as beginning at Matebian. If there had been another he would have been leader (Niner 2004:106).

Charismatic leaderships often emerge in times of crisis, operating in the absence of formal rules, shaped by their transitory and deeply personal natures, and Xanana's leadership fits into this mould (see, for example, Willner 1968). We can trace Xanana's development during just such a period of history, from a young unconfident, uncommitted outsider, to a man who had created for himself a central role as charismatic healer to his shattered nation in 1999.

## Charismatic leadership: Strengths and weaknesses

One crucial ability of Xanana's is to empathise intelligently with, and relate to, all sides. This fostered a focus on conflict resolution and in turn translated into a moderate and inclusive leadership style. Such a focus on settling disputes and establishing consensus is the mark of a 'middle-way' leader, which has been described by political psychologist Graham Little (Little 1983, 1997a, 1997b). Such leaders are charming, gregarious, future-oriented and often charismatic. With these attributes they are able to draw diverse groups together by negotiation and compromise. One weakness of such a leadership is that it hinges upon the charismatic leaders themselves as they create an expanding circle of colleagues and supporters with themselves at the centre. Other weaknesses include a tendency to substitute themselves for representative organisations in the belief they know intuitively what their people want.

I assert that Xanana believed the unity required for the independence movement to succeed could only be achieved by leading alone, above the internal factions, continually brokering political compromise both internally and externally. While some may protest, history has proved him right. He became the man at the centre, often solitary, searching for allies, and soothing grievances and grief: a middle-way leader to use Little's expression. However, this independent leadership style also fostered a propensity toward unilateral and undemocratic decision-making fitting to a military commander during a time of war but harder to maintain in the confines of a modern constitutional democracy that Timor-Leste now struggles to foster.

## Imprisonment

In November 1992, in the lead up to the first anniversary of the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre, Xanana was captured in Dili. He was sentenced to life imprisonment, but by March 1993 again took up leadership of the movement from his prison cell. Imprisonment actually increased Xanana's international visibility and some hailed him as the Mandela of Southeast Asia. In prison, for the first time he became accessible to representatives of the UN, foreign governments, and human rights organisations. He also made invaluable links with Indonesian political prisoners, many of them important members of the pro-democracy movement. From his prison cell in Jakarta thousands of kilometres away from Dili he was now more central to the independence movement than ever.

## September 1999 and its aftermath

In the lead up to the 1999 ballot, Xanana warned of possible violence and called for armed international peacekeepers, but was forced to compromise and agreed to proceed with the referendum. The dramatic and violent consequences of the Timorese choosing their independence are still grieved in Timor-Leste and a matter for domestic and international courts. In September 1999 the Indonesian government released Xanana from house arrest amidst the extensive military and militia slayings in East Timor that followed the announcement of the pro-independence vote. Initially taking refuge in the British Embassy in Jakarta after receiving death threats, Xanana fled to Darwin in Northern Australia. On September 15 1999, following massive violence, the United States at last pressured Indonesia into accepting a peacekeeping force and the UN Security Council authorised an Australian-led multinational force (INTERFET) to restore peace and security in East Timor. After travelling the world to garner support Xanana returned home to a devastated East Timor on October 22 1999. In sorrowful scenes of mass public grieving Xanana made emotional pleas for all Timorese to return home, to forgive and to rebuild. Only a true charismatic leader could have managed such scenes on a national scale.

Xanana often appears to be a reluctant politician and president and has given several reasons for his reluctance since the early 1990s. He has described a blood oath he took with other Falintil guerrillas, saying, 'that I would never accept any reward, for I was only at the service of an ideal shared by us all, nor would I ever foster the ambition for an office or position, for I was not struggling for that reason'. He explained his reluctance further in his 1999 New Year's message.

The history of the Third World is repeating itself: the leader of the resistance will end up as president, even if he is not up to the task; guerrilla commanders will be generals and politicians will strive to become ministers. All because we were

the heroes; all because we worked hard, suffered more than others! If this were to happen, it would be an outrage to the whole meaning of our struggle, the whole meaning of the sacrifices made by our people. It would be a betrayal (Gusmão 1998:231).

He now has to live with this self-styled betrayal and it must cause certain feelings of reluctance and ambivalence about his current position.

## 2005

Once again he is alone and in the middle, brokering a future between his people and their old enemies. Somehow, like Nelson Mandela (who gave him much counsel during a visit to Salemba Prison in 1995 and since), Xanana has reached an empathetic understanding of the enemies of his past, he does not hate them and is able to look to the future, embrace them and explore a process of reconciliation, which is often criticised by his own people. Most struggle to understand and wonder where Xanana's passion for reconciliation and forgiveness could spring from. While it comprises a degree of diplomatic and economic pragmatism, it could be more practically explained as the natural inclination of a middle-way leader toward negotiation and compromise. It could also be explained more idealistically as the last resort of a man who has fully appreciated the worst people can do to one another, and who has decided to embrace its opposite. The leadership the East Timorese people have invested in Xanana has given him the power not simply to survive the tragedy of recent history, but to overcome it. Xanana's is a privileged position that accords him the power to forgive and imagine a brighter future. Not everyone is so empowered, yet it is not a bad example in a country struggling to overcome its past and build that brighter future.

## References

- Gusmão, X 1994, in Sarah Niner (ed.) 2000, *To Resist is to Win: The Autobiography of Xanana Gusmão with selected letters and speeches*, Aurora/David Lovell Press, Melbourne.
- Gusmão, X 1998, in Sarah Niner (ed.) 2000, *To Resist is to Win: The Autobiography of Xanana Gusmão with selected letters and speeches*, Aurora/David Lovell Press, Melbourne.
- Little, Graham 1983, 'Hawke in Place: Evaluating Narcissism', *Meanjin*, (4) 431-444.
- Little, Graham 1997a, 'The two narcissisms: comparing Hawke and Keating', in J Brett (ed.) *Political Lives*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 16-27.
- Little, Graham 1997b, 'In-between Man: A profile of John Alderdice, Leader of the Alliance Party in Northern Ireland', Paper submitted to the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland, July 21-24, 1997.
- McIntyre, Angus 2001, 'Middle Way Leadership in Indonesia: Sukarno and Abdurrahman Wahid Compared', in Lloyd Grayson and Shannon Smith (eds), *Indonesia Today: Challenges of History*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

- Niner, S 2004, 'Our Brother, *Mann Bo'*: The Biography of Xanana Gusmão, Leader of the East Timorese Struggle', PhD thesis, Latrobe University, Melbourne.
- Niner, S 2001, 'A Long Journey of Resistance: The Origins and Struggle of CNRT', in R Tanter, Selden and S Shalom (eds), *Bitter Flowers, Sweet Flowers: East Timor, Indonesia and the World Community*, Rowan and Littlefield, USA.
- Willner, A R 1968, *Charismatic Political Leadership: A Theory*, Research Monograph 32, Center for International Studies, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, Princeton.