Timor Leste: On a Path of Authoritarianism?

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Scholars, journalists, and political analysts observing East Timor for the past 20 to 30 years and visiting East Timor in 2005 comment that things seem to have become more “disheartening” — the local people are more angry towards the malaes (foreigners), more disillusioned with the government, the political elite, and emerging Timorese capitalists; members of civil societies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are more worried about the narrowing of spaces for pluralistic visions, opposition, and dissent; ex-Falintil veterans are feeling more betrayed by the lack of acknowledgement of their contributions to the independence resistance struggle, armed forces soldiers have abandoned their barracks in Metinaro claiming discrimination and inequality, and citizens genuinely concerned that the path to nation-building and democratization is increasingly signalling an authoritarian Mozambique-style suppression of opposition and freedom of speech.

Politically, East Timor is a fascinating study of democratization processes in a conflict/post-conflict context, in addition to being a paradoxical case study of the United Nation’s mixed performance and most ex-
tensive involvement in nation-state building and peacekeeping in Asia and the Pacific. The country is currently undergoing serious challenges to freedom of speech and judicial sector reform, with a centralistic and rather insecure state trying to control, censor, and regulate NGOs, civil society, media, and opposition parties. As an example, one of the most widely discussed issues between the government, the judicial sector, and civil society at the moment is the re-introduction of the defamation law in the East Timor Penal Code. A defamation law (somewhat akin to the “Internal Security Act” in Singapore and Malaysia), which was criminalized by the Indonesian occupation and used under the “Subversion Law” to imprison independence resistance leaders, and was de-criminalized by the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor, or UNTAET (Executive Order No. 2000/2) under Sergio de Mello, is being reinstated by the Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and the Council of Ministers in a move seen within opposition circles as intended to silence opposition in the country prior to the 2007 legislative and presidential elections. Under Indonesian occupation, it was better known as pasal-pasal penghinaan. These “elastic laws” (pasal karet) — so-called because they were so wide-ranging, arbitrarily applied, and elastic — included “engaging in an act or an activity which indicates sympathy for the enemies of the Republic of Indonesia …” (Article 13 UU No. 11/PNPS/1963); “whoever defames, insults or intention-
ally deviates from the State Ideology of Pancasila or discredits the author-
ity of the State or the Head of State or any apparatus of the State”; or
“spreads, gives rise to and perpetuates enmity, separatism, conflict, dis-
order, a state of unrule, or anxiety among the population” (Article 13 UU

The United Nations subsequently de-criminalized this law.\(^2\) However, at the 72\(^{nd}\) meeting of the East Timor Council of Ministers on 7
May 2004, the following decision was made in relation to the re-criminal-
ization of defamation in East Timor, reversing Executive Order No. 2 by
UNTAET:

Following the decision of 19 February 2004, the Council of Ministers renewed their discussions about the pro-
posed law on the criminalization of defamation presented
by the Minister of Justice. This objective of the proposal
is to end the situation of impunity, for whoever commits
defamation or injures someone’s reputation, and to rein-
state the law set out in Articles 310–321 of Chapter 16 of
the applicable Penal Code. The Council of Ministers par-
tially approved the substance of the law, and decided to
improve on the preamble.

While President Xanana Gusmao has yet to promulgate the defam-
ation law, Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri is already using it as a threat, sum-
moning opponents for interrogation via the Prosecutor General’s office, in
an apparent attempt to silence opposition. The first opposition leader to be
subjected to the controversial defamation law making it a crime to criticize
the prime minister is Fernando de Araujo, President of Partido Democrático (PD), the second largest political party in East Timor, and a former clandestine resistance leader of the Resistencia Nacional dos Estudantes de Timor Leste (RENETIL), who was tried and imprisoned for almost seven years under the “Subversion Law” during the Indonesian occupation.3

This article provides a historical background before reviewing the developments in East Timor in 2005. It investigates the government’s increasing authoritarian tendencies and its attempts at foreclosing public space for democratic discussion. Next, issues with regard to foreign relations with its two immediate neighbours, Indonesia and Australia, are examined. The article then looks into the efforts on poverty reduction, and human security. Finally, the article examines the in-between spaces in the politics of culture, memory, and identity, and the resilience of the East Timorese.

