

Democracy in the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste*

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Various naturally occurring neolithic pieces of evidence in the Tutuala caves date back almost 50,000 years and provide strong evidence of an early hunter-gatherer society of small kingdoms with shared clannish marital arrangements and land use. Javanese and some Chinese traders around the 13th century profited from the export and sale of sandalwood, bee honey, honeycombs, and beeswax. Almost 300 years would pass before the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th and 17th centuries after the sacking and destruction of Muslim-held Malacca. It was the Portuguese conquerors who introduced coffee plantations, cane sugar, and cotton plantations. While the Catholic missionaries from the Portuguese colonies of Goa in India helped spread that faith, most of the primary socio-economic and political activities tended to be littoral by design. In spite of attempts to convert the locals to Catholicism, many of the animistic practices of the Timorese were preserved and remain unchanged till 2023. Compared to Goa and other Indian ports, the early medieval towns and ports of Timor were backward and pre-modern in nature. The intention of this paper is to consider the fact that in the absence of democratic roots in Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, this paper nevertheless highlights the main obstacles for democratic growth in Timor in late modernity by using a seven-question democratic framework.

Keywords: democracy, Portuguese, Timor, Dili, Xanana Gusmão, political science, Southeast Asia

Framework for analysis

The framework for analyzing democracy in Timor-Leste with seven questions is as follows: (1) Are there regularly held elections that are free and fair in the country? (2) Are there external or foreign observers of the elections? (3) Are the ballot boxes stuffed openly or secretly? (4) Are the voters bribed in any way before or during the elections? (5) Is the vote secret? (6) Are there secret police operating beyond the law? (7) Are there opposition parties that can freely take part in elections with low barriers to entry?

* This paper is dedicated to the unknown civilian war dead at the hands of the Portuguese colonialists, the Fretilin, and the Indonesian Armed Forces under Suharto in East Timor.

Early to modern Timorese history

Timor is an ancient land hidden with rich natural resources that are virtually inaccessible to modern capitalist extraction. After two periods of colonization by the early Javanese in the 13th century and the medieval Portuguese in the 17th century, there was a long period of relatively modernizing Portuguese rule for over 400 years up till the invasion of Solor by the Dutch VOC and the Portuguese retreat to Flores' archipelago of islands. Historical records show that the medieval Portuguese conquered Timor in 1702, but in wars with the Dutch VOC, Solor was lost in 1613 as the Portuguese retreated to Flores. Only in 1769 was Dili established, but again with very little Portuguese influence. For the Portuguese, Timor was a marginal trading post on the outskirts of the Empire. Significant Portuguese buildings remain in decay in spite of their historical value today. A high

degree of political stability reigned during the Portuguese–Dutch colonial era, and this was the situation even as late as the Japanese naval battles with the Russian Imperial fleet hundreds of miles to the north of Timor Island around 1905. Timorese locals did not appear to take part on any side during World War II. In fact, it was only after the invasion by the Imperial Forces of the Empire of Japan (IJN) in February 1942. The Allies made use of Dili to fight against the IJN that ended with the second Battle of Timor and the eventual defeat of the Japanese and the return of Timor to a trading city with Indonesia and Australia. Portuguese investments were limited as Lisboa was far away in Europe and the malaria-infested jungles and high crime rate against White people did not make Timor any more attractive even in the late 1950s and 1960s. After the 1974 Portuguese Revolution, Lisboa abandoned its only Southeast Asian (not South Asia) colony, resulting in the first modern Timorese Civil War in 1975. That resulted in open urban and jungle combat between the Fretilin and the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT). A UDT coup in August 1975 failed in spite of declarations of independence by various parties on November 28, 1975; Indonesia decided to invade East Timor in December 1975 and then annexed it as its 27th province on July 17, 1976. However, the former Portuguese African colonies seem well publicized or even marketed by unscrupulous propagandists, as seen in the cases of Mozambique and Angola. The historically significant events surrounding the politics of Portuguese Timor from 1974 to 1976 are perhaps best known to modern Southeast Asian scholars. However, Lawless's (1) early accounts and assessments appear to be more reliable than previously thought given such academic updates on the Indonesian invasion (for example) that came in the form of Southgate's (2) article. The Fretilin managed to resist Suharto's Indonesians until November 1978, some two years later, as the guerrilla resistance forces retreated to the heat of the tropical and mountainous jungles.

Invasion of East Timor

Suharto's desire to expand his corrupt government in Indonesia exploited an opportunity to annex East Timor in July 1976. Suharto's generals had been up till this time focusing on internal security (INTSEC), and the Portuguese exeunt provided an opportunity for TNI to flex its National Security (NATSEC) muscles. Because of the Indonesian invasion, most of the Fretilin went underground, which changed the kind of tactics required in that theater of war. Interestingly, this was viewed by scholars as the "invention of East Timor" (3) and on the conflict itself (4–6).

