CHAPTER 7

The 2007 Elections

Following the political upheavals of 2006 and the uneasy political truce that had been entered into following the resignation as prime minister of Mari Alkatiri, many had hoped that 2007 would provide some relief from the previous political tensions. Gang fighting continued, if at a lower level, and house burnings had become more sporadic, if also regularized. Because it was an election year, there was much hope that the electoral process would resolve what had developed as a political deadlock between Fretilin as the majority party in government and the popular but non–Fretilin interim prime minister Jose Ramos-Horta. As was becoming something of a pattern of expectations, many hoped that the 2007 elections would not only break this political deadlock, but would also open the way toward a brighter future for East Timor. As with so many other aspirations for East Timor’s future, these hopes were, at best, only partially fulfilled.

Reflecting a common pattern for most of East Timor’s impoverished population, 2007 began less with celebration for the new year than with growing hunger. The “hungry season,” as old crop stores begin to run low but before new harvests came in, was hurting worse than usual. The previous season’s crops had been adversely affected by a short rainy season and, given the drought conditions that had affected East Timor since 2003, there was insufficient food in store to last over what was already a difficult time for most East Timorese. But in early 2007, not only were the previous season’s crops inadequate, but also the rainy season started very late and lasted only a few weeks. The 2007 crops, too, promised to be inadequate.

Malnutrition had long been a part of life in East Timor, exacerbated in the late 1970s and early 1980s by Indonesian military policy on resettlement, but always a feature of the harsh and often unforgiving landscape. The farthest point in an often drought-affected southeastern chain of islands, Timor’s topography and often unyielding soil has always meant that scratching a living from the
land was at best a precarious proposition. Almost half of East Timor’s children under five were chronically malnourished, with most of those regarded as severely malnourished. This phenomenon continues into school age children, and also women, about 30 percent of whom also suffered from malnutrition (WFP 2006).

The government had a policy of alleviating some of the worst of the “hungry season” by stockpiling purchases of rice and then distributing them in times of need. Yet in February 2007, the price of rice had risen from US$10 to US$15 per 20-kilo sack to US$35. This meant that most people who might have just scraped together enough money to buy rice at the lower price were either forced to buy much less rice or were entirely excluded from the market. In part, the increased price of rice reflected a surge in world food prices generally and of rice in particular starting in late 2006, affecting rice prices from January 2007. The main cause of this price rise was a global downturn in grain production in 2006 due to widespread drought, exacerbated by generalized inflation and in particular the increase in world oil prices, which has pushed up the cost of shipping as well as price competition for biofuel grains.

Yet the warehoused rice being held in Dili by the government had been purchased before the increase in food costs, while supplies continued to be available across the border in Indonesia. In short, there was a widespread suspicion that the government was stockpiling rice for political purposes. Later in the year this appeared to be confirmed when the government began to distribute rice as electoral booty to its supporters, in a twist on the old political term “pork barrelling.” But in early 2007, all that most people knew was that they were more hungry than usual, and the expected food relief was not available as they might have expected.

Many people talked about the possible outcomes of the coming elections while the government was trying to rebuild its shattered relationship with the majority of East Timorese. The international community, meanwhile, openly speculated about the range of political scenarios that could eventuate. In a small country, and especially a small capital city such as Dili, perhaps there was little else of much interest to discuss. But perhaps, too, given that the political stakes were high, tensions remained close to the surface and the political environment was never far from anyone’s thoughts. There was, in particular, increasing speculation at this time about the political intentions of the president, Xanana Gusmao, and the interim prime minister, Jose Ramos-Horta. It was becoming increasingly likely from this time that Gusmao would run for parliament, and that Ramos-Horta would probably contest the presidency. In a society that had long been politicized, after the events of 2006, knowledge that the people would go to the polls in 2007 to elect a new government