**Historical Background**

East Timor is the world’s newest country, gaining its official independence on 20 May 2002, after a UN-sponsored referendum to integrate or separate from Indonesia in 30 August 1999, in which the majority of East Timorese voted for independence. A country of less than one million people, it shares the tropical island of Timor with a province belonging to
Indonesia (West Timor). The island of Timor was divided between the Portuguese, who first came to the island in the 16th century and stayed on to colonize the country up to 1975. The Dutch took over West Timor, which became part of newly independent Indonesia in 1949.

East Timor is a unique country in the sense that indigenous belief systems and practices, especially in the central mountain highlands, have been highly resilient, but it is also adaptive to a mix of migrations from Ceylon, China, Arab, Papua, Pacific, and the Malay Peninsula, and to colonization and occupation by the Portuguese and Indonesians. There are numerous local languages spoken in Timor, the more dominant ones being Tetum, Indonesian, Portuguese (declared as the official language by the current Republica Democrática de Timor Leste or RDTL government), and English (used primarily by the development organizations, donor communities, and urban elite-diaspora Timorese educated in Australia, England, and America). East Timor extends over 14,610 km² covering 12 districts, plus the enclave of Oecussi-Ambeno, the island of Atauro, and the island of Jaco near Tutuala in Lautem. Contrary to colonial perspectives that it is “too small a country” to be significant, in fact in terms of physical geography it is larger than dozens of other countries in land mass, including Brunei, Hong Kong, and Singapore.
While it may be the world’s newest nation-state, according to more recent significant archaeological explorations and findings by Australian, American, and Indonesian scholars, the Lene Hara and Ilik kere-kere caves near Com and Tutuala in Lautem and other excavations reveal that East Timor holds the oldest evidence of human civilization in Southeast Asia, dating back 35,000 years. Local Timorese guardians of the caves in Tutuala argue that while Portuguese and Indonesian archaeologists have known about these historical cultural heritages, it was not in their interest to make it public. On the contrary, they did their best to keep it secret as it went against their justification to colonize East Timor for it was supposedly “uncivilized”. Yet another myth is that East Timor is “isolated”. While this might have been true during the Indonesian occupation from 1975 to 1998, the French historian and geographer Frederic Durand argues that in examining European, Chinese, Arab, and Malay documents since the 11th century, he found that Timor had been at the crossroads of trade in sandalwood and spices, different migrations to the island (from Ceylon or present-day Sri Lanka, Papua, and the Malay peninsula), and of travellers going to and from Australia.

East Timor had been on the United Nations General Assembly agenda for 24 years before agreement was reached between Portugal and Indonesia on a process of self-determination. After the overwhelming vote
for independence in 30 August 1999, there followed an orgy of violence and severe destruction of property, leading to East Timorese fleeing their homes, setting up refugee camps, and becoming internally displaced persons (some temporarily, others permanently) within the country (in Dili and elsewhere) and outside the country (in West Timor, primarily in Atambua and Kupang). Others were evacuated to a temporary refugee shelter in Darwin on 11 September 2001, along with the last United Nations Transitional Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) officials evacuating the country. Indonesia was pressured to consent to an Australian-led, UN-mandated, multinational force, the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) of about 8,000 soldiers, to restore order. Since UNAMET, which oversaw the East Timor Popular Consultation in 1999, the Security Council mandated a subsequent mission, the UNTAET, to administer the territory pending elections and the installation of a sovereign independent government. When the first government of Timor Leste was installed on 20 May 2002, the United Nations remained to assist in the form of the United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISET).

An article by Ian Martin, former Head of UNAMET, on the role and performance of the United Nations in East Timor is much more critical than mainstream UN analysis. He acknowledges, for example, that in the UNTAET-sponsored elections for the Constituent Assembly in 2001,
“the timescale for the transition process was short, civic education was limited, and new political parties had little time to establish themselves”.