The illegal invasion by Suharto's TNI was thus forced to adopt Counter-Insurgency Operations (COIN) tactics. These COIN operations in the civil war led to the deaths

of close to 1/2 million East Timorese, mostly civilians, but no side was able to achieve their strategic objectives. At that point in time, the diplomatic history of the East Timor issue was virtually non-existent without the presence of a representative government or any form of legitimate government. Beginning in July 1983, the United Nations (UNO) decided to adopt a new type of diplomatic approach to the East Timor civil war (7).

What was most needed was humanitarian intervention by the UNO and other International Organizations (IO) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). However, such foreign aid was not forthcoming as seen by scholars like Wheeler and Tim (8), Southgate (9), and Hodge (10). Old-fashioned Australian and outdated analytical methods on the East Timorese and Indonesian foreign policy emerged, all a little too late.

These outdated modes of analyses were ironically applied by Australian scholars like Crouch (11). Using 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall to signify the end of the Cold War that began in 1955, Suharto and his erstwhile diplomats and violent generals no longer had any form of "legitimacy" to continue operations in East Timor. This was also due to the fact that since 1976, western European governments had failed to intervene in the civil war.

ASEAN failures

The so-called ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) failed to support Timor at all. These other governments had signed away their right to prevent the spread of war through a nonsensical treaty of non-interference. So East Timorese people were left high and dry in the tropical thunderstorms, heat, and high humidity of their war-torn country. From the late 1990s, Suharto's influence was also waning. This was illustrated by the massive student protests and failure of the Indonesian Police (POLRI) to fire weapons at their own citizens in Jakarta, Surabaya, and other major cities. Although Suharto would only die in 2008, the writing was on the wall.

Twenty-six years after the illegal invasion by Suharto's TNI, sometime in 1999, Indonesia was forced to exit East Timor and halt its illegal war and COIN operations. This was a big blow to Indonesia, and their leaders lost face. It was also indicative of another ASEAN loss of face and diplomatic failure: its leaders stood idly by while East Timorese were being tortured and massacred¹. There are of course many other scholars and academics who have written (spasmodically) about Indonesia's illegal actions, but no one and none from Portugal or Western Europe even tried to

¹ It is only a matter of time before the Chinese own all of the (so-called) South China Sea from the Sultan Shaol to the Spratlys.

demand compensation for the atrocities committed in East Timor as late as 2023².

Analysis and conclusion

The analysis shows that (1) there are regularly held elections that are free and fair in the country; (2) UN and other foreign observers of General Elections (GE) come from all over the world including Malaysia and Singapore; (3) it is sometimes alleged that there is some degree of local corruption and the stuffing of ballot boxes as is done in Malaysia in the Malaysian states of Terengganu and Kelantan; (4) voters are known to accept secret bribes during the GE; (5) it is still unknown if the vote is truly secret as seen in many other Southeast Asian states; (6) unlike most SE Asian states, there is no known secret police after the Portuguese left the country decades ago, and unlike Singapore, there is no secret police who operates within the confines of the law; (7) it is well known that the Opposition parties can freely take part in elections with low barriers to entry without coming under duress from the government. It therefore can be concluded that Timor-Leste is more democratic than many Southeast Asian countries today. Widespread corruption is not known to take place, and the Christian political class tends to shun and thwart any kind of sex scandals that have recently emerged in Singapore under the Lee Hsien Loong government and under Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad since 1981 with Anwar Ibrahim.

After Indonesian President Suharto resigned, President BJ Habibie allowed a referendum on independence. Between October 25, 1999 and December 31, 2002, Timor was taken over by the UNTAET and INTERFET as part of the PKO since almost 1/2 million Timorese had died from malnutrition and death in the time of Suharto's presidency. On May 20, 2002, the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of East Timor was established; a new parliament was formed with Xanana Gusmão elected as the first president. Then, on September 27, 2002, the country became a UN member state, thus making it recognized internationally. This makes Timor Leste or East Timor the newest liberal democracy in Southeast Asia. Perhaps it is even more democratic than most other Southeast Asian states given its short learning curve. This was proven to be democratic as several more presidents were elected with apparently little to no corruption or ballot-box stuffing. The Constitution of East Timor provides for the Separation of Church and State

² But neither have the Japanese made any compensation for their atrocities in the Asia-Pacific during World War II. The Japanese have not even revised their high school text books or updated them to show that they were morally wrong and their war time atrocities entirely inexcusable. There was also no compensation from the now dead Queen of England, Scotland and Wales, who raped and robbed their colonial subjects in India, Malaya, Africa and the rest of the world. This is the Non-white Man's burden.

across all the 14 municipalities. Portuguese and Catholicism remain its main language and religion intertwined with local Timorese customs and dietary habits. Out of all the Southeast Asian countries, East Timor has a good chance to become even more democratic as long as Indonesia does not develop any ideas about a second annexation of its former province. Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste is the official name today, and the capital is Dili. Government is via a Semi-Presidential system where the popularly elected president shares power with a prime minister appointed by the National Parliament. It is therefore a unitary state with shared power.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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