

Current status and issues regarding Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership

By YAMADA Mitsuru

1. Domestic political situation in Timor-Leste

The presidential election held on April 19, 2022 saw José Ramos-Horta elected as president with an overwhelming 62.1% of the national vote, receiving support from the country's national hero Xanana Gusmão. On May 20, 2022, Ramos-Horta, who previously served as president from 2007 to 2012, also marked the 20th anniversary of Timor-Leste's restoration of independence as the first independent state of the 21st century; this date also coincided with his inauguration as president.

The domestic politics of Timor-Leste is characterized by intense competition between the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) and the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT). Around 51% of Timor-Leste's population falls between the ages of 15 and 35, with a young median voter. This demographic segment is increasingly getting discontent about the political instability triggered by these political rivalries.

2. Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership

The aspiration for ASEAN membership has been a longstanding goal for Timor-Leste. The newly elected president Ramos-Horta said that Timor-Leste has been pursuing independence and ASEAN membership since 1974, when Portugal relinquished its sovereignty over the region. In fact, following the country's independence in 2002, many government officials have reportedly emphasized the importance of ASEAN membership for Timor-Leste's economic growth and security. After independence, Timor-Leste became a member of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) and the United Nations in 2002. In 2005, it joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and became a signatory of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 2007. In 2011, Timor-Leste officially applied for ASEAN membership. The country hosted the CPLP Summit in 2014 and joined the WTO in 2016. It signed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in 2018 and ratified it in 2022. Recognizing Timor-Leste's preparation for membership, it was agreed in principle at the ASEAN Summit held on November 11, 2022 that the country would become the 11th member state.

Securing membership in ASEAN entails unanimous approval from all member countries during the ASEAN Summit, as recommended by the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC). Starting around 2019, Timor-Leste has undergone the process of assessments by three ASEAN Communities: the Political-Security Community, the Economic Community, and the Socio-Cultural Community. These assessments are vital to ascertain Timor-Leste's preparedness for membership and are subsequently presented to the ACC before being recommended to the Summit. The assessments from the three communities raised concerns about Timor-Leste's high dependence on oil and natural gas as well as the downward trend of its income levels. Evaluations also consider the potential economic growth that Timor-Leste's membership could bring to the region and its contribution to socio-cultural development.

3. Reactions of experts and governments of ASEAN countries to Timor-Leste's membership

So how do experts and governments in each of the ASEAN countries assess Timor-Leste's potential membership? According to a report by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, frequently used as an attitude survey in the ASEAN region, on a whole, 61.5% of ASEAN experts were in favor of Timor-Leste's membership, while 15.8% were in disagreement. However, there were differences at the country level, with 93.3% and 67.8% of respondents in Cambodia and Indonesia, respectively, being in agreement; conversely, only 27.8% of respondents in Myanmar supported Timor-Leste's membership.

These trends were similarly reflected at the government level as well: in Cambodia, which held the ASEAN chair in 2022, Prime Minister Hun Sen actively endorsed Timor-Leste's membership. Singapore initially took a negative stance, expressing concerns that Timor-Leste's membership might hinder ASEAN's economic development due to economic disparities with other countries. However, it has subsequently leaned toward a supportive stance, and is currently offering personnel training for membership. Indonesia has established a friendly relationship with Timor-Leste after Gusmão took steps to make peace immediately after Timor-Leste's independence, and has since been supporting its membership. Malaysia also supports Timor-Leste's membership and has offered cooperation through NGOs to train English-speaking personnel in the country. Furthermore, the "roadmap" for official membership based on the abovementioned reasons was presented, and so Timor-Leste's membership at last year's summit was granted "in principle."

4. Timor-Leste in the future

As stated by Gusmão, the diplomatic policy of Timor-Leste revolves around “never make enemies and not joint alliances.” China has positioned Timor-Leste as an importance base for the Belt and Road Initiative, actively engaging with the country. However, it is worth mentioning that Timor-Leste is located a mere 600 km from Darwin, an important military base for Australia. Timor-Leste is acutely aware of these circumstances and has avoided leaning toward either the United States or China. In view of this, its advocacy for the centrality of ASEAN as well as its pursuit of ASEAN membership, which participates in many international frameworks, are important aspects in terms of security. The economy of Timor-Leste experienced a decline in growth rate, plummeting by 8.6% in 2022 compared to the previous year due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The country has shown hope and interest in securing economic support from China through the Belt and Road Initiative. It also seeks direct foreign investments through the ASEAN Economic Community and strives for market integration.

Timor-Leste faces various challenges regarding its ASEAN membership. First, the nation faces economic stagnation due to its heavy dependence on oil and natural gas. Second, becoming an ASEAN member requires an annual operating cost of \$2.5 million. Unlike the EU, ASEAN mandates all member states to pay equal operating costs. Another major issue is the lack of human resources. ASEAN holds over 750 conferences annually. So, can Timor-Leste secure sufficient human resources for this? Over 6,000 workers have left Timor-Leste for countries such as South Korea over the past 10 years, while technical intern trainees have gone to Japan. Under such circumstances, it would not be easy for Timor-Leste to provide human resources for various ASEAN conferences. Additionally, Timor-Leste’s official languages are Tetun and Portuguese, and the lack of English education, which is the official language of ASEAN, compounds the issue.

(This is an English translation of an outline of the lecture delivered by YAMADA Mitsuru, Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, Waseda University, at the 95th Policy Plenary Meeting of CEAC on April 21, 2023.)