



Vote for FRETILIN!

2007 Parliamentary Elections

“Defending Timor-Leste’s independence”

Media release

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Education “the backbone of democracy and development”, says FRETILIN leader

FRETILIN, Timor-Leste’s (East Timor) largest political party, today called on voters to recognize its enormous achievements in school education over the last five years and not to be fooled by false promises from opposition leaders who have no practical experience in educational reconstruction.

“Education is the backbone of democracy and development, and the right of every Timorese citizen” said FRETILIN spokesperson and parliamentary candidate, Ildha de Conceição.

As a young student, Senhora Conceição took part in FRETILIN’s mass literacy campaign in 1975. Between 1975 and 1983, in the early years of the Indonesian occupation, she was a guerilla fighter, and one of the organisers of FRETILIN’s women’s organisation, OPMT. Today, she is Vice Minister of Education and Culture, in charge of primary and secondary education in the Third Constitutional Government.

Article 59 of Timor-Leste’s Constitution says:

The State shall recognise and guarantee that every citizen has the right to education and culture, and must promote the establishment of a public system of universal and compulsory basic education that is free of charge in accordance with its ability and in conformity with the law.

“Since forming government in 2002, FRETILIN has worked to implement its Constitutional commitment, but we had to overcome extraordinary difficulties,” said Sra. Conceição. She asked voters to remember what FRETILIN inherited:

“Indonesia and their militia destroyed 90% of Timor-Leste’s primary schools after the 1999 referendum. One fifth of all primary teachers left, along with over 90% of secondary teachers, and almost every administrator. UNTAET began the reconstruction program in 2000, but the First and Second Constitutional governments, led by FRETILIN, are responsible for the achievements since 2002. We have finalised an Education Policy after wide consultation, which began with a National Education Congress in October 2003. We also developed the basic laws for the education system.”

“In October 2005, we finalised and began implementing a Strategic Plan to achieve universal primary education by 2015. The first national Timorese curriculum in our two official languages Tetum and Portuguese, was completed in 2005 and is now being introduced across the nation in all primary schools in all grades. Development is now underway on the first Timorese pre-secondary curriculum.”

The school rehabilitation and construction program fulfills another major commitment. Between 2002 and 2006, 327 schools were rehabilitated, and 150 new schools constructed. The FRETILIN government has committed funds to 120 more school reconstruction and rehabilitation projects every year for the next few years. By 2010 all schools in Timor-Leste will be required to comply with minimum school safety and maintenance standards. The government has already begun to implement this policy with funding this year for maintenance of all schools.

“FRETILIN’s aim is to have a quality school within walking distance of every child in Timor-Leste,” said Conceição. “But we must plan this carefully. School buildings must last for more than thirty years. Without careful planning and management, major capital investment can lead to wastage and corruption. It is easy to make promises, but someone has to do the work to implement them.”

Most important, the FRETILIN government has made a commitment to cover the costs of schooling, which had previously been carried by parents. To start with, in 2006, school fees were abolished in

government primary schools throughout the country and in government secondary schools in Dili. From September 2006 onwards, FRETILIN abolished fees in the entire government school system.

“The abolition of school fees fulfils FRETILIN’s historic commitment to social equality, and shows the country what responsible use of our oil fund revenues can achieve,” said Conceição.

In 2006, the FRETILIN government introduced a school feeding program into primary schools in three districts, Manatuto, Aileu and Viqueque. In Oecusse and the Sub-district of Atauro, there are also feeding programs subsidised by the World Food Program.

“The free primary school feeding program will be extended to all districts next year,” said Sra Conceição.

From July 2006, a National School Grants System is being implemented to ensure all families can afford to send their children to school. This system also provides grants to non-government schools, so they can participate in making free education a reality for all families. The FRETILIN Prime Minister Eng Estanislau Da Silva, re-iterated this commitment only last week, when he told the media:

“The government is working in partnership with the Church to open more secondary schools and is proud to be providing the Church with increased financial assistance to run the Catholic primary and secondary schools and their social programs. We are also committed to providing financial assistance for private schools operated by other religious groups.”

More than one thousand teachers in private schools are paid by the Government, and the government is also providing private schools with books, teaching materials and funds to rehabilitate school buildings.

The Ministry of Education and Culture is increasing the involvement of parents in schooling through Parent Teacher Associations. These were initially set up with assistance from UNICEF in the Friendly Schools Program. In each subdistrict, there is a Friendly School, which operates as a training centre for other schools. FRETILIN’s Education Minister, Senhora Rosaria Corte-Real, described the PTA program:

“Our goal is to have PTAs operating in all government schools by end of 2008, to increase involvement of parents and the community in the education of their children. We will also continue to develop secondary school student councils to give young people a say in school decision-making.”

Senhora Corte-Real added: “The government has also embarked on an ambitious program of in-service teacher training for primary and secondary school teachers through the Institute of Continuing Education. Under the Bilateral Cooperation program with Portugal, approximately 800 teachers will complete their studies this year. The FRETILIN government is also working with UNTL to develop a new curriculum for secondary teacher training.”

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