Opposition parties and independent analysts have been arguing for a long time that the 2001 elections were not a “level playing field”. On the contrary, they claim that the United Nations supported the pre-determined victory of one dominant ruling party majority (that is, Fretilin, Frente Revolucionário de Timor Leste Independente or Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) as part of a clean exit strategy. Martin also writes: “While UNTAET secured independence in a short period, its contribution to sustainable self-government and a democratic political environment was limited.”

Timor Leste’s structure of government involves a semi-presidential system, with the principle of separation of powers between the executive, judiciary, and legislature. The legislature is a unicameral system where members of the national parliament are elected for five years through a proportional representation system. While the president is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, in practice most executive power is in the hands of the prime minister (as approved by the national parliament in the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste in 2002), with the current president having mostly ceremonial roles and moral authority. The prime minister, ministers, the vice-ministers, and the secretaries of state
constitute the executive government. A civil service has been established, with 12,000 civil servants, half of them teachers, subject to the Statute of the Civil Service Act 2004 setting out their duties and responsibilities as civil servants.

**Lack of Space for and Acknowledgement of Critical Problems**

A recent UN report to the Security Council states that “time will be required for democratic governance … to take root in the country”. The report notes that a “major challenge facing Timor Leste in the near future will be the forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in 2007”.

While there were more than 13 political parties that participated in the first Constituent Assembly elections for members of parliament in August 2001, the multi-party system is rather weak. The ruling party, Fretilin, controls 55 out of 88 seats in parliament. The rest of the seats went to opposition parties including the Partido Democratico, seven seats; Social Democrat Party of East Timor (*Partido Social Democrata Timor Lorosa’e*) six seats; and Timorese Social Democratic Association (*Associação Sosial Demokrata Timorense*), six seats. The opposition parties hardly have any power in terms of number of votes to enact important legislation, but have a lot of moral authority in providing checks-and-bal-
ances, enlivening critical debate, and making sure the space for dissent in the public sphere is not totally annihilated.

Contrary to more sanitized official reports put out by the UNMIS-ET to the UN Security Council on the “peacefulness” and “orderliness” of UN-monitored nation-building, reconstruction, and development in East Timor,\textsuperscript{11} the Suco Elections\textsuperscript{12} from December 2004 to September 2005 administered by Technical Secretariat for Election Administration (STAE) and the Ministry of State Administration, provoked surprise among independent foreign electoral observers, including UNMISET Political Affairs officers, who did not predict a landslide victory by Fretilin.\textsuperscript{13} Due in part to poor electoral administration,\textsuperscript{14} and in several cases alleged rigging of ballots and corruption, the Commission on Elections ordered re-election in several districts. As for the Suco Elections 2005 data: Fretilin received 56.98 per cent of the votes, the majority from Dili; PD garnered 10.75 per cent, the majority from Dili. PSD got 6.62 per cent, majority of which were also from Dili. The smaller parties received less than 2 percent of the votes each. Meanwhile, individual candidates got 22.10 per cent of the votes.\textsuperscript{15}

Mainstream media reports, opposition parties’ submissions to the Commission on National Elections (CNE), press conferences by the CNE, international observers’ documentation and reports (for instance, by the
National Democratic Institute), and NGOs and civil society reports provide a plurality of perspectives on the 2005 Suco Elections process. These perspectives are not captured in the STAE’s and UNDP Support to Suco Elections reports. In a press release on 20 September 2005 on the Aldeia Elections in Dili and Liquica, for example, STAE reported that “election day has largely been a success”. Similarly, the Security Council Progress Report (for the period 13 May to 15 August 2005) provided by Mr Hasegawa to the UN Secretary-General states under section II “Recent Political and Security Developments in Timor-Leste”, that “the elections were conducted in a peaceful and orderly manner”. Alternative sources of information, on the other hand, including alternative media, civil society, NGOs, and opposition parties involved in the elections, provide very different accounts of intimidation of rural villagers by Fretilin, manipulation of the number of votes, tampering with ballots, switching photos of candidates on the ballot boxes, conducting a disinformation campaign against opposition leaders and parties, and allegedly the use of huge numbers of civil servants and government facilities under the Ministry of State Administration to “administer” the elections, with a key target of ensuring that the ruling party (Fretilin) wins.

For truly democratic societies to develop, it is highly important to allow, create, or generate a plurality of discursive spaces, including “non-
state spaces” for citizens to articulate their political perspectives. In various analyses of democratization and reconstruction in newly independent, regime transition, conflict/post-conflict societies, it is “normal” for citizens to have differences in opinion and views different from those of the ruling party. It is part of the process of democratization to allow these to be generative, rather than producing a mono-culture of one-perspective only, which the Indonesian New Order regime nurtured and which many continue to hope will not be repeated again in East Timor.

**Foreign Relations**

In 2005 the most pressing foreign affairs issues in East Timor related to their two immediate neighbours — Indonesia and Australia.

At the end of 2005 the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) completed its final report. The East Timor Parliament set up the CAVR with the mandate of establishing the truth about the human rights violations committed in Timor Leste between 25 April 1974 and 25 October 1999, facilitating community reconciliation, and reporting on its findings. The final report is made publicly available on the website of the International Centre for Transitional Justice, at http://www.ictj.org. The President, Xanana Gusmao, initially refused to circulate the report,
which provoked severe criticism from civil society groups, opposition political parties, and former members of the CAVR itself. In favour of a more conciliatory approach to Indonesia, the president and government of RDTL instead founded a “Truth and Friendship Commission” (TFC) to be based in Bali, and composed of both Indonesian and East Timorese “reconciliation” experts. Critical foreign observers, scholars, and local and international NGOs have dubbed the commission the “truth and fried chicken commission”, commenting on the lack of will from the TFC to follow up on the CAVR’s recommendations. Historians and scholars who painstakingly worked on conserving the historical archives and testimonies of hundreds of witnesses are concerned about the CAVR archives’ fate, especially as the documents contain information about atrocities that were also committed by Fretilin, which is now the ruling party.

On the economic front, Indonesia continues to dominate East Timor’s trade relations. Indonesian products (from infrastructure and construction materials to Supermie noodles and Bimoli cooking oil) flood the market. Smuggling in the borders (in Oecussi, Suai, and Maliana) is a common phenomenon, despite efforts by border control to prevent it.

In 2004 Timor-Leste imported goods worth US$113 million while the only offsetting export was US$7 million-worth of coffee. Of its imports, US$52 million consisted of foodstuffs, including US$12 million for

Meanwhile, Australian–East Timor historical, economic, and political relations are complex and can be gauged from divergent perspectives. Official perspectives tend to focus on Australia’s role in “securing independence” for East Timor by sending INTERFET forces in September 1999, led by General Peter Cosgrove. Little is said of the Australian government’s de facto or de jure recognition of Indonesia’s illegal occupation during a quarter century. 

During that time, the general Canberra line was to characterize Timorese resistance to integration as perverse and absurd, and that Indonesian rule in East Timor was basically well intentioned and would in the long run benefit the population.  

More progressive Australians acknowledge a kind of “debt of gratitude” to East Timorese assistance to Australian troops in World War II, and a sense of ethical responsibility to return the favour by supporting East Timor’s struggle for independence and nation-building process. This international solidarity, primarily initiated by the Australian individuals and civil society groups, in particular in larger cities such as Melbourne and Sydney where there are thousands of Timorese immigrant and refugee communities (in Melbourne alone there are more than 8,000 East Timorese), is perhaps best exemplified in the grassroots network of groups such as the
Timor Sea Justice Campaign based in Melbourne. The campaign has been committed to providing independent information on oil and gas offshore resource sharing between Australia and East Timor to ensure that the East Timorese get their fair share of the revenues.

The Timor Sea Agreement between Australia and East Timor continues to be a highly contentious economic and foreign affairs issue. On 12 January 2006, the Australian and East Timor governments signed the Timor Sea Agreement for the joint exploration of the Timor Sea. Opposition political parties in East Timor declared that the agreement, “is not in the best interest of Timor Leste and its people”. The opposition parties expressed their concern about the postponement of negotiations on the establishment of maritime boundaries between Timor Leste and Australia, arguing that it can bring disadvantages and possible loss of Timor Leste’s legitimate rights to the Exclusive Economic Zone that belongs to Timor Leste by international law. They demanded that the government of Timor Leste, and members of the national parliament, not abdicate the rights of Timor Leste in the Exclusive Economic Zone and to continue to insist on the continuation of negotiations with Australia for a rapid and just solution in the definition of the boundary of the Timor Sea. Civil society and environmental groups have made appeals to the Australian government to:
be fair and just and fully respect the international rights and laws in existence. As a rich country, Australia does not need the resources and riches of the Timor Sea. On the other hand, Timor Leste depends on them to be able to eradicate poverty, illnesses and misery that affect our country and our people.\textsuperscript{22}

On other aspects of foreign relations, East Timor continues to attend the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings as guest of the host country. Apparently its application to become a member of ASEAN is blocked by the Myanmar government, which claims that many of the East Timorese government leaders (in particular the Foreign Minister) are close friends and supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi.

\textbf{“Poverty Reduction”: Can One Truly Reduce Poverty?}

“Poverty reduction” has become a paradox in an oil/gas/natural resources–rich country such as East Timor. Material poverty and food insecurity continue to be problems especially in the rural districts, aggravated by severe damages to crops caused by rainstorms and natural disasters. The country also continues to be highly dependent on foreign aid and donor money. Sustained economic growth will be a primary requirement for tackling poverty. Economic growth has fallen from 15 per cent in 2001 to 3.4 per cent in 2004. Economic growth in 2005 was negative because of lack of investment. The annual budget for 2004–2005 was US$86.96 million,
which include a supplementary budget of US$3.9 million made in Decem-
ber 2005. The budget for fiscal year 2006 is US$132 million.\textsuperscript{23}

According to the UN’s Timor Leste Human Development Report
2006, “lifting all of Timor-Leste’s poor out of poverty would take US$18
million per year.” Around 40 per cent of the people live on less than
US$0.55 per person per day. In conjunction with the United Nations push-
ing for its Millenium Development Goals, the government of Timor
Leste’s National Development Plan claims to aim to eradicate extreme
poverty and hunger, by reducing the percentage of poor people living on
less than US$1 per day from 21 per cent in 2001, to 14 per cent in 2015.

A World Bank report states that Timor Leste is one of the poorest
countries in the world:

The Gross Domestic Product per capita is US$405, with
one in five people living on less than one dollar per day
and two in five live below the national poverty line. In-
equality is also high, with the poorest 40% of the popu-
lation having an expenditure share of less than 18%. Two
out of five adults are illiterate, half of the children under
five are stunted and the under-five mortality rate is 83
deaths per 1,000 live births. In urban areas, around 70% of
the population has access to electricity and safe drinking
water, but in rural areas, access rates are only 43% for
drinking water and 11% for electrification. Moreover,
high fertility and population growth rates compound the
challenges of improving the welfare of the poor in Timor-
Leste.\textsuperscript{24}
The Ministry of Health states that Timor Leste has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the Southeast Asian region: an estimated rate of between 420 and 800 mothers die out of every 100,000 live births, due to complications related to the pregnancy, delivery, or early post-delivery. The high rate of infant mortality is mainly due to problems related to the low birth weights and infections.25

According to the Timor Leste Human Development Report 2006:

Children’s health is especially vulnerable: out of every 1,000 live births, around 90 infants die before their first birthday and approximately 136 children die before their fifth birthday. Mortality rates are particularly high in the rural highlands: 15% of children die there before their fifth birthday, compared with around 7% in the major urban centres. Many of these child deaths are related to malnutrition: 43% of children under five are underweight, 47% are stunted and 12% are wasted. Other children die from immunizable diseases: some 58% of children under two have never been immunized and 95% of children are not fully protected. Many children also suffer from diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections. According to UNICEF’s Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, more than half of the children experienced some form of illness in the two weeks preceding the survey and very few parents followed recommended remedial curative procedures.26

The relationship between poverty, underemployment, and unemployment continues to be debated, as it is not so much a lack of employment that is the issue, but the fact that human resources continue to rely heavily on the rule of foreign experts and advisers who focus on “capacity
building” among the Timorese, with much of the donor money going back to the donors’ countries via their experts. For example, some contributions from the European Community (EC) stipulate that the experts are to come from the EC. Similarly, Japanese experts also dominate Japan-funded projects.

East Timorese have begun to leave the country to look for work as factory workers in Ireland, or as unskilled labourers in Korea, Malaysia, and other countries. The Ministry of Labour and Solidarity has now hired a “labour migration adviser” to draft new regulations on what to do with increasing labour migration abroad. The current Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, according to one of their senior advisers, seems to have little imagination and initiative in terms of developing a more pro-active agricultural development policy in the rural sector. A World Bank Report in 2005 on youth and unemployment states that there has been an increase in the number of young people leaving the rural districts and moving to Dili to live in increasingly overcrowded neighbourhoods in the hope of finding income-generating activities in Dili.

Furthermore, the Timor Leste Human Development Report 2006 states that:

Each year, about 14,000 young people enter the labour force, swelling the ranks of the unemployed. In 2001, unemployment among youth (15–24 year olds) was 15% overall — and about 43% among those in the labour force
in Dili and Baucau. As the economy continues to stagnate, so the employment situation has worsened; by 2004 the unemployment rate had increased to 8.9%, with 23% among the youth (2004 Census of Population and Housing). Many people are also underemployed, especially in the agricultural and informal sectors. The 2004 Census shows that 88% of the total 293,348 working population were engaged in self-employment or subsistence farming. Faced with limited prospects at home, a few of the more enterprising youth are migrating to seek their fortunes in foreign lands: according to the Ministry of Development and Environment, an average of about 800 of Timor-Leste’s young people are leaving the country each year looking for opportunities abroad.

The most serious threat to economic development is perhaps corruption, which threatens the more established nation-states in Southeast Asia, but in a three-year-old country such as East Timor, where the civil society and political institutions are weak and in the process of developing, its effects could seriously be debilitating. The Office of the Ombudsman and Prosecutor-General could be more independent and strengthened, and there needs to be serious accountability and transparency mechanisms on the part of the executive to tackle and prosecute corruption, not to mention stronger legislature and civil society organizations committed to fighting corrupt practices. A World Bank report states that the external audit functions are weak and that the risks of corruption in East Timor are high.

Most reconstruction and development consultants have tended to categorize the majority of East Timorese as “impoverished”, without pay-
ing more attention to resilience, social capital, and social cohesion. Yet for an observer who has had the opportunity to travel extensively in East Timor, the social and cultural life, linguistic diversity and complexity, ritual and indigenous belief systems of ordinary villagers signifies something different. East Timor has a wealth of resources and social capital: instead of being mono-lingual, it is multi-lingual, instead of a mono-culture, it is multi-cultural, both regionally and internationally (through Portuguese and Indonesian colonization and Chinese, Indian, Arab, and Malay trade).

Insecurities

Besides the official government rhetoric on “security”, alternative definitions of security provide a more critical analysis of sources of insecurity in 2005. There are several internal sources of insecurity in East Timor today. Among them the April 2005 eruption of mass demonstrations organized by the Catholic church against the RDTL government, but primarily directed against the Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, concerning the issue of separation of church and state and whether or not religious education in schools should or ought not to be compulsory. There has been no resolution, and relations between the Catholic Church and the government have been tense, including one case where a priest, Domingos Soares Maubere, was reported in newspapers to be giving sermons telling people not to vote for
Frelimo again as they were allegedly communists who planned to eradicate priests and nuns.29

