

Taiwan should follow East Timor

Written by Jerome Keating
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On Sept. 27, 2002, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (East Timor) joined the UN to become its 191st member. Since then, two other nations have joined, Montenegro on June 28, 2006, and South Sudan on July 14, 2011.

The combined total of the populations of these three nations is just more than half that of Taiwan's 23.7 million people. East Timor has 1.3 million, Montenegro has slightly more than half a million and South Sudan has 10.9 million.

They all are members of the UN, yet much more populous Taiwan is denied membership.

Of the three, East Timor, as a Southeast Asian nation, is of particular interest to Taiwan. The histories of both nations have many related and informative experiences, and the indigenous peoples of East Timor and those of Taiwan have common ancestral links in their Austronesian heritage.

Both nations became involved in world trade and politics during the era of global navigation — a time when European powers came to Asia in search of the lucrative spice islands.

The Portuguese landed in East Timor in the early 16th century. They did not find spices there, but found sandalwood, which had definite commodity value, and so they decided to stay.

Portugal would colonize the eastern half of Timor island and fight the Dutch over who would colonize its western half. Related Dutch colonies would ultimately become the Dutch East Indies, present day Indonesia.

In 1702, Portuguese Timor became the official name of this colony. As for the Dutch, the Portuguese would eventually make peace and get them to guarantee Portugal's half of the island in the Treaty of Lisbon in 1859.

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Taiwan, on the other hand, got only its name, Formosa, from the Portuguese when in the mid-16th century Portuguese trading ships from Macau passed by Taiwan on the way to Nagasaki.

However, while Portugal never colonized Taiwan, the Dutch and the Spanish, as fellow competitors for trade with China, did so in the early 17th century.

The Dutch would drive the Spanish out in 1643, only to be driven out by fleeing Ming (明) loyalists from China in 1662. The Ming loyalists in turn surrendered their part of the island to the Qing (清) troops in 1683.

A period of relative stability followed, despite periodic uprisings and revolutions, and the impact on trade from the Opium Wars in China.

Two centuries later, Japan entered the picture. It gained Taiwan in the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895 and set about making it a colony.

Later, as the Japanese Empire expanded in World War II, the Japanese on Timor fought and defeated the joint forces of Allies and Timorese. In 1942, Japan ruled all of Timor as well as Taiwan, but quickly lost both territories three years later when World War II ended.

In the aftermath of the war, Portugal regained its colony of Portuguese Timor, while Indonesia in 1945 declared itself independent and would soon control the former Dutch East Indian colonies.

Taiwan, on the other hand, entered its current limbo stage created by the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty, being the main “unfinished business” of World War II (“World War II’s Unfinished Business,” June 23, page 8).

Portugal would rule Portuguese Timor until November 1975 when it abandoned its colony. At

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that point, the people of East Timor declared independence only to be overrun and occupied by Indonesian forces.

The people of East Timor had a week of independence. The Republic of Formosa (台灣) in 1895 had fared little better when it existed for about six months after the Treaty of Shimonoseki.

In the 20th century, the US caused problems for Taiwan and East Timor. Henry Kissinger, US National Security adviser under then-US president Richard Nixon and later secretary of state under then-US president Gerald Ford, was ready to sell out both.

In 1975, the US gave Indonesia assurances that it would not interfere, thus allowing Indonesian troops to pour into East Timor to make it an Indonesian province.

East Timor's subsequent suppression by Indonesia would rage on until the Dili massacre of 1991 brought numerous surrounding nations in support of East Timorese.

After decades of suffering, a UN-sponsored referendum in 1999 allowed the East Timorese the right to choose their own government, and they chose independence.

Taiwan, on the other hand, after its own lengthy struggles under martial law, managed to successfully work out a peaceful transition from a one-party state to a full-fledged democracy, yet it still dwells in a limbo of "unfinished business."

If the people of East Timor can have independence, why not the people of de facto independent Taiwan?

On its side, Taiwan still has other issues to resolve. It must face how its nomenclature and its outdated Constitution prevent it from joining the UN. The public must realize that the followers of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) were tossed out of the UN in 1971 and not the Taiwanese.

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It is an ongoing conundrum, which points again to how the world needs a better way to handle the self-determination of all peoples, and move toward a global-home paradigm where the whole planet is respected and all peoples are treated equally as family members.

For Taiwan, if the citizens of the small nation of East Timor with far less resources could pull it off, certainly the Taiwanese can do it, too. They have to find out who are its loyal allies and supporters of its democracy.

However, outside factors are helping. The problems brought on the world by COVID-19 continue to demonstrate which nations are responsible players and which ones are not.

Regionally and globally, the lucrative gain of participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative is finally being exposed as coming with a high price in terms of body count, which is further exacerbated by excluding Taiwan's potential contributions to the WHO.

The time has come for all to step back and rectify this unfinished business of the past: It is time to recognize and give Taiwanese their true right of self-determination, and finally close this chapter of World War II. Takers anyone?

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