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Major Alfredo Alves Reinado: Cycles of Torture, Pain and Violence in East Timor

Sara Niner

Introduction

Sara Niner of Monash University writes that the death of Alfredo Reinado during the attack he led on the president of Timor Leste (East Timor) on February 11th must be understood in the context of "post-traumatic stress syndrome [that] affects one third of the population" of East Timor. Such personal histories, notes Niner, do "not affect everybody the same. Some have survived such treatment and it has transformed them into deeply empathetic, generous, thoughtful human beings able to forgive the perpetrators." Reinado's childhood experiences and personality "propelled him on to ever increasing grandiose and dangerous behaviour." Niner argues that "the cycle of violence continues and the pain and trauma remains unaddressed and unacknowledged, even amongst the leadership. Xanana Gusmao's example of forgiveness is instructive but not always possible. In every program and project, every office and workplace, every team and community a strategy to deal with these issues should be built into activities."

The life of Alfredo Reinado, who died in the attack on the house of President Jose Ramos Horta early on the morning of February 11th, like that of many people in East Timor, reads like a 21st Century tale from Dickens: after a childhood of cruel and unusual punishment the twisted character returns the treatment doubly to those around him. He was 41 years old when he died, but the disturbing events of his life seem barely able to fit into those years. The effects of abandonment, humiliation and torture as a child and young man must have shattered any healthy psychological development. This combined with an ego ever desirous of attention and notoriety propelled him on to ever increasing grandiose and dangerous behaviour.

The effects of this kind of deep damage must be understood much better in the context of East Timor. Post-traumatic stress syndrome affects one third of the population; half have witnessed acts of serious violence. It does not affect everybody the same. Some have survived such treatment and it has transformed them into deeply empathetic, generous, thoughtful human beings able to forgive the perpetrators. Gusmao and the three wonderful people he presents in the documentary 'A hero's journey' are examples of this.[1] Gusmao sincerely believes in this process of forgiveness but not everyone is capable of doing so, and Reinado was an example of a deeply incapable person.



Xanana Gusmao and Alfredo Reinado

Events in Dili on the day Reinado died appeared part death-wish. After a year in the bush—left to stew—he attempted to reassert himself at the highest levels of national political leadership. What first appeared as a blood-thirsty plot to assassinate the President and Prime-Minister was subsequently described as a bungled kidnap attempt; there are indications that perhaps Reinado was dead before Horta was hit. To believe he could carry out the kidnapping of the President and Prime-Minister with so few men is evidence of an inflated idea of his own capacity and reach.

The fact that he and partner Gastao Salsinha got so far shows how ineffective the security forces still are in Timor-Leste and how little has changed since the traumatic events of 2006. However, it cannot be easy to protect a President and Prime-Minister who refuse to admit any vulnerability: both men walked confidently into life-threatening situations on the day of the attack.



Pvt. Solvado Soadares and Lt. Gasta Salsinha (right)

Damaged history

It is hard to separate fact from fiction in the unbelievable events of Reinado's life. He was born in Aileu in November 1966, in the west of East Timor, to a Timorese mother and Portuguese father. His uncle in Dili, Victor Alves, said he took care of him for part of his childhood. Alves himself was a staunch member of the Fretilin resistance to Indonesian occupation who was charged and acquitted in Timor after 1999 with killing pro-Indonesian militia.

As Indonesian paratroopers invaded Dili in December 1975 Reinado's family moved southwards to Turiscai along with the resistance army Falintil and the vast majority of the population of the capital and its surrounds. According to the version of events that Reinado recounted to the Commission for Truth, Reception and Reconciliation (CAVR) he became separated from his mother in the chaos and travelled with other Timorese. He was 11 years old.