Other sources of insecurity come from groups such as CPD-RDTL, led by Antonio Aitahan Matak, who refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the current government, and who have been banned by the President. In 2005 a new political party, UNDERTIM, was formed, led by Eli-sete (Eli-7), an ex-Falintil veteran whose group of ex-veterans is highly dissatisfied with the current political situation in East Timor. In February 2006 an estimated 400 to 700 FDTL30 armed forces soldiers abandoned their barracks in Metinaro in protest against alleged discrimination and lack of promotion possibilities in comparison to those from the “Loro monu” regions of East Timor (that is, Manatuto, Dili, Ainaro, Aileu — the ten districts besides Lautem, Baucau Viquque — the three Loro sae regions where higher-ranking officials come from).31 In terms of external sources of insecurity, there have been several cross-border incidents in Maliana, Oecussi, and Suai since independence, with ex-militias infiltrating all the way to Atsabe and Dili. Most recently, in February 2006 there was a highly controversial case of an Indonesian armed forces soldier raping a Timorese woman in Oecussi, fracturing already fragile Indonesia–East Timor relations.
Contesting Memory and Remembrance

In 2005 the Timorese Resistance Archive and Museum (Resistencia Timorense Arkivu ho Muzeu) sponsored by the Portugal-based Mario Soares Foundation and supervised by Portuguese academics, officially opened to the public. The problem of power in history and historiography is immediately visible when one enters the display section of the museum (not the scanned and computerized, digital archives) section. On the museum display section, you see mostly the photos of the current prime minister, foreign minister, the president, and council of ministers. Hardly on display are photos of any of the former Falintil guerrilla leaders (for example, Mau Hunu, Mau Hudo, Konis Santana), through their armaments are. No photos of students from the clandestine resistance are displayed either, except for one letter from RENETIL, which is not a very relevant letter. If one moves to the scanned historical documents and computerized archive, however, there is a multiplicity, even contentiousness in terms of perspectives. The archives capture East Timor as a politically divided society, rather than the official display of unidade nacional (“national unity”).

In the archives, one finds a wealth of photographs of the Falintil guerrillas, archives of letters from the clandestine movement. There is also an excellent book on “The Dignity of Konis Santana and the Timorese Resistance” by Jose Mattoso (2005). In several recent visits to Los Palos,
Mehara, and Tutuala (Konis Santana’s birthplace and former Falintil stronghold), ex-Falintil and clandestine leaders sadly reflected that if Konis Santana had lived and not been killed in 1998, East Timor would have more paths to choose from instead of taking the Mozambique-inspired road it is now taking.

Hope can be found in the realm of cultural production in the rural districts — the most innovative and imaginative, with numerous material culture and performing arts groups (local music bands, dance, theatre, martial arts, textiles, painting, sculpture) in the villages and in Dili emerging and generating local and national performance events and exhibits. There is a renaissance of expressive culture, having been suppressed for so many decades, and finally having the independence and space to articulate new dreams, visions, desires, and aspirations. While more conventional media (such as the print media and television) have been more politically censored and self-censored to the extent that opposition leaders have argued that the RTTL (Radio Televisao Timor Leste) is increasingly becoming primarily an apparatus and instrument for state and ruling party propaganda, indigenous local performing arts and expressive culture have really blossomed and generated innovative forms of articulating dissent, resilience, and hope.
Discourses of victimization, degradation, and destruction dominate the international aid commentary on East Timor, while the actual dynamics underlying change processes in the transition from Indonesian colonialism and war to independence are still only minimally understood. Most international solutions are geared towards “capacity building”, while little attention has been paid to traditional ideas of power and cosmology. Take, for example, the programmes on “gender and development” run by the government and international NGOs, including UN agencies, many of which seem to begin from the standpoint that East Timorese women are “weak, need empowerment, are lacking in assertiveness, strategies of resilience and care of the self”, and so on. It occurred to me while watching several of the traditional dances (in Mehara, Tutuala, Suai, Ermera, Ainaro) that a more effective means of “gender empowerment” would be to ask the East Timorese women to perform the traditional dances (including martial arts), to support and enable them to continue to pass on such cultural knowledge to younger children (male and female), as the body movements and gestures in themselves go a long way to teach and socialize East Timorese children on repose, composure, and strength, and at the same time also teach them to be creative, gracious, and confident — much more than any theory on gender empowerment can possibly do.
1 Falintil stands for the Armed Forces of the National Liberation of East Timor or Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor Leste.

