



# Timor-Leste's Pre-Election Environment

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Report by the International Republican Institute's  
Long-Term Election Observation Mission

June 21 to July 15, 2017

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International Republican Institute  
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*Timor-Leste's Pre-Election Environment: Interim Report by the International Republican Institute's Long-Term Election Observation Mission*

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## Introduction

On June 21, 2017 the International Republican Institute (IRI) deployed two long-term observers in advance of its election observation mission to monitor Timor-Leste's July 22, 2017 parliamentary elections. The observers, Mr. Joerg Meier and Dr. Ken Palmer, were assigned to cover the following districts:

- Mr. Joerg Meier: Baucau, Lautem, Manatuto, Manufahi and Viqueque
- Dr. Ken Palmer: Aileu, Ainaro, Bobonaro, Cova Lima, Dili, Ermera, Oecusse and Liquica

This report summarizes the findings from their first three weeks of observation. The content of this report should not be interpreted as representing the motivations of government officials or bodies, political parties, activists, media outlets or any other election-related stakeholders.

From June 21 to July 15, 2017, Mr. Meier and Dr. Palmer attended 110 meetings and events with election-related stakeholders, broken down into the following categories:

- 18 meetings with political party leaders, officials or representatives;
- 30 campaign events or rallies held by 13 different political parties;
- 20 meetings with the National Elections Commission (CNE) and the Technical Secretariat for Electoral Administration (STAE);
- Six meetings with the National Police of Timor-Leste (PNTL);
- 24 meetings with diplomatic or international organization representatives;
- Four meetings with civil society and domestic observation groups;
- Six meetings with other government officials; and
- Two meeting with private citizens.

Mr. Meier and Dr. Palmer recorded the following key findings:

### Electoral Administration

- CNE and STAE district-level offices are well-organized and ready to implement their mandates on Election Day.
- STAE district-level offices have noted an increase in the number of polling centers and polling stations for the parliamentary election in comparison to the March 2017 presidential election.
- STAE district-level offices noted that their three main concerns for Election Day are: transportation for STAE officials and sensitive voting materials; voter access to polling centers due to road conditions; and a lack of electricity at some polling centers.

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- The evidence suggests that there has been close cooperation and coordination between the PNTL, CNE, STAE and the political parties to ensure a calm, safe and peaceful electoral process.
  - STAE officials noted that the country's three largest political parties are expected to have party agent observers present at nearly every polling station, while other parties are expected to have a more limited number of observers.
  - CNE district-level offices continue to update the official campaign schedule and monitor campaign events by having CNE officials attend them. In some cases, parties have not informed CNE of changes to their campaign schedules.
  - CNE district-level offices have not reported any major problems, but have documented some minor issues that have required CNE intervention.
  - During the first week of the campaign, some political parties had rallies planned at the same location; CNE successfully mediated between parties to resolve these scheduling conflicts.

### Media Environment

- Media outlets have covered nearly every campaign rally, including even sparsely-attended events held by small political parties.
- The CNE's publication of the official campaign schedule has helped media outlets and reporters to cover campaign events.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that most political parties are not especially active on social media or Facebook. However, FRETILIN and PLP do maintain active Facebook pages.
- To date, IRI observers have not seen any evidence that press freedoms have been abused or have not been protected.

### Campaign Environment

- The campaign has proceeded peacefully so far, without any significant problems or instances of violence to date.
- The most prominent campaign activities are rallies and "mini-campaigns."
- Some parties have focused on holding large rallies in the main cities and capitals of municipalities, while others have favored smaller rallies at the sub-district level.
- While many campaign rallies still focus on the legacy of the resistance movement rather than substantive policies, there has been a noticeable increase in the treatment of public policy issues by parties compared to past elections.
- IRI observers have encountered some obstacles to observing the activities of smaller parties, as parties sometimes arrive late, postpone events, undertake unscheduled activities or cancel scheduled activities.

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### Participation by Women, Youth, and People with Disabilities

- Many parties recognize that they should at least mention equal political participation by women as an issue, but have yet to mainstream an approach to gender in their platforms and policies.
- Political parties recognize the need to target young voters as part of their campaign efforts due to their large and growing share of the voting population.
- People with disabilities have received limited attention from political parties.

### Civic and Voter Education

- The CNE and STAE have conducted extensive civic and voter education programs since May and developed programs targeted at specific demographic groups.
- Many political parties provide logistical information about how to cast a vote for the party on the ballot paper at their rallies.