On that journey I witnessed immense suffering: people dying of hunger, parents killing their children because they were making too much noise and they were worried they would alert the Indonesian military; children leaving their aged parents to die; decaying corpses; and members of political parties killing other Timorese because of political differences. The men who killed for political reasons were very cruel. Their faces were like robots or machines.[2]

His fate as a young boy was 'adoption' by a member of the Indonesian military, which meant being kept as a virtual slave. He was described as a TBO (Tenaga Bantuan Operasi) or porter for Indonesian soldiers, carrying their goods and being forced to take part in their operations. He was treated cruelly and witnessed all the excesses and violence of the occupation including rape and execution.

During the time with the army I saw horrific things ... during an operation in Turiscai I saw them tie the men to trees and rape the women. I saw women being dragged away by two or three men who then used them in whatever way they wanted.

One boy was executed for refusing to carry goods. This experience for young boys during the occupation was repeated over and over: the infamous Eurico Guterres, militia leader in 1999, was similarly treated. Reinado was then hidden in a box and transported aboard a ship to Sulawesi and remained as a slave to the family of the Indonesian Sergeant.

Obviously this treatment had brutalising effects as one victim recounted in the early 1990s:

We were always frightened. The young ones growing up became rough in their character with the violence. They grew unsteady in their temperament, irritable and frightened. Something had been stolen from these young people and they did not trust.[3]

When Reinado was 18 he managed to escape to Kalimantan, living on his wits. Finally he got back to East Timor where he found his mother again and worked for his uncle in Dili. He said he also worked with the resistance in the 1980s. This was around the time of the Santa Cruz massacre when over 200 mostly young students taking part in a funeral procession were shot down by Indonesian soldiers in November 1991.



Indonesia, East Timor, Australia

By July 1995 Reinado escaped from East Timor once again—captaining a boat to Australia with 18 other Timorese, including his young wife and baby. Their arrival created a welcome media stir and he received a certain notoriety for his actions. He was seen as a hero by many supporters of the East Timorese cause in Australia. However they had arrived as refugees and spent some time in detention, another site of trauma for many. Some Timorese in Melbourne remember meeting him at this time and find it hard to believe it is the same person who turned up armed to President Horta's home on February 11th. The question is: when did he transform into the Rambo-styled rebel he became? Was this notoriety from the Australian arrival the beginning?

For the next four years he lived in Perth, with his wife and children, who today mourn for him. Working in the heavily masculine environment of the Western Australian shipyards, he picked up some Australian affectations, certain sayings and drinking 'VB'.

Reinado returned to East Timor after the 1999 referendum that resulted in East Timor's independence. With some experience of ships he was given a position commanding the two patrol-boats that made up the East Timorese navy. An incident followed which led to his demotion: perhaps a first indication of problems to come. As part of the Defence Forces co-operation program he received training in a program affiliated with the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra. Afterwards he was made Commander of the military police unit of F-FDTL, the new army of East Timor.

Neighbours tell of terrible bouts of domestic violence between Reinado and his family in Dili. Domestic violence is widespread in East Timor, and is the country's most reported crime. Some blame the culture of violence fostered during the 24-year occupation and the trauma of the final conflict in 1999. However there are other factors too: during the conflict women took up traditional male roles both inside and outside the home and carried out military and clandestine duties as part of the resistance. Many women want to retain some measure of their independence but men would rather they retreated back into the home. This leads to tensions that are common to post-war societies.

2006 Crisis

By 2006 the new nation of Timor-Leste was in turmoil. After its hard won independence in 1999, formally declared in 2002, the process of national reconstruction was shattered by bitter internal conflict resting on a bed of endemic poverty and disillusionment with independence. The conflicts and rivalries in Timorese society are multifarious but in 2006 they combined to create a crisis that saw 37 people killed in violence between warring factions of the army and police. Approximately 100,000 persons were internally displaced and some still remain in the depressing camps two years later. Development was set back to 1999 scorched-earth

levels. The security sector, both Police and Army, ceased to function and poor, uneducated, disenfranchised gangs of young men filled the vacuum with chaotic violence, looting and burning. These boys were those who had witnessed the terrible violence of 1999 as children. However many were paid by different political factions. The Timorese leadership and government did not effectively manage this situation and a profound loss of faith in the direction of the political leadership has resulted.