2 According to UNTAET Executive Order No. 2000/2 “On the De-criminalization of Defamation”:

   Effective immediately, the conduct defined in Chapter XVI (Defamation) of the Indonesian Penal Code, comprising articles 310 through 321, is of non-criminal nature in East Timor. Under no circumstances may said articles be the basis for criminal charges by the Public Prosecutor. Persons allegedly defamed shall be limited to civil actions and only to the extent that such remedies may be provided in a future UNTAET Regulation. This Executive Order shall apply to all pending proceedings in East Timor, regardless of the time of any alleged offense. (Signed by Sergio Vieira de Mello, Transitional Administrator, 7 September 2000)

3 De Aruajo was called in for his first “investigation” by the Portuguese Adviser to the Prosecutor General, Joao Paulo Ferraz Carreira, on 14 February 2006, after making a statement about the Prime Minister possibly being guilty of corruption and accepting a US$2.5 million bribe from the oil corporation Conoco-Phillips (karik nia simu ka lae, osan korupsaun mina nian hamutuk 2.5 miloens dolar Americano). Oceanic Exploration had filed a case in the United States against Conoco-Phillips making the bribery allegations in 2004.

4 See, for example, Peter Lape, “Does Archaeology Have a Role in Building the Nation of East Timor?” Asian Social Issues Program (The Asia Society), 2003, http://www.asiasource.org/asip/archeology.cfm.


7 Ibid.


9 Ibid.

10 Nine other opposition parties and an independent won the remaining opposition seats. They are: Sons of the Mountain Warriors or Association of Timorese Heroes (Klibur Oan Timor Aswa’in, or KOTA), two seats; Timorese Democratic Union (União Democrática Timorense, or UDT), two seats; Timorese Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista Timorense, or PNT), two seats; People’s Party of Timor (Partido de Povo de Timor, or PPT), two seats; Christian Democrat Party of Timor (Partido Democrata Cristão, or PDC), two seats; Liberal Party (Partido Liberal, or PL), one seat; Christian Democratic Union of Timor (União Democrática Cristão de Timor, or UDC), one seat; Socialist Party of Timor (Partido Socialista de Timor, or PST), one seat; Christian Democratic Party of Timor (PCDT), one seat; and Independent, one seat.

Timor Leste is divided into 13 districts: Aileu, Ainaro, Baucau, Bobonaro, Covalima, Dili, Ermera, Lautem, Liquica, Manatuto, Manufahi, Oe-cusse, and Viqueque. Oe-cusse is an exclave located in West Timor. Each district is divided into sub-districts (65 in total) and these are further divided into 498 Sucos (Villages) and 2,336 Aldeias (Hamlets). The Suco Elections in 2005 were conducted to elect Suco Councils and Suco Chiefs (Chefe de Sucos) and Aldeia Chiefs (Chefe de Aldeias). The local suco and aldeia elections was an ongoing process for several months, beginning in outlying districts from December 2004 and ending in Dili District in Sept. 2005. For further details regarding the Suco Elections, please see the government website at www.stae.tl.

Author’s interviews with independent international observers, including UNMISET Political Affairs officers, and other international NGO observers.

Tomas Cabral, the Director of STAE, himself publicly acknowledged that STAE was severely under-staffed and under-resourced.


Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation or Comissao de Acolhamento, Verdade e Reconciliacao (CAVR)


Ibid.

UNDP Parliament Budget Oversight Internal Report 2005. In addition, author’s personal correspondence with Ms. Mica Barreto Soares, UNDP Programme Officer, Governance Unit, and Mr. Rui Gomes, UNDP Head of Poverty Reduction Unit. March 2, 2006.


Ibid., p. 11.

29 *Suara Timor Lorosae*, 26 February 2006.

30 FDTL stands for East Timor Defence Force or Forcas de Defesa de Timor-Leste.

31 *Loro monu* refers to the western districts of East Timor (Aileu, Ainaro, Bobonaro, Covalima, Dili, Ermera, Liquica, Manatuto, Manufahi, and Oecusse) while *Loro sae* to the easternmost districts (Lautem, Baucau, and Viqueque).