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# Decolonizing International Relations Conference on *“Decolonization(s): From the Ground-Up”*

THE FLETCHER SCHOOL OF LAW AND DIPLOMACY,  
TUFTS UNIVERSITY

KEYNOTE SPEECH BY HIS EXCELLENCY  
KAY RALA XANANA GUSMÃO

*11 February 2021 At 8am (Dili) | 10 February 2021 At 6pm (Boston)*

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*Dean Kyte, Members of Faculty, Ladies and Gentlemen, and Dear Students,*

I was very pleased to accept the kind invitation to take part in this Decolonizing International Relations Conference. Please allow me to congratulate and thank the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University for bringing us together with this virtual gathering. The Fletcher School is such a distinguished institution in global affairs which provides outstanding education for future leaders. At this time of great turmoil, division and intolerance, the Fletcher School plays a critical role in equipping its students to build a better tomorrow for us all.

I am, of course, deeply honored to receive the Dean’s Award. Previous recipients of the award have been men and women of great principle who

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**Mr. Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão** led the Timor-Leste resistance movement to independence twice (first against Portugal and then Indonesia), was elected as Timor-Leste’s first president and then served as prime minister. Currently, as Minister of Planning and Strategic Development, he combats climate change and promotes environmental sustainability. He has received many awards, including the Sakharov Prize for Freedom in Thought in 1999.

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have made substantial contributions to international relations, human rights, and peace. I am humbled to be in such esteemed company.

I have been given the opportunity to speak frankly and openly on several troubling international issues that presently demand so much from each one of us. One of these issues is the way in which inequality is spreading throughout the world, without a strong effort to understand the root causes of the problem or its true consequences.

My contribution in this matter is not of an academic nature. As you know, most of my training in politics and international affairs has come from practice and from studying on my own.

As such, what I have to share with you is my experience—the experience of someone who was born in the aftermath of World War II and at the dawn of the Cold War, in a country that had been forgotten, even by its own colonial power, and where freedom and progress were late in coming.

I was born in Timor-Leste, a half-island located between Asia and the Pacific, more precisely between the Indonesian archipelago and the vast Australian continent. My country was colonized by Portugal for centuries, and then subject to a brutal occupation by Indonesia for twenty-four years. The Timorese people had to sacrifice much in order for Timor-Leste to become one of the youngest independent States today.

Timor entered the radar of the UN and of decolonization movements in the 1960s, being considered a “Non-autonomous Territory under Portuguese administration.” The geopolitical context at that time was rather adverse, being dominated by the interests that ruled the Cold War. Indeed, the fate of our land had already been decided by the key players in the region: the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, which agreed unanimously that our independence was not feasible (which is to say that we were not fit to become independent) and that our annexation by Indonesia was the best solution for world peace.

The Portuguese revolution of 1974 made it possible for the Portuguese colonies to believe they could become independent and free. Still, history had already shown us that decolonization could be a traumatic process, and in Timor-Leste it was no different.

We were finally able to create our own political associations, reflecting the growing desire by the Timorese to decide their own fate. Although we were inexperienced and lacking in preparation, our ownership and longing for self-determination became too strong to be rooted out by any foreign occupation. As Gandhi said in 1916, “it will not be a party to give freedom to a people who will not take it themselves.”

However, and as I have already mentioned, an independent Timor

did not serve the strategic interests of the key players, particularly Indonesia and Australia. As such, these two countries did everything in their power to create divides between our political associations, even leading to a short civil war that was seized upon as further evidence that we were not fit to become independent.

On November 28, 1975, we unilaterally declared our independence. Nine days later we were invaded and annexed by Indonesia. Nevertheless, this brutal invasion, using heavy weaponry and tens of thousands of soldiers, met its match in the Timorese resistance.

It is quite possible that Indonesia would not have been able to sustain this occupation for twenty-four years, were it not for Western powers supplying it with weapons, tanks, aircraft, and training—so that Indonesia could enhance its fighting ability and thus annihilate the small Timorese guerrilla army.