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## Key Findings

### Electoral Administration

*Key Observation: CNE and STAE district-level offices are well-organized and ready to implement their mandates on Election Day.*

IRI observers met with CNE and STAE officials in all 13 districts - Aileu, Ainaro, Baucau, Bobonaro, Cova Lima, Dili, Ermera, Lautem, Liquica, Manatuto, Manufahi, Oecusse and Viqueque. In each district, officials expressed confidence in their preparations for the election. Rhetoric from the CNE and STAE is consistent with other institutions both inside and outside of their respective municipalities. They seem to be working well with relevant electoral stakeholders, including political parties, to ensure a positive campaign environment.

*Key Observation: STAE district-level offices have noted an increase in the number of polling centers and polling stations for the parliamentary election in comparison to the March 2017 presidential election.*

These increases have happened across the country. In Aileu, the number of polling centers increased from 47 to 55 and the number of polling stations has increased from 49 to 58; in Ainaro, the number of polling centers increased from 38 to 46 and the number of polling stations increased to 64. In both districts, STAE officials stated that they were prepared for the increases and have identified experienced officials who worked at polling stations during past elections to staff the new polling centers and stations.

*Key Observation: STAE district-level offices noted that their three main concerns for Election Day are: transportation for STAE officials and sensitive voting materials; access to polling centers due to road conditions; and a lack of electricity at some polling centers.*

These concerns were voiced in many districts, particularly those that are far from Dili and have a lower level of infrastructure development. Officials did note that they have contingency plans in place to address these issues; for example, in Viqueque, officials have developed a contingency plan to have villagers carry ballot boxes, ballot papers and other voting materials across stretches of roads that become impassible in the event of poor weather. In Ainaro, officials are planning to utilize vehicles from the municipal administration and government ministries to address transportation concerns, but noted that many of these vehicles are frequently out of service. Overall, the STAE is aware of these potential problems and is seeking to address them in advance; however, these mitigation tactics may still encounter problems on Election Day, especially if poor weather makes roads impassable.



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*Key Observation: The evidence suggests that there has been close cooperation between PNTL, CNE, STAE and political parties to ensure a calm, safe and peaceful electoral process.*

Stakeholders consistently stressed their commitment to a peaceful election environment and their willingness to cooperate with other stakeholders to ensure this is delivered. To this end, the non-violence agreement signed before the campaign period by political parties, the PNTL, and the Catholic Church has helped to facilitate cooperation. Additionally, the PNTL has developed thorough plans for Election Day; for example, in Bobonaro, the PNTL has identified areas of potential conflict, set up mobile police posts in preparation for Election Day and identified difficult places for the deployment of sensitive materials.

*Key Observation: STAE officials noted that the country's three largest political parties are expected to have party agent observers present at nearly every polling station, while other parties are expected to have a more limited number of observers.*

The Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT), Democratic Party (PD) and Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILN) are expected to field party agent observers at nearly every polling station, given their organizational capacity. Smaller parties contesting the election do not have the same level of organizational sophistication and are likely to field party agent observers at a smaller number of polling stations. It should be noted that the STAE has worked with parties to train their party agent observers on how to properly conduct their duties within the bounds of election laws.

*Key Observation: CNE district-level offices continue to update the official campaign schedule and monitor campaign events by having CNE officials attend them. In some cases, parties have not informed CNE of changes to their campaign schedules.*

Multiple CNE staff members have been present at every campaign event observed by IRI observers. In some cases, particularly at larger events, more than a dozen or two dozen CNE staff have been present. This has enabled CNE officials to work cooperatively with parties to ensure that they are following regulations, and has contributed to the peaceful environment at campaign events.

While the CNE has generally updated the campaign schedule accurately, IRI observers have witnessed multiple unscheduled "mini-campaign" activities; in some cases, CNE officials told IRI observers that the parties coordinated these activities with them, despite not being listed on the official calendar. In other cases, parties have changed their campaign schedules without informing the CNE, thus preventing CNE from being able to update the campaign schedule.

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**Key Observation:** *CNE district-level offices have not reported any major problems, but have documented some minor issues that have required CNE intervention.*

A small number of issues— such as party activists covering an opposing party’s sticker with their sticker or a small-scale fight between intoxicated campaign supporters— have been noted by CNE representatives to IRI observers and/or witnessed by IRI observers in multiple districts. IRI observers have also observed a small number of campaign events that *suco* chiefs and district administrators attended while wearing political party attire. In some cases, the CNE has been able to work with political parties on-site to resolve these issues, while in other cases the CNE has referred the parties to the relevant government bodies such as the Anti-Corruption Commission and Human Rights Ombudsman.

**Key Observation:** *During the first week of the campaign, some political parties had rallies planned at the same location; the CNE successfully mediated between parties to resolve these scheduling conflicts.*

In Liquicia, FRETILIN and the Unity Party for Democratic Development (PUDD) had rallies planned at the same time and location on June 20, and FRETILIN and CNRT had rallies planned at the same time and location on June 28. In both cases, the CNE mediated between the parties to resolve the conflicts. Since then, scheduling conflicts have not been observed by IRI observers.

### **Media Environment**

**Key Observation:** *Media outlets have covered nearly every campaign rally, including even sparsely-attended events held by small political parties.*

Radio Television Timor-Leste (RTTL) covers nearly every rally, regardless of which party is holding it. During the observation period, IRI observers only attended one rally where RTTL was not present. National Media Group (GMN) TV has also been present at many rallies, but not as many as RTTL. Radio Television (RTV) Maubere has covered every FRETILIN event IRI observers have attended. Additionally, IRI observers witnessed new online media outlets covering some rallies. For example, Tafara.org covered a Timorese Unity for Honor and Enrichment (KHUNTO) rally in Gleno on June 22. IRI observers will continue to monitor media coverage throughout the campaign period.

**Key Observation:** *The CNE’s publication of the official campaign schedule has helped media outlets and reporters to cover campaign events.*

The official campaign schedule is published and updated online by the CNE, which has helped media outlets select campaign events to cover. This is a positive outcome, as media outlets would have a more difficult time covering the campaign season if this information were not readily available on a consistent basis from an accessible source.

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*Key Observation: Anecdotal evidence suggests that most political parties are not especially active on social media or Facebook. However, FRETILIN and PLP do maintain active Facebook pages.*

IRI observers have not seen evidence suggesting the widespread use of social media or Facebook by political parties to engage voters. However, FRETILIN and PLP have the largest presence of any political parties on Facebook and regularly post campaign updates, videos of their rallies and photos from supporters across the country. It should be noted that other parties do maintain Facebook pages, but do not utilize these pages nearly as extensively as FRETILIN and PLP.

*Key Observation: To date, IRI observers have not seen any evidence of that press freedoms have been abused or have not been protected.*

Media outlets have been free to cover campaign events as they see fit. To date, IRI observers have not seen any evidence of government bodies, political parties or other stakeholders seeking to prevent media outlets from covering any aspect of the campaign. IRI observers will continue to monitor this throughout the campaign period but believe it is very unlikely that any serious issues will emerge.

### Campaign Environment

*Key Observation: The campaign has proceeded peacefully, without any significant problems or instances of violence to date.*

Representatives of political parties, electoral management bodies, security institutions and civil society have emphasized the need for tolerance, respect and non-violence during the campaign period and on Election Day. Given the current climate of cooperation and the peaceful campaign season, instances of violence on Election Day or during the run-up to Election Day seem unlikely.

*Key Observation: The most prominent form of campaign activities are rallies and “mini-campaigns.”*

IRI observers have attended 30 campaign events across the country held by 13 political parties: CNRT; FRETILIN; KHUNTO; PD; PLP; PUDD; Christian Democrat Party (PDC); Fretili-Mudança (FM); National Unity of Timorese Resistance (UNDERTIM); People’s Hope Party (PEP); Social Democratic Party (PSD); Timorese Democratic Union Party (UDT); and the Timorese Popular Monarchy Association (APMT).

To date, rallies have been the most prominent form of campaign activity utilized by political parties, along with *suco*-level “mini-campaigns” where party supporters engage voters in a more direct manner. While some parties have listed door-to-door activities on the CNE campaign schedule, IRI observers have experienced difficulty

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with trying to observe these activities. IRI observers have also witnessed political party activists campaigning at public locations such as street markets.

*Key Observation: Some parties are focusing on holding large rallies in the main cities and capitals of municipalities, while others favor smaller rallies on the sub-district level.*

Larger parties are able to hold large rallies in the main cities and capitals of municipalities, as they have the supporters and organizational capacity necessary to draw crowds and hold large rallies in addition to smaller events in less populous locations. Some smaller parties, such as PD and PLP, are addressing this gap in outreach by explicitly focusing on smaller rallies at the sub-district level.

