

LEADERSHIP

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LEADERSHIP IN A CHANGING WORLD

One-Eyed About Leadership? From Afghanistan to East Timor, the Challenges are Great

By Dean Williams

In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king, so the saying goes. That was literally true in Afghanistan where the one-eyed Mullah Omar provided a rigid and oppressive rule for a nation seeking some reprieve from the disorder and chaos of the past 20 years. Many people put their trust in him, blindly or otherwise, to provide the leadership necessary to create a viable and productive nation. He told them he knew how to do it, and with God on his side, he believed he would succeed.

The Mullah's authority grew out of his heroic accomplishments in battle, his complete dedication to his faith, and because of the ruthless treatment of those who disagreed with him. The one-eyed king certainly tapped into the fears, hopes, and aspirations of a considerable portion of the population who were desperate for someone who could provide a solution to their current predicament. He made bold promises and adhered to a rigid Taliban interpretation of the world. But not understanding the

nature of leadership and how it should be employed to develop a country, he failed to get people to deal with real problems. Today he is a man on the run.

Leaders who think they see more clearly than others, or believe they have the answers to the problems facing a nation and therefore act unilaterally, generally fail to engage the people in addressing the most difficult and pressing issues. When they believe that success is entirely dependent on their own intellect, knowledge, and power, they put themselves in a precarious position. Their arrogance keeps them from noticing alternative courses of action. They fail to realize that problems are too complex for one man's expertise to consistently resolve. Therefore, given their inevitable errors, they become increasingly susceptible to being "killed off."

Far from Afghanistan, on the other side of the world, is the newly
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East Timor tribal chiefs in the village of Maubisse, June 2001.

emerging nation, East Timor, which is also faced with the daunting challenges of leadership to construct a sustainable nation, literally from the devastation and ashes left from 25 years of brutal Indonesian occupation. East Timor has no shortage of one-eyed men who claim to see “reality” better than anyone else, and are demanding that they be made king and be given the responsibility of governing the country.

In East Timor, as with Afghanistan, the long-term success and viability of the emerging nation will depend on the nature and quality of the leadership that can be mustered to bring disparate groups together, and keep people focused on the requisite work of nation-building. Few who witnessed the 25-year guerilla war for independence—a struggle that entailed maintaining an organized resistance movement both internally and abroad—doubt the ability of the East Timorese to sustain the commitment and dedication necessary to succeed in nation-building. While the leaders of East Timor possess a decent dose of idealism, the challenge they face is daunting and perilous. For now they have considerable international support, but eventually progress will be entirely dependent on the capacity of the people to engage difficult and complex problems, work them through, and invent solutions and responses that are appropriate to their particular context.

Over the past year I have made a number of visits to East Timor and, with World Bank support, have been working on the development of the emerging leadership of the country. I have had the heads of all the major political parties together in the same location for days at a time considering their roles, the challenges of nation-building, and the kind of leadership that can move the country forward. Part of that challenge has been to get them to consider the dangers of heroic leadership, and to question their underlying belief that they have it “figured out” in regards to what needs to be done, how it must be done, and who needs to do it. In other words, they might see that this is not a time for opinionated dogmatism, but reflective consideration of how they could work together.

Changing behavior and developing new approaches to leadership and the political process is never easy. For example, in East Timor’s recent and first ever free election for a constituent assembly, there were 17 political parties running candidates, each one screaming “Vote me, vote me,” and doing what they could to embarrass, humiliate, and undermine the opposition. In one of our sessions, two weeks into the campaign, the head of a major party argued that “This is exactly what you are supposed to do in a democracy, make the other party look fools!” Given East Timor’s lack of political maturity, such behavior is a recipe for disaster. The danger is exacerbated by the fact that 25 years ago some of these party heads were fighting one another in a brief but bloody civil war.

Demagoguery and political savagery are the antithesis of great leadership, and this group began to see that.

As I worked with this group, we began to explore the two-fold challenge of political leadership: To mobilize the population’s attention on the most important issues of national development, and to get them engaged in the work of adjusting their values and being active contributors to the design and creation of a viable country. Rather than attacking candidates, they might focus on the tough realities before them and address the questions of how they represented a point of view other parties did not consider. In other words, they could work the issues and build a readiness in the country to take on those issues. Demagoguery and political savagery are the antithesis of great leadership, and this group began to see that. As a result, their election proceeded orderly and effectively, with many parties exercising extraordinary leadership on important questions and concerns.

One of those whom I have been working with is the resistance leader Xanana Gusmao. “Xanana” is a hero to the East Timorese, having led the resistance as a fighter in the jungles, and then from his prison cell in Indonesia for seven years. Last summer I was with Xanana in the remote mountain village of Maubisse and watched people surround him in total adoration. The village chief hugged him for 10 minutes and, with tears in his eyes, whispered into his ear, “You must be our president, you must!” Wherever we went, I observed similar incidents. Indeed, it was apparent to me that this could be a setup for failure. People’s longings were so great, and Xanana was such a powerful symbol of national unity, how could he not succumb to their pleas and become their god-king?