It should be recalled that this new war in Southeast Asia started shortly after the United States lost the war in Vietnam. The Cold War was in full swing, and the West feared the expansion of socialist regimes throughout the world. More importantly still, in a world where greed is good, Timor-Leste had coffee and other resources to be exploited. Of these resources, there was none more coveted than oil, which had been discovered in the decade prior to the Indonesian invasion.

It is a fact that while the world ignored the war that the Timorese were waging at great cost, Australia—the only Western country to recognize the criminal invasion by Indonesia—was starting negotiations with Indonesia in order to agree on maritime boundaries between them. And in 1989, Australia and Indonesia signed an agreement to share between them revenue from the valuable resources in the Timor Sea. This was known as the Timor Gap Treaty. These resources belonged to an independent Timor-Leste.

Thus, constrained in our half-island and subjected to military occupation, without any help from abroad, we started to see things from a regional perspective and to look at the world critically. At that time the world was changing. We were witnessing the fading of the ideals of European superiority and the dawn of a period of idealism and hope.

Nevertheless, similar to other peoples that had to fight for their self-determination, so too were the Timorese forced to carry on with their struggle!

Internally, we organized a new stage of the struggle along three fronts—the armed front, the political and clandestine fronts, and the diplomatic front. We wanted each and every Timorese citizen, whether they resided within the territory or abroad, to be able to play an active role

in the common effort for liberation. This included demonstrations abroad and putting pressure on foreign governments that were conniving with the serious violations of international law and the human rights abuses against the Timorese people. We wanted to shout as one that “We do not want to be submissive! We want to be a Sovereign Nation!”

At the time, several solidarity groups throughout the world were already advocating for the Timorese cause—and none more so than Portugal. Citizens all over the world were now advocating the highest values of Humanity: the right to life; the right to freedom and independence!

And yet, the people of Timor-Leste had to wait for many long years to see their international right upheld. This journey finally came to an end on August 30, 1999, when despite a climate of violence and intimidation our people voted overwhelmingly for independence in a Referendum held under the banner of the United Nations.

Thus, we had a new challenge in 2002: to build a Nation State literally from the ashes. And believe me, dear students, this is proving to be at least as much a challenge as the fight for independence was.

*Dear students,*

Unfortunately, we cannot take stock of colonial domination without mentioning the Western policies of exploiting resources and the complete contempt for the lives of the colonized subjects. As well as this, the encounter between different people and nations, with significant cultural and linguistic differences, also resulted in the assimilation of some European distinctions, particularly language and religion, resulting in permanent changes in countries and cultures throughout the world.

Today we are all happy to see the end of colonization. Still, in the same manner that holding elections or drafting a Constitution do not by themselves build a democracy, so too decolonization processes do not by themselves guarantee that post-colonial independent states are not dominated by the developed world.

The modern world is but a set of references extracted from the Western states of “the white man,” which are claimed to embody progress and success. However, taking on the form of a nation state and creating complex legal frameworks and democratic governance structures is no easy task, particularly when starting, like we did, from an institutional void.

And while such a state cannot be built in a day, the colonial mindset continues to prevail in countries and international organizations that seek to impose inappropriate models on us, so that afterwards they may write

reports on us from their skyscrapers and rank us according to their Western assessment tables, designed under the influence of a one size fits all mindset.

Many of these new states continue to be economically dependent, including with regard to human resources and capacity building. They often also require goods and services and lack the ability to exploit their natural resources, which might otherwise enable them to generate dividends.

After years of subservience, it becomes almost impossible for decolonized countries to survive without external aid. Still, we should question how much of this help is truly humanitarian and selfless, and how much is back payment for past exploitation or worse, an attempt to hold on to political and economic control.

In light of recent events, this doubt is even more relevant in the case of Timor-Leste. While the myth that we lacked the ability to rule ourselves benefited the Indonesian occupation, it also benefited Australian interests in the Timor Sea. For decades we were the subject of underhand diplomacy that sought to claim the oil and gas fields that lay on our side of the maritime median line.