*Key Observation: While many campaign rallies still focus on the legacy of the resistance movement rather than substantive policies, there has been a noticeable increase in the treatment of public policy issues by parties compared to past elections.*

Some parties still focus their messaging on the legacy of the resistance movement and restoring independence to Timor-Leste, which has proven to be a powerful and effective message in past elections. However, a rising number of parties - especially newer ones - have shifted their messaging towards more substantive public policy issues, such as infrastructure and education, in contrast with past campaigns. Some parties have even adopted messages targeted at the particular needs of specific districts and sub-districts in which they are campaigning. This is a sign that parties are becoming more responsive to voters, who in turn are more actively seeking policy solutions from their political leaders. However, it should be noted that much of this rhetoric is vague and lacks key details such as funding mechanisms for proposed policies.

*Key Observation: IRI observers have encountered some obstacles to observing the activities of smaller parties, as parties sometimes arrive late, postpone events, undertake unscheduled activities or cancel scheduled activities.*

The difficulties observing smaller party activities may be a reflection of the organizational and financial deficits many small parties face, which can undermine their ability to hold events and activities in a disciplined manner. Throughout the observation period, IRI observers sought to observe events held by a number of smaller parties that were canceled without notice, postponed, or deviated significantly from what was listed on the CNE official campaign schedule.

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## Participation by Women, Youth, and People with Disabilities

*Key Observation: Many parties recognize that they should at least mention equal political participation by women as an issue, but have yet to mainstream an approach to gender in their platforms and policies.*

At their rallies, many parties have spoken briefly about women's issues and acknowledged their importance. Some parties (such as at a rally on June 27) have featured female candidates as speakers; others (such as PUDD at a rally in Viqueque on the same date) have featured non-candidate female speakers. FRETILIN has also sought to address women's issues; for example, Mari Altakiri, the Secretary General of FRETILIN and President of the Special Administrative Region of Oecusse, spoke extensively about issues such as domestic violence and women's rights at a rally on July 5 in Dili. FRETILIN has also engaged gender-focused civil society groups as part of their campaign efforts. However, most parties have yet to mainstream gender and women's issues into their platforms.

*Key Observation: Political parties recognize the need to target youth voters as part of their campaign efforts due to their large and growing share of the voting population.*

Many parties acknowledge the importance of youth at their rallies, and a significant number of rally attendees are under 30 years old. FRETILIN, FM, KHUNTO, PD and PLP have promoted policy proposals targeted at young voters to varying degrees, demonstrating an active effort to court the youth vote. FRETILIN has also engaged with youth-focused civil society organizations at campaign events in Dili and elsewhere. This is a significant shift from past elections, when young voters received limited attention from political parties.

*Key Observation: People with disabilities have received limited attention from political parties.*

Aside from FRETILIN campaign events featuring disability rights activists held in Dili in early July, IRI observers have witnessed limited campaign rhetoric related to people with disabilities (PWDs) at other parties' campaign events. However, PD, PSD and KHUNTO did include PWDs and related public policy issues at events they held in Liquica, Dili and Manatuto.

## Civic and Voter Education

*Key Observation: The CNE and STAE have conducted extensive civic and voter education programs since May and developed programs targeted at specific demographic groups.*

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Voter education programs have included activities such as visits to secondary schools and screenings of educational videos to promote voting and teach voters about the logistics of going to the polls. STAE is implementing voter education programs throughout the country, has hired additional staff to implement these initiatives and is coordinating with district and *suco*-level officials to ensure their effectiveness. However, STAE has encountered some difficulties with transporting staff to geographically isolated *aldeias* due to infrastructure limitations.

STAE is also implementing programs targeted at specific demographic groups; in Aileu, for example, the STAE district office has timed voter education activities with mobile bank subsidy and pension distributions, allowing the STAE to more effectively reach those voters. In Dili, the STAE held a “young voters’ festival” on July 16 that sought to engage young voters in the electoral process.

The CNE has also conducted extensive civic education programs across the country targeted at political party leaders, elderly citizens and young voters at the district and sub-district levels. These programs focused on subjects including electoral laws and regulations, the system of government, and how to register to vote. In Dili, the CNE completed election monitoring training for Official Election Monitors (OMEs) who will be deployed to polling stations on Election Day.

*Key Observation: Many political parties provide logistical information about how to cast a vote for the party on the ballot paper at their rallies.*

Most parties incorporate “how to vote” material or presentations in their rallies. For example, IRI staff have observed poster-sized mock ballots at some rallies that demonstrate how to vote for a certain party. While these efforts are only targeted at voters supporting a specific party, they are nonetheless valuable and help supplement the STAE’s voter education programs.



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