Most of the male leadership of East Timor have been engaged in a brutal and bloody war for most of their adult life. A culture of the warrior and violence existed from colonial times through to the Indonesian occupation. Most have suffered great trauma and made dreadful sacrifices for independence including those of their fellow soldiers, close friends and family. Their mothers, wives and daughters have often been victims of sexual abuse at the hands of the Indonesian military or its militias and this was used as a weapon of war.

The central conflict in 2006 was between factions in the 1,800-strong army (F-FDTL). A substantial group of soldiers submitted a written petition about discrimination and other grievances and protested in Dili. Led by Gastao Salisinha they eventually abandoned their barracks with their weapons. On 16 March, 2006, 591 of these 'petitioners' were unceremoniously dismissed. In April they held a peaceful demonstration which attracted around 2,000 supporters. After a week this demonstration erupted into violence. Petitioners burned cars and shops: five civilians were killed. Against advice the government deployed F-FDTL to assist the police force, PNTL restore order and contain the petitioners.

This situation was complicated also by conflict between PNTL and F-FDTL. The establishment of both the Army and Police Forces under the auspices of the UN regime has been heavily criticised by experts. The politicisation of both forces was the result of the inept processes of selection and training of candidates. Simply put, some followed the Fretilin government and some followed Gusmao, then President, who had been historically at odds over how the resistance and now the government should be run.

On 3 May, Reinado, who had been ordered to chase down and 'contain' the petitioners, abandoned his post along with other military police and regular police officers. Instead they joined the petitioners. Reinado fled to the hills outside Dili, and, helped by a network of supporters, established a hilltop base and lines of communication with those in the capital. Reinado, was seen to have lined up behind the "Xanana camp" against the government.

Three weeks later, on the 23rd, Reinado ambushed F-FDTL and PNTL and five were killed. He was captured in July by Portuguese and Australian troops, who had come to assist the government to halt the violence. Initially he was charged with illegally possessing weapons but his charges grew to include eight counts of murder. His acts of daring also grew when in August 2006, he led more than 50 prisoners to break down a wall and escape from the prison.



Reinado and bodyguard

This was the beginning of his public notoriety and during an SBS documentary in March 2007 he appeared to warm to seeing his image on television. A narcissist stared down the barrel of the camera. He became a hero for many of the disenfranchised in this western part of Timor he was from and in Dili amongst the youth who started dressing like him.

To avoid yet more violence the Government offered Reinado a deal under which he would hand over his weapons and testify at a special hearing. Reinado instead led raids on several police posts capturing more weapons and ammunition. In March 2007 Gusmao ordered Australian-led forces to surround Reinado. He evaded capture but five of his men were killed. It was said he was significantly affected by their deaths. He then languished up in the hills of Same, with Horta and Xanana unwilling to sort out the issue of what to do about him until the presidential and parliamentary elections (which they respectively won) were conducted during 2007. Some felt to kill or capture Reinado would lead to a civil war. Gusmao the older guerrilla leader had lost patience with the younger man who was holding the country to ransom. Reinado posted a video on 'You Tube' taunting Gusmao.

A week to die

Just a week before he died Reinado was visited by three MPs. Their location was no secret. The mostly Australian International Stabilisation Force who had previously indicated they wanted nothing further to do with catching Reinado turned up at the meeting place. Reinado and Salsinha fired up to eight warning shots. They made desperate-sounding phone calls to people with links to those in power, screaming they were surrounded and for the troops to be withdrawn. Apparently it was all a mistake by the ISF, a major blunder we have heard little about, but which may have created a feeling of unease in the rebels.

Ramos-Horta had gone out of his way to be conciliatory toward Reinado, waiving the arrest warrant and holding an informal face-to-face meeting with him. Investigators now report that on the day of the attack, Reinado and his men entered Horta's house, seemingly to await his return from his early morning walk, but were surprised by the day-shift of guards turning up early. Hearing the gunfire, Horta walked straight toward it telling an observer it would be OK. Horta must have felt he could control whatever was going on.

Gusmao had the same attitude. After receiving a call requesting him to stay in his house as the President had just been attacked, Gusmao immediately jumped in his car to sort things out. He proceeded down the hill to Dili, leaving his family behind. He was ambushed by rebels firing at his tyres but his driver refused to stop. Around the next corner they halted and ran into the bush fearing another ambush. Gusmao's reaction was one straight out of his guerrilla past. The bush was always the safe haven from the Indonesians. What other reactions does Gusmao harbour from his own tortured history?

While he was in still prison in 1999 Xanana met with Father Michael Apsley, well-known advocate of reconciliation who ran the Institute for Healing of Memories in South Africa. Apsley said Xanana told him that the Timorese were willing to forgive and reconcile and were not preoccupied with the past. Apsley told him that as leader his own pain and story had been acknowledged and recognised which enabled him to move forward and hold the views he did. However, many Timorese had not had this acknowledgment and would find it hard to reconcile and forgive. Xanana clearly understood the distinction but has in reality made little allowance for it, instead taking the pragmatic path and leading by example on this sensitive issue.

The Unfinished

Reinado's uncle Vitor Alves organised his funeral in Dili, reportedly attended by 2000 people.



Mourner at Reinado funeral

On 12 February he commented,

With the help of God with the fall of my nephew -of my son- the situation in Timor will improve. The situation of instability will finish once and for all and we can find peace. The boy is dead, finished. He will not create any more confusion, no more disgrace. Let us have a peaceful funeral. It is calm. It is finished.[4]

However it is not finished. All the stories like Reinado's are not finished and neither are the traumatised and unhinged reactions of so many to the brutal past and poverty-stricken present. This was made clear by the Commission for Truth, Reception and Reconciliation Report (2006). Many of the youth who carried out the violence in 2006 were the children who witnessed all the violence of 1999. They have received little help to overcome these events. The cycle of violence continues and the pain and trauma remains unaddressed and unacknowledged, even amongst the leadership. Until it is seriously addressed the cycle of violence will probably continue.

There are under-resourced programs in Dili that are working on the issues: PRADET (Psychosocial Recovery and Development East Timor) being the most long standing and obvious one.[5] A new one is the Association for Living Memory set up to assist ex-political prisoners. The Commission for Truth, Reception and Reconciliation (CAVR) report suggests further work that needs to be done. Xanana Gusmao's example of forgiveness is instructive but not always possible. In every program and project, every office and workplace, every team and community a strategy to deal with these issues should be built into activities.

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This is a slightly revised version of an article that appeared in the Austral Policy Forum on February 18, 2008. Posted at Japan Focus on February 18, 2008.

Notes

[1] A hero's journey, Grace Phan (Producer/Director), Luxlucis, 2006.

[2] Commission for Truth, Reception and Reconciliation (CAVR), Final Report 'Chega', 2006.

[3] Michele Turner, Telling, Sydney, University of NSW Press, 1992.

[4] "Não havia indícios de ataques em Timor, diz tio de rebelde" ['There were no indication of the attacks in Timor, says rebel's uncle'], Lusa, 12 Feb 2008.

[5] See PRADET Timor-Leste (Psychosocial Recovery and Development East Timor, or Recuperação no Desenvolvimento ba Trauma no Psisosocial iha Timor-Leste).

Further references

'Torture and Trauma in Post-conflict East Timor', J. Modvig, J. Pagaduan-Lopez, J. Rodenburg, C.M.D. Salud, R.V. Cabigon, and C.I.A. Panelo, The Lancet - Vol. 356, Issue 9243, Nov 2000.

'A Defiant Rebel to the End', Ben Doherty, The Age, 12 Feb, 2008.

'Braggart Rebel Died As He Lived', Jill Jolliffe, Sydney Morning Herald, 15 February 2008.

'East Timor- Alfredo Reinado', Journeyman Pictures, March 2007.

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