For years, the Australian government and multinational companies were accomplices to the tragedy taking place in my country, because having power and control over those resources was more important to them than human consequences.

And then, only two months prior to Timor-Leste regaining its independence, Australia withdrew from all binding dispute resolution procedures on maritime boundaries. This prevented Timor-Leste from requesting an international court to rule on our permanent maritime boundaries.

And on the first day of our independence, we were led to sign a Treaty restoring the agreements that Australia had made with our previous occupier, so as to maintain its rights and benefits over the Timor Sea.

However, Australia went further still. Two years after our independence, its government installed illegal listening devices in our government's cabinet office during our resource-sharing negotiations. By the time we learned of these actions we had already signed a Treaty that set a fifty-year moratorium on negotiating maritime boundaries.

At the time Timor-Leste was a young and inexperienced country that was absolutely starving for revenues that were required to lift our people out of extreme poverty. What could we have done differently?

Australia became one of the main donors and partners towards the stability and development of my young country. Nevertheless, it continued to refuse our many attempts to hold serious talks on maritime boundaries.

Rather than throwing in the towel, we were the first country to make

use of the Compulsory Conciliation mechanism under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and as a result we were finally able to reach an agreement with Australia.

For us, this was more than a fight for sovereignty and jurisdiction over our maritime area and for our natural resources—it was the final step in our fight against colonialism. Once again, the Timorese people refused to give in to the powers that be and made use of the international system of justice to solve its maritime dispute. As a result, Timor-Leste is now free to choose its own path.

I believe that Timor-Leste and Australia, which ultimately agreed to negotiate in good faith, showed that it is possible to resolve disputes peacefully and to decolonize the legal order and international relations.

*Dear students,*

Since 2010, Timor-Leste has been part of a group of fragile and/or post-conflict States, of which it is a founding member. This group is called the “G7+” and it consists of around twenty countries that have come together to try and change international sustainable development policies.

The sharing of experiences and knowledge among us has been very rewarding. Although our countries are vastly different, we have seen that approaches to international cooperation hardly change from one country to another: international aid is almost always deposited “in the same currency.”

The United Nations and the International Community must change the approach they have been using. One of the mottos of the “G7+” is that “without peace there is no development!” Conversely, “without development there is no peace!”

I am talking about countries as different as the Central African Republic, Haiti, Afghanistan and the Solomon Islands! Many of these countries only know oppression and violence. And while these countries had to wait for centuries for international aid to reach them, they are now expected to absorb concepts such as “good governance,” “economic liberalization,” or “human rights” in a short period of time, lest they are moved definitively to the category of “failed states.”

In this long marathon of overcoming obstacles so that we can look increasingly more like the so-called Western States, we still find ourselves living under a certain ‘conditional sovereignty.’ This is where assistance is not provided to the actual needs of our people—the over 1.5 billion people living in these fragile states—but rather we remain hostage to the ‘superior interests’ of donor countries, their culture and their image.

*Ladies and gentlemen, dear students,*

As we have already seen, the second half of the twentieth century was the age of decolonization and of new democracies. After the end of the Cold War, we were filled with idealism and hope in a “New World Order.” But let us not fool ourselves, the world is still divided and—worse still—in disorder. There are insurmountable walls preventing millions of people from having access to freedom, justice, and development. Meanwhile, the fears of new wars still linger—wars that can be more damaging than ever.

We insist on paying more attention to the number of democracies than to their quality, even though we know that many democracies are failing to ensure human dignity. We look to impose universalization of democratic ideals, even if we have to wage war to achieve it. Indeed, one needs to only look at the interventions in the Middle East to understand how conflicts are exacerbated and how new threats appear—threats that have since become global. The Arab Spring is another example of this failure, a failure mostly due to foreign interests!