Xanana understood clearly that leading a nation and leading a resistance movement were different processes of leadership. His years in prison gave him ample time to reflect on this. Xanana makes no claim to having this “leadership thing” figured out. He has been a very active participant in the work we have been doing, displaying a keen interest in learning how to use the informal authority granted him to get people to confront difficult realities rather than perpetuate his heroic identity. For example, I saw him deflect attention from himself and put the onus back on the shoulders of the people; challenge groups by bringing uncomfortable issues to the fore; facilitate reconciliation; and provide a strong moral voice to calm an angry and wounded people.

Be it Afghanistan or East Timor, the work of nation-building is so complex it is almost impossible for a leader to productively attend to multiple and contending issues, and succeed. As the former President of the Philippines Fidel Ramos told me: “It’s like being on a tightrope juggling many objects. You know it’s just a matter of time before something goes wrong.”

New nation states may not have the infrastructure and traditions

to cope effectively with the changes that self-reliance and cooperation require. Unfortunately, many of the present notions of leadership and development focus on heroic, “great man” theories or on bureaucratic and economic theories that provide mechanisms for control and coordination. These models presuppose that groups are malleable and easily influenced. They assume that goals can be well-defined, the pathway forward is manageable, and that if people are persuaded they will naturally embrace and participate in the development process. Most nation-building efforts, often with support of international institutions, are aimed at establishing systems and government structures to address the immediate tasks of survival and preventing civil disorder. While this is important, it does not necessarily mobilize competing factions to compromise and cooperate as they deal with tough realities and perplexing challenges. Under such circumstances many of the popular axioms and standard approaches to leadership and governance leave new nations without the skills that are necessary to make democracy and the free market worth the effort.

With the East Timorese, a central part of our endeavors was to help them see that managing change and generating progress is never done in a linear, straightforward way. When people believe that it is a rational and simple process, they become frustrated and disappointed when things do not work out as planned. Indeed, there is a strong tendency for people, particularly when under stress, to resist changing deeply held values and traditions, thus refusing to accommodate new realities. A successful leader of major change can ease this process by recognizing that there are powerful group sentiments born of shattered dreams, frustrated hopes, and emerging aspirations that are impacting many aspects of problem framing and problem solving. These sentiments must be acknowledged, engaged, and worked through if any degree of progress is to be achieved.

If the leader yields to the temptation to provide simplistic solutions to complex situations, undesirable consequences may likely follow, such as excessive dependency on the leader for the right answer, frustration with the leader when he cannot produce the right answer, and an overall reduction in people’s willingness to think creatively and critically about their current problems and

the opportunities available to them. In other words, the danger is that people become less responsible. And when people are lacking in responsibility, they may actually become so irresponsible that they undermine and subvert initiatives and programs that could contribute to their own well-being.

A primary challenge the leadership of an emerging country faces is to gain, hold, and manage the attention of key constituents so that productive work gets done. Ultimately it is the people’s values that must shift if progress is to ensue. Ensuring that people are attending to what really matters is difficult to do in an environment riddled with competing demands, conflicting objectives, and political and factional tensions.

In this milieu it is natural for leaders to feel like they are being pulled and pushed by the various factions internally and externally, all of which seem to have legitimate and pressing concerns that demand immediate resolution. It is not uncommon, therefore, for leaders to lose their own sense of focus and become frustrated, bewildered, and despondent. Some respond to this environment of uncertainty by becoming increasingly authoritarian and ruthless. Others simply give up.

In East Timor, as with Afghanistan, various political parties and interest groups are emerging to participate in the debate on where the country needs to go and how it should get there. The debate process is generally very messy and heated as the perspectives and ideas represent formerly oppressed, marginalized, and wounded groups. There is much at stake, and there is also much pain. The potential to be distracted, to lose sight of what’s important, and to subvert what many have fought so long for is very real. In such a context, leadership is absolutely essential, not from the one-eyed man who claims he sees more clearly because everyone else is blind, but by capable individuals who know how to facilitate shared insight and assist others in confronting and addressing what has been avoided for so long.

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The Presidential Leadership of George W. Bush: A Pre- and Post-9/11 Comparison

By Fred Greenstein

The American presidency is said to be an office in which some incumbents grow and others swell. If ever a president has fallen into the first category, it is George W. Bush. Before the suicide bombings of September 11, 2001, even a number of Bush’s supporters were not persuaded that he was fully up to his responsibilities. Since then, even many of his critics grant that he has

become strikingly more presidential. A Gallup poll that was completed a day before the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon found that only 51 percent of the public expressed approval of his presidential performance. Three days after the attack, Gallup fielded the first of an extended run of polls in which Bush registered approval levels in excess of 85 percent.