Extremism happens when you least expect it, but still world leaders refuse to change their perceptions. Meanwhile, mistrust and uncertainty undermine relationships between people, between people and states and between states themselves.

Fear becomes more powerful than the truth, and beliefs replace facts. While we fear that refugees will bring their legacy of violence within our borders and that immigrants will take away our rights, jobs, education, health and even our valuable principles, it is we that are becoming increasingly inhuman. And yet, we still fail to grasp that the endless wave of refugees is but a product of the wars, and therefore the lack of peace, in their countries.

Additionally, prejudices such as racism and xenophobia, as well as all other types of discrimination, are threats against peace and stability in every society. Indeed, there is no worse torment than hopelessness and no worse trend than inequality.

This requires people to overcome a colonial mindset of seeing others as “different” and “backwards,” through a lens of superiority and mistrust, while seeking to impose one’s own rules, ideals and interests. We have seen powerful countries apologizing for the transgressions made during their colonial past. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge recent transgressions and the desire to do better by using some of the developed world’s valuable resources, such as eloquence, diplomacy and negotiation skills.

*Dear students,*

Our reconciliation process was a key in the state building and peace-building in my country. This included reconciliation between Timorese citizens, after a campaign that sought to divide us, as well as reconciliation with our occupier, recognizing that both Timorese and Indonesians had been the victims of the same regime, so that we can now walk together on the path to democratic transition and development.

At a time when democracies are being jeopardized in a myriad of ways, and when the need for national unity and reconciliation is not an exclusive feature of fragile states, we must look to this challenge as an opportunity to rethink the systemic problems of our world with all their ramifications, causes and consequences. We must rethink the common fate of humankind.

I have witnessed too much war and human misery for one lifetime. And just when one might think that things could not possibly get worse, because humankind has had the chance to learn from the past, I am surprised by the morbid symptoms of a world that is growing increasingly unequal.

Today it is difficult to look at anything through rose-colored glasses. In addition to hunger, poverty, and war, I am troubled to see new forms of slavery and social differences being sustained by the governments of the so-called developed countries. I am also worried to see that, although the world is moving closer and closer towards global warming and the serious humanitarian crises it entails, we do not seem to truly realize the seriousness of this issue.

And now we are all facing the fury of COVID-19. This is a pandemic that does not respect borders and that threatens both the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, the “North” and the “South!” The way in which the world handles this pandemic is a once-in-a-generation test for the international community—and it may very well prove to be a human disaster.

The pandemic has truly exposed the inequality between rich and poor countries, with the latter lacking access even to basic health care, much less to scientific progress and vaccine production. In addition to lacking the economic capacity to purchase vaccines, poor countries lack the ability of developed powers to negotiate contracts with the pharmaceutical companies, which have since exhausted their production capacity, leaving millions of people behind!

The poor will emerge from this crisis even poorer. And if we fail to deal with the pandemic properly, it will also be because world leaders have



never cared enough about the virus of poverty, in a world where money is revered instead of justice and human dignity.

If we want to erase for good the footprints of colonialism, which disregarded even human life itself, then all of us are now responsible for liberating all peoples from poverty.

For each of these threats, there are mechanisms and resources that the world could be employing. Most importantly, we should be displaying something that ought to be rooted in every man and in every woman: solidarity!

I would like to finish by providing a great example of such solidarity. During our dispute over maritime sovereignty with Australia, the United States Congress stood with us. The Congress committed to ensuring that international law and a just outcome be achieved in the dispute. It was because of this commitment, and the work of important Congressmen and women in supporting the conduct of the conciliation proceedings, that we were able to achieve permanent maritime boundaries with Australia. In this way, the United States Congress was so fundamental in paving the way for the international law of the sea to be used to achieve the peaceful resolution of international disputes.

In conclusion, now more than ever, we need to come together in solidarity. We need a collective effort, both nationally and internationally, to mitigate hatred, conflict, inequality, and death in this twenty-first century that is so technologically advanced and yet so bereft of kindness.

Thank you very much.

Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão

