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The path to peace and democracy: the case of Timor-Leste

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This study explores the development and challenges of democracy in Timor-Leste, one of the youngest democracies globally, following the restoration of independence in 2002. It examines how historical legacies of Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation, combined with international interventions, have shaped the country's democratic evolution in the context of peace and state-building. The analysis is based on a comprehensive literature review, and considers key factors influencing democratic consolidation. We highlight that Timor-Leste has reached significant milestones in the field of democracy—such as free and fair elections, constitutional safeguards, and active civil society—and represents a successful case of democratisation in the context of peacebuilding. That said, further progress is pending on: a better integration between formal and informal governance structures, overcoming political patronage, and on better results in terms of social and economic inclusion, especially vis-à-vis the youth and rural population.

KEYWORDS

Timor-Leste, democracy, civil society, state-building, governance

1 Introduction

Timor-Leste, one of the youngest democracies globally, offers a unique case of democratic consolidation following decades of occupation and violence. Gaining independence in 2002, the country has made notable strides in building a democratic state, a fact that is especially notable when compared to other countries emerging from similar conditions. There are still important challenges to democracy, related to political, social and economic aspects, but overall the country has achieved an impressive state of democratic stability.

This article provides a comprehensive examination of the evolution of democracy in Timor-Leste, considering the country's colonial past, foreign occupation and struggle to independence, and long experience of international intervention leading to a dual process of state-building and peacebuilding. It aims to provide an overview and systematization of what have been the main factors influencing democracy, both positively and negatively in this broader context of reconstruction.

The evolution of peace and democracy in Timor-Leste has been discussed from different perspectives. On the one hand, many authors (e.g., [Borgerhoff, 2006](#); [Richmond and Franks, 2008](#); [Jones, 2010](#); [Simangan, 2019](#); [Blanco, 2020](#); [Wallis and Neves, 2021](#)) have focused on the specific dynamics of peace and state-building, focusing on how international actors have influenced this process and its limitations. On the other hand, there is a large body of literature reflecting more specifically on democracy, discussing features such as its institutional dimensions ([Shoosmith, 2012](#)) and party politics ([Ingram, 2018](#)), governance dynamics ([Cummins and Leach, 2012](#); [Cummins, 2014](#)), as well as the role of civil society ([Wigglesworth,](#)

2013; Dibley, 2016; Tanaka-Sakabe, 2021). Importantly, some scholars (Kingsbury, 2009; Feijó, 2022; Kammen, 2019) have also focused on the historical conditions influencing current political dynamics.

Studies offering a broader discussion on how patterns of peace and conflict have influenced democracy in the country have been more rare. A notable exception is a recent study by Bermeo (2022). In an effort to understand the “puzzling success” of Timor-Leste, Bermeo has reflected on how the legacies of armed conflict actually contributed to this positive outcome by helping create an “institutional and ideational landscape for a relatively robust democracy” (Bermeo, 2022: p. 166).

Regardless of the discussion frame, there seems to be a consensus that the state of democracy in Timor-Leste reflects a positive picture, especially if compared to other countries that have come from a similar context of armed conflict followed by international intervention. Notwithstanding the 2006–2008 crisis, free and fair elections that have been held regularly and the country is also considered overall free (Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 2024; Freedom House, 2024). The constitutional framework of 2002 enshrines democratic principles, fundamental rights and commitment to pluralism, and the alternance in power over the elections are proof that these principles stand to practice.

That said, there are also elements that affect negatively the quality of democracy in the country, such as the gap in resources and capacity in the context of the state institutions (Trindade and Castro, 2007), which hinders the delivery of essential services; the fragmentation of political parties, which affects the coherence and sustainability of policies and reforms (Sahin, 2011); dynamics of corruption and patronage, that leads to the elite capture of state resources (Leach, 2017); and the major socio-economic disparities that affect political engagement and civic participation and affects the path towards sustainable development (Scambary, 2015).

In this article we analyse these and other aspects considering the multiple transition that Timor-Leste has faced in recent years, specifically the process of state and peacebuilding along with democratisation, all influenced by international actors, in particular the United Nations.

The analysis is based on a comprehensive literature review on democracy in Timor-Leste, as well as reports from organizations such as Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and Timorese NGOs that contribute to the debate on democracy in the country. The text is also informed by the personal experience as a Timorese who has studied and experienced on a daily basis the progress of democracy in the country, its achievements and challenges. His view is that the political landscape is still evolving, with significant room for strengthening governance and addressing the underlying issues that continue to hinder full democratic consolidation.

This view that significant improvement is needed is shared by other East-Timorese. As a perception survey conducted by the Commission of Anti-Corruption (CAC) shows, while in 2015 58% of respondents felt that democracy was improving in the country (Comissão Anti-Corrupção (CAC), 2015), in 2022 this percentage dropped to 41% (Comissão Anti-Corrupção (CAC), 2022a). This shift suggests a growing sense of disillusionment among the population, perhaps due to ongoing challenges such as corruption, weak institutional frameworks, and socio-economic inequalities.

This article is structured in four sections besides this introduction and the conclusion. In the following section, we present a brief

overview of the discussion on peacebuilding and democracy. Next, we look at the effects of Portuguese colonialism and the Indonesian occupation in the governing dynamics of Timor-Leste. We then examine the role of the United Nations and the transitional government that laid down the basic structure of the current Timorese democratic system. Subsequently, we explore the current dynamics of democracy in the country by focusing on five elements: (1) institutions and politics, (2) freedom, (3) social inclusion and representation, (4) governance dynamics, and (5) the role of political economy. These elements synthesise the components of democracy according to the literature and key democracy indicators (such as V-Dem, the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index, and Freedom House).

We argue that, notwithstanding the many challenges, in particular the complex context of state-building that followed years of violent occupation, Timor-Leste has experienced significant democratic milestones, including free elections, constitutional safeguards, and active civil society engagement. Further progress, however, is dependent on better integration between formal and informal governance structures, addressing of political patronage, as well as major steps towards economic inclusion especially the youth and rural population.

2 A brief note on peacebuilding and democracy

Since the end of the Cold War, democracy has become an explicit objective of international peacebuilding efforts and a key component of the “liberal peace”, next to economic liberalisation (Paris, 2004; Mac Ginty, 2006; Cavalcante, 2019). This incorporation was broadly justified and inspired by the democratic peace theory and the assumption that democracies are less likely to go to war and more inclined to resolve disputes through negotiation. The application of this idea was reflected in the increasing focus on elections monitored by the UN following peace accords.

The mixed results of this approach, however, led to a series of reflections in the peacebuilding literature. In many cases, the follow-up of elections led to the resumption of armed conflict; moreover, even when elections took place this did not ensure the consolidation of democracy in the long run.

The literature has pointed to several factors that explain this mismatch between the promises and achievements of democracy in peacebuilding contexts. For starters, the democratic peace theory was elaborated with an emphasis on interstate relations as opposed to intrastate scenarios. As scholars like Reiter (2017) and Hegre (2014) caution, the causal mechanisms linking democracy and peace are complex and contingent, often depending on institutional maturity, socioeconomic development, and external conditions.

Moreover, when it comes to “exporting” democracy the peacebuilding agenda has privileged a liberal model of democracy, focused on elections, markets, and formal institutions, largely overlooking alternative democratic practices rooted in local cultures or non-Western traditions (Mac Ginty, 2006; Watts, 2023). This narrow interpretation of democracy has shaped how peacebuilding has been operationalized, largely focusing on organizing elections soon after the cessation of hostilities. Yet, the results of this strategy have been deeply mixed. In his famous comparative peacebuilding study, for example, Paris (2004) noticed how rushing into elections

after violent conflict was problematic, especially because in post-armed conflict settings there is usually a lack of basic administrative and coercive capacity to enforce the rule of law and protect rights. Based on these findings, he argued for a strategy based on “institutionalisation before liberalisation”.

This view led to a broader discussion on sequencing, but was also criticised on other fronts. Jones (2010), for example, argued that the dominant institutionalist approach views the state as a set of formal institutions separate from society, but the process of state-building is, in fact, a deeply political and conflict-ridden process shaped by competing domestic social forces. Engaging with these other social forces is therefore crucial to understand the prospects for democracy and peace in the long term.

In a different but complementary vein, Zürcher et al. (2013) noticed that one of the reasons for the meagre result of peacebuilding interventions fostering robust democracies was that the emphasis on electoral processes often sidelined broader questions of institutional capacity, legitimacy, and inclusion. In a major comparative study on peacebuilding and democratisation, they pointed to the need of discussing the role of the elites in this process, and argued that democratisation depends not just on external leverage but also on the incentives facing domestic actors.

The relevance of these studies is that they question the extent to which democracy is something that can be automatically exported, especially in contexts of post-armed conflict. By highlighting the role of social conflict they help us questioning what is the actual potential of international peacebuilding to succeed in promoting not only peace but also stable institutions and democracy. The studies by Jarstad and Sisk (2008) and Watts (2023) shed further light on this debate. In an edited collection discussing several case studies, Jarstad and Sisk introduced the concept of war-to-democracy transitions, reflecting on key dilemmas or trade-offs situations “where the choice is between reforms to promote democracy versus efforts to secure peace” (Jarstad, 2008: p. 18). These dilemmas include: the tension between elite inclusion and democratic competition, the difficult balance between legitimacy (inclusion and representativeness) and decision-making efficacy, the balance between external engagement and local ownership, as well as the trade-off between short-term and long term democratic development. More recently, Watts (2023) added several other dilemmas to this list (making a total of 14), including aspects related to sequencing (bottom-up vs. top-down), resources (efficiency vs. viability), design (political vs. technical), and finance (present vs. future). In both cases, the argument follows the idea that recognizing and engaging with these dilemmas is crucial for the outcome in terms of successful democratisation and even peace stability. Ignoring these dilemmas may further lead to the legitimization of authoritarian tendencies disguised by democratic make up.

This brief overview of the discussion on peacebuilding and democratisation shows that the dual transition to peace and democracy is challenging and complex to say the least, and the risk of non-success is very high. Interestingly, amid this generally pessimistic landscape, the case of Timor-Leste stands out. Despite the challenges of post-conflict recovery and state formation, the country has managed to maintain a functioning electoral democracy since independence in 2002. Zürcher et al. (2013), Bermeo (2022) and Watts (2023) classify it as a rare success story among postwar democracies. Because it falls out of the curve, it is difficult to determine exactly what have been the drives for this success.

According to Bermeo, Timor-Leste presented adverse conditions to develop a democracy in the context of peacebuilding, having high levels of poverty, low literacy, no democratic tradition and ethnic fragmentation. What made the difference, in her view, was not the international peacebuilding apparatus, rather the very footprint of the armed conflict against Indonesia, which left four institutional legacies that enabled democracy: the delegitimation of anti-democratic elites, the forging of a cohesive national identity, the creation of a pluralistic party system (based on different national leaders who presented different political stands yet respected each other) and the formation of a professional and apolitical military structure (derived from the liberation struggle). For Bermeo, these are explanatory factors and the role played by international assistance in this case does not bear the same weight (being, furthermore, part of a broader legacy of the armed struggle).

In this article we are not interested in providing an explanatory factor, in the sense of determining a specific set of factors that led to the success of Timor-Leste. Rather, our interest is in understanding how different factors have affected/affect the development of democracy in the country both positively and negatively (sometimes concomitantly) and what lessons can be drawn from the East-Timorese case for the broader discussion on peacebuilding and democracy. We acknowledge that historical factors are crucial to understand these development, but equally important are culture, leadership and the overall context (including regional and global). Additionally, despite the existing criticism, we understand that intervention also played a role in this positive outcome. We develop this argument in the following sections.

3 The legacy of Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation

Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation left enduring scars on Timor-Leste’s political and social fabric, with lasting effects on its governance systems. The Portuguese governed Timor-Leste as a neglected and underdeveloped colony, through a paternalistic rule, minimal infrastructure investment, and little regard for local customs or governance (Kingsbury, 2009; Gunn, 2011). Their rule was further marked by a lack of investment in education, economic development, and political participation for the local population, contributing to feelings of alienation and marginalization (ibid.).

Unlike the more entrenched colonial systems seen in African colonies, Portuguese rule in Timor-Leste was less focused on economic exploitation and more on maintaining control through minimal governance (Gunn, 1999). There was little attempt to create a sustainable, self-governing system. As a result, Portuguese colonialism left Timor-Leste with a very weak institutional framework, a fragmented and poorly developed political system, a poor education system, and an underdeveloped administrative structure. As Kingsbury (2009) suggests, this scenario left the East-Timorese population ill-prepared to govern in the post-independence.

After Portugal’s sudden withdrawal in 1975, a brief yet violent civil war took place engaging two competing political forces—the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN) and the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT). The war last less than two months but left between 1.500 and 3.000 people dead, besides

thousands displaced (Dunn, 1996; Taylor, 1999). The war also left important lessons for the Timorese leaders at the time, most notably the fact that the costs of political fragmentation were too high and that inclusive nationalism should be pursued from then on. However, before the country could benefit from independence—declared under the winner party, FRETILIN—a brutal occupation by Indonesian forces took place, lasting 24 years and forever changing the lives of the East-Timorese population.

The Indonesian occupation was based on widespread violence, forced displacement, and cultural repression. It intensified ethnic divisions and led to the suppression of local Timorese identity, as Indonesia attempted to assimilate Timor-Leste into its national framework (Kingsbury, 2009).

In practice, both colonial and occupation forces created divisions within society, reinforced hierarchical structures, and imposed governance systems that undermined indigenous authority and autonomy. However, the Indonesian occupation brought a very different type of centralization, as Timor-Leste was fully integrated into the administrative structures of the Indonesian state, with an emphasis on military control and suppression of local political expression, sidelining local political representation and dismantling traditional structures of governance (Simonsen, 2006; Cummins, 2014). Furthermore, public institutions were dominated by military personnel, and political dissent was systematically silenced through surveillance, arrests, and extrajudicial killings.

The centralized and authoritarian nature of the Indonesian state left Timor-Leste with a highly militarized political system, with little room for democratic participation or local autonomy. Moreover, educational and cultural policies sought to enforce Indonesian identity, further alienating the local population. This systematic suppression intensified resistance, both armed and nonviolent, laying the groundwork for eventual international attention and the subsequent referendum. More fundamentally, the violent occupation contributed to create a strong sense of national identity (Dunn, 1996; Taylor, 1999; Bermeo, 2022). Key to this was the breadth and multifaceted nature of the resistance movement. Besides the military front, clandestine networks operated underground to coordinate efforts, spread information, and maintain civilian morale. Armed resistance, most notably by Falintil, engaged in protracted guerrilla warfare in the country's rugged terrain. On the international stage, exiled leaders and diaspora communities conducted diplomatic campaigns, garnering support from foreign governments and international organizations. Simultaneously, the general population contributed through passive resistance, logistical support, and participation in organized protests. These diverse efforts not only challenged foreign occupation but also helped build a shared sense of purpose and national cohesion. In the aftermath of independence, Timor-Leste's leaders sought to dismantle the inherited militarized bureaucracy and instead foster inclusive democratic institutions—efforts deeply informed by the solidarity and resilience developed through years of coordinated resistance across societal and institutional domains.

The downfall of Indonesian president Suharto—who had ordered the invasion of East Timor—in 1998 opened a critical window for Timor-Leste's independence movement. Following intense international pressure and persistent resistance from the Timorese people, Indonesia agreed to a United Nations-supervised referendum in 1999 (King, 2003). The referendum offered the

Timorese people a choice between autonomy within Indonesia and full independence. An overwhelming 78.5% of voters chose independence, a decision that triggered violent reprisals by Indonesian militias, resulting in widespread destruction and a humanitarian crisis (UNAMET, 1999).

Timor-Leste's restoration of independence was formally recognized on May 20, 2002, after a transitional period of governance under the United Nations, which laid the foundations of the new East-Timorese state and its journey towards peace and democracy.

4 Building the state, peace and democracy after 1999: the role of the United Nations

The process of state building and democratisation in Timor-Leste after 1999 was profoundly shaped by the United Nations' intervention, in particular by the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), which played a pivotal role in facilitating this transformation, marking a turning point in Timor-Leste's political development. In this process we can identify many of the challenges discussed by the literature on peacebuilding and democracy, including some of the dilemmas discussed by Jarstad (2008) and Watts (2023).

To begin with, UNTAET assumed executive, legislative, and judicial authority, acting as a transitional government. This comprehensive mandate was essential for restoring order and creating the foundations for governance. Additionally, the establishment of key institutions under UNTAET's guidance reflected a commitment to fostering democratic governance. For instance, the National Council and the Constituent Assembly were created to promote inclusive participation in policymaking, thereby laying the groundwork for a parliamentary system (Smith and Dee, 2003).

One of UNTAET's most significant tasks at that point was determining the political system that would guide the country after its transition to independence, reflecting Timor-Leste's aspirations for self-governance and its complex social and political landscape. The choice of a parliamentary system was largely influenced by the desire for a democratic, participatory government that would allow for representation of the diverse ethnic and political groups within Timor-Leste. As a result, the Constituent Assembly (CA), tasked with drafting a new constitution, was expected to establish democratic norms within the framework of a multi-party system. This system would ensure the involvement of different political factions in government and promote political pluralism. Beuman (2016) notes that the parliamentary system reflected the desire to balance the need for a strong government with the promotion of democratic decision-making and the empowerment of elected representatives. However, the decision to opt for this model was also influenced by international norms, as international actors—particularly the UN—sought to establish a democratic model consistent with global standards. Thus, the choices made during this transitional period were heavily shaped by international actors, with UNTAET playing the central role in decision-making, while Timorese political actors had limited influence (Lijphart, 2012). This highlights a key tension in the transitional period, and common in peacebuilding scenarios: the difficulty of balancing the role of international experts with the need for local ownership (Braithwaite et al., 2012). That said, the UN placed significant

emphasis on capacity-building initiatives, aimed at empowering Timorese leaders and civil servants with the skills necessary to manage state functions independently. These efforts were instrumental in preparing the country for the transition to self-governance in 2002.

As [Gouveia and Pedro \(2023\)](#) notes, the adoption of the Constitution in 2002, under UN guidance, symbolized Timor-Leste's dedication to democratic principles and the rule of law. Unsurprisingly, this process was not without challenges. Tensions occasionally arose between local leaders and international administrators regarding the pace and nature of reforms. One of the main sources of friction related to the pace and sequencing of the reforms. While the UN favoured a more gradual and structured approach to governance, emphasizing institutional stability before full political autonomy ([Beauvais, 2001](#)), many Timorese leaders, particularly those that were part of the independence movement, were eager to take control of national decision-making as soon as possible ([Kingsbury, 2009](#)). For example, debates arose over the electoral timeline and the formation of state institutions. While the UN sought to establish strong legal and administrative frameworks before holding elections, some Timorese leaders believed that immediate national elections were essential for legitimacy and public confidence ([Chesterman, 2004](#)). This disconnect led to frustrations, as delays in elections were perceived by some as a reluctance to hand over power, despite the UN's insistence that the slow pace was necessary to ensure free and fair democratic processes ([Goldstone, 2004](#)). Consequently, these tensions sometimes caused political uncertainty, as different factions debated whether international oversight was facilitating or obstructing self-governance. It is interesting to note the UN is more often criticised for rushing the sequence of events ([Paris, 2004](#)), but in this case it was the other way around.

The establishment of a justice system under UNTAET also played a critical role in shaping the democratic transition, given that Timor-Leste's judicial institutions had been decimated during the occupation, when human rights violations were widespread, and the legal system was largely militarized. A significant decision made by UNTAET was to maintain the civil law tradition (inherited from Portuguese colonial rule) rather than adopting a common law system. This decision was a strategic move, as Timorese legal professionals were already familiar with civil law principles, which allowed for continuity in the legal system. This led to a smoother transition in the legal field, despite the challenges of rebuilding infrastructure ([Broderick et al., 2013](#)). At the same time, local actors had limited agency in shaping the judicial system, and much of the process was dictated by the international community, which led to the perceived lack of Timorese ownership ([Babo-Soares, 2004](#)).

The Serious Crimes Unit (SCU), established to prosecute individuals responsible for crimes during the Indonesian occupation, was another key institutional development. While it played an important role in addressing the legacy of human rights abuses, scholars such as [Kingsbury \(2009\)](#) argue that the absence of local legal professionals in key roles within the judicial system undermined long-term sustainability and limited the capacity for indigenous legal development. Furthermore, the reliance on international legal advisors meant that the justice system, while addressing some immediate needs, did not sufficiently reflect the cultural and legal practices that were more familiar to the local population ([Kingsbury, 2009](#)). This contrast between international justice systems and local expectations

highlighted the challenges of building an inclusive justice system in a post-conflict context ([Kent, 2012](#)). It also exemplifies several dilemmas related to timing and the balance between external engagement and local ownership ([Jarstad, 2008](#); [Watts, 2023](#)).

More broadly, one of the most significant criticisms of UNTAET's involvement in Timor-Leste was the limited participation of local actors in the decision-making processes. While UNTAET was charged with overseeing the transition to independence, the extent to which local East-Timorese voices influenced the design of the political and judicial systems was often minimal. [Santos \(2002\)](#) argues that while the National Council (the first Timorese representative body) was established in 2000, it had only limited powers and was often seen as ineffective due to its lack of authority and limited impact on policy decisions. In addition, the Constituent Assembly, which later became the parliament, often lacked a significant role in the design of the foundational structures of Timor-Leste's democracy ([Smith and Dee, 2003](#)). Thus, the underrepresentation of Timorese political actors in these early processes was partly a result of UNTAET's governance model, which prioritized technical expertise over local knowledge.

Relatedly, and mirroring several critiques on the liberal peacebuilding practices, [Babo-Soares \(2003\)](#) argued that although civil society actors played a significant role in resisting the Indonesian occupation, they were sidelined in the post-independence phase as international organizations took precedence. The limited participation of local actors in governance structures undermined the legitimacy of these institutions in the eyes of many Timorese, which posed challenges to state-building and democratic consolidation ([Mearns, 2008](#)). This approach further reinforced the emphasis on electoral and institutional procedures at the expense of a more thorough engagement between state and society ([Jones, 2010](#)).

Another critical task of UNTAET was to address the socio-economic impact of the Indonesian occupation, which had left Timor-Leste with virtually no infrastructure and an economy in ruins. Scholars such as [McWilliam \(2015\)](#) note that the post-conflict reconstruction process was focused on immediate relief but often neglected deeper structural issues related to poverty and underdevelopment—another of the dilemmas identified by [Jarstad \(2008\)](#). Although international aid played a significant role in rebuilding key infrastructure, local needs were sometimes overshadowed by international priorities, which contributed to a feeling of alienation among the Timorese population ([McWilliam, 2020](#)).

Additionally, the high dependence on external assistance sometimes hindered the development of local capacity. Since Timor-Leste faced immense challenges in rebuilding institutions after the Indonesian withdrawal, international financial and technical aid was crucial ([Engel and Vieira, 2011](#)). Nevertheless, this reliance often led to decision-making being dominated by foreign experts rather than Timorese officials. For instance, many key government functions—including economic planning, infrastructure development, and legal drafting—were initially managed by international advisors ([Chesterman, 2007](#)). As a result, local administrators had limited opportunities to develop expertise and take ownership of these critical processes.

Moreover, foreign donors and international agencies often imposed their own priorities, which did not always align with Timor-Leste's immediate needs ([Kingsbury, 2013](#)). For example, while local leaders sought to prioritize agriculture and rural development,

international organizations emphasized governance and legal reforms (Wigglesworth, 2013). This misalignment sometimes led to inefficiencies, as projects funded by external actors did not always address the country's most pressing socio-economic concerns. Ultimately, this dependency on international assistance created a paradox: while it enabled state-building, it also delayed the full transfer of responsibilities to Timorese officials, slowing the development of autonomous governance structures.

Another major issue was the need for national reconciliation, particularly given the scale of human rights abuses during the Indonesian occupation. The establishment of the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (CAVR) in 2001 was an important step in this process, as it provided a platform for victims and perpetrators of violence to come forward and seek justice. Babo-Soares (2003) notes that while the CAVR was vital for healing, the process was largely top-down, with significant influence from international actors. This dynamic limited the authenticity and depth of reconciliation efforts, as it did not fully account for local cultural practices or participatory mechanisms that might have made the process more inclusive (Simonsen, 2006). Moreover, while the CAVR contributed to documenting human rights violations and providing a platform for victims, its impact on long-term justice and reconciliation remains contested.

One of the key criticisms is that the transitional justice process prioritized reconciliation over legal accountability. For instance, the commission's mandate focused on truth-telling and community reintegration rather than formal prosecutions of perpetrators (Linton, 2001). As a result, many victims of past atrocities were left without full judicial redress, leading to lingering frustrations among survivors and human rights advocates. Moreover, the UN-backed Serious Crimes Unit (SCU), which was tasked with prosecuting major human rights violations, faced political and logistical constraints. In particular, Indonesia's refusal to extradite key suspects meant that many high-level perpetrators remained unpunished (Cohen, 2006).

These limitations had lasting implications. On the one hand, the reconciliation process helped stabilize the fragile political environment in the early years of independence by preventing retaliatory violence. On the other hand, the absence of full accountability contributed to a culture of impunity, particularly among political elites and security forces (Kent, 2012). Furthermore, the lessons from the UN-led transitional justice efforts shaped subsequent national policies. For example, the Commission for Truth and Friendship (CTF), established in 2005 as a bilateral initiative between Indonesia and Timor-Leste, largely followed a similar approach by emphasizing reconciliation over prosecution (Hirst, 2009). Consequently, while these mechanisms helped maintain diplomatic stability, they did little to strengthen judicial independence or build a robust rule of law.

In sum, the role of UNTAET in Timor-Leste's transition was undeniably crucial for laying the groundwork for a democratic state. As we could see, many peacebuilding dilemmas were present and often addressed by privileging the stand of international actors and their calculations regarding long-term vs. short-term implications. Given the extent of the international engagement in so many different areas that are crucial to democracy (from elections to the rebuilding of the judiciary), it seems difficult to clearly separate which factors had more or less weight in contributing to the endurance of democracy in the country. Certainly the legacies of war played a crucial role, but the very institutional design of the state and democracy was embedded in

a wide scale international experiment of massive state-building. Our view is that this had both positive and negative aspects: on the positive side it helped rebuild the country's infrastructure, often from scratch; however the trade-off was that often the priorities taken into account were not the local ones.

5 Assessing democracy in independent Timor-Leste

Looking at this complex historical background, and considering other cases of post-colonial states coming out of protracted periods of violence, it is a wonder that Timor-Leste has managed to consolidate its democratic status in such a short period of time. This does not mean there are no challenging areas to work on.

According to the most recent Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Democracy Index Report, Timor-Leste is classified as a "flawed democracy," scoring 7.06 out of 10 points (Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 2024). The democracy index includes five dimensions, respectively: (1) electoral process and pluralism, (2) functioning of government, (3) political participation, (4) political culture, and (5) civil liberties. In the case of Timor, the highest scores are located under electoral process and pluralism (9.58, same as countries such as the United Kingdom and Sweden) and civil liberties (7.35, same as Brazil and South Africa). The lowest score refers to political participation (5.56), followed by functioning of government (5.93) and political culture (6.88). This ranking position has remained stable since 2020. This aggregate score number, however, is smaller than the numbers from 2008 and 2019, when it varied from 7.16 to 7.24 (Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 2024: p. 20). The purpose of this section is to examine different components of democracy in the country and how they have evolved since 2002. In the subsections below we examine these and other factors in more detail.

5.1 Institutional and political aspects

As noted above, the institutions established in Timor-Leste were largely shaped by international actors, and based on liberal democratic principles, with a strong emphasis on the separation of powers and constitutional democracy (Brown, 2015). These institutions include the presidency, symbolizing national unity and elected by popular vote, the parliament as the legislative body, the government, responsible for implementing policies and ensuring national development, and an independent judiciary to uphold justice and constitutional integrity (Constituent Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (CRDTL), 2002).

While these institutions have remained stable over time, there are not immune to challenges from different nature. For starters, key political figures, in particular former resistance leaders, also referred to as "big brothers"—still play dominant roles in shaping the direction of governance (Kammen, 2019), with the political environment heavily shaped by personal networks and historical loyalties rather than strictly ideological divisions (Ingram, 2018). This dynamic can result in coalitions that are more focused on securing political advantage for specific leaders than on addressing the broader needs of the population. In turn, this has often led to political gridlock, where decision-making becomes bogged down by

personal rivalries and the pursuit of political power rather than national development (Morrow and White, 2002). Personal rivalries and historical loyalties have also led to political deadlock, revealing the challenges of separating political power from institutional processes (Leach, 2017).

One of the results of these dynamics is a great deal of political fragmentation, a factor also related to the structure of the electoral system, which is based on proportional representation, exacerbating fragmentation and encouraging the formation of numerous small parties. While this system allows for broad representation, it also makes it challenging to form stable, coherent coalitions, as the smaller parties often hold disproportionate power and can leverage their influence in coalition negotiations (International IDEA, 2021), sometimes destabilizing the governing body (Feijo, 2019).

With that said, with the exception of a major crisis in 2006, the political and institutional landscape has remained stable. The 2006 crisis was sparked by tensions within the military and police, allegations of regional discrimination in these corporations, and growing dissatisfaction among segments of the population, particularly from the western districts, regarding real estate disputes and uneven peace dividends. The crisis escalated to the point of mobilising martial arts groups, and youth organizations, all of which played critical roles in destabilizing the government. The crisis leading to violent unrest in the capital, the internal displacement of thousands, the deaths of around 30 people, and the resignation of then Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri (Scambary, 2019).

The crisis had important repercussions. Internationally it led to the extension of the UN presence for several years. Up until then the case of Timor-Leste was considered a success and the crisis challenged this portrait, showing the fragilities of the security sector reform, the divisions that took place within society and among the political elite. Internally, the Prime Minister's resignation marked a turning point in the Timorese political landscape. Following the resignation of Alkatiri, who is one of the main leaders of FRETILIN, Xanana Gusmão, the charismatic leader of FALINTIL (the liberation armed front) consolidated his influence while the FALINTIL veterans gained greater prominence in national politics through a new pension and benefits system. The crisis solidified the veterans' political role and set the stage for ongoing political struggles, rooted in the legacies of both resistance and post-independence governance.

The crisis, however, did *not* affect important institutional aspects. Differently from many other countries where military forces could have easily staged a coup, that did not happen in Timor-Leste. On the contrary, as Bermeo (2022: p. 178) observes, if anything 2006 was a major test for democracy and Timor-Leste survived this "through the skillful use of inclusivity," reinforced by the semi-presidential system adopted from Portugal, the integration of potential "anti-system" movements into the party system, the creation of institutions in which the police and military would work together overcoming the divisions that led to the crisis, and a major pension scheme to accommodate the veterans' grievances. While Bermeo sees these elements as resulting from the legacy of the armed conflict, it seems important to stress that specific measures taken during this context cannot be detached from the international presence and peacebuilding dynamics, from the very design of the electoral system to the follow up measures in the security sector.

Importantly, the country's electoral system kept working efficiently, with the National Election Commission (CNE) playing a

central role in safeguarding its integrity by overseeing free and fair elections, monitoring campaigns, educating voters, resolving disputes, certifying results, and coordinating with international observers (Guterres, 2008; Babo-Soares, 2003). Since the first democratic elections in 2001 under UN supervision, the electoral process has been a cornerstone of Timor-Leste's democratic development. While early elections were largely smooth, subsequent contests became more complex as political competition intensified. The 2007 elections marked a key turning point with FRETILIN's loss of parliamentary dominance and the rise of the Alliance of Parliamentary Majority (AMP), a transition accompanied by political tensions and unrest. As coalition politics became the norm, elections such as those in 2012, 2017, and 2018 underscored the volatility and challenges of governance. Despite these challenges, the CNE has consistently managed to uphold electoral integrity, maintaining public confidence and demonstrating the resilience of Timor-Leste's democratic institutions.

More critical has been the evaluation of the judiciary. The judiciary in Timor-Leste is constitutionally independent, yet its autonomy in practice has been a subject of concern. While the Constitution guarantees judicial independence, limited resources and a shortage of qualified legal professionals have affected its effectiveness (ICNA, 2009). Political pressures also threaten judicial impartiality, especially in high-profile cases involving political figures or allegations of corruption (CEPAD, 2018). The appointment and dismissal of judges have at times raised concerns about political interference, undermining the judicial branch's ability to operate freely (Shaila, 2023). To strengthen judicial independence, continued investment in legal education, judicial training, and safeguards against political influence are essential (Babo-Soares, 2003).

5.2 Freedom

Political freedom, defined as the ability of citizens to participate in political processes without coercion or suppression, is a fundamental aspect of democracy in Timor-Leste. Freedom House has started measuring freedom in Timor-Leste in 1999 and since then the country's indicators have increased steadily. Until 2016 Timor-Leste was considered partially free, but since 2017 it has retained a consistent status of free country, reaching a score of 72/100 in 2024 (33/40 regarding political rights and 39/60 regarding civil liberties). According to the report, political rights in Timor-Leste are well-established, with free and fair elections regularly conducted, enabling peaceful transfers of power.

Civil liberties are generally well-respected in Timor-Leste. Freedom of expression is constitutionally guaranteed, and the media landscape is relatively open compared to other countries in the region. Since 2002, Timor-Leste has witnessed significant growth in independent media outlets, such as Timor Post and Jornal Nacional Diário, contributing to public discourse and civic education (Laò Hamutuk, 2018). The legal framework, including the Press Law of 2014, guarantees press freedom. Journalists operate without significant government interference, and defamation laws have been reformed to decriminalize criticism of public officials (Freedom House, 2024). However, financial dependence on government advertising and political affiliations of media outlets contribute to occasional self-censorship. Challenges persist, particularly regarding political

influence over state media and limited resources for independent journalism (La'o Hamutuk, 2018).

The government has not imprisoned journalists for their work, and defamation was decriminalized in 2009, but legal actions against media personnel have occasionally raised questions about press autonomy (Judicial System Monitoring Programme (JSMP), 2015). Further, grassroots initiatives like the Timor-Leste Press Council have supported media development while advocating for greater journalistic freedom (The Asia Foundation, 2024).

Access to information remains a challenge, particularly in rural areas where infrastructure and education levels are lower, limiting citizens' ability to engage fully in public discourse, due to geographical isolation and limited opportunities for civic engagement (The Asia Foundation, 2021). Despite constitutional guarantees, women and marginalized groups still face barriers in fully exercising their rights, particularly in rural areas. Limited infrastructure, such as poor internet connectivity, and lower education levels hinder citizens' ability to access news, participate in political discussions, and engage in the democratic process. These challenges, while gradually improving, reflect deep-rooted social asymmetries dynamics that antecede independence and works to the disadvantage of the rural population vis-à-vis the urban. They underscore the need for greater investment in both infrastructure and education to ensure all citizens can fully engage with the political system.

Finally, religious freedom in Timor-Leste is well-protected, with the country officially recognizing Catholicism while allowing for the free practice of other religions. The nation is predominantly Roman Catholic, with approximately, 98% of the population adhering to Catholicism. While the Catholic Church holds a privileged position, the government also provides funding opportunities to other religious organizations, promoting an inclusive environment. However, members of minority religious groups have occasionally faced bureaucratic challenges, particularly in obtaining official recognition for marriage and birth certificates.

Traditional cultural practices and religious beliefs continue to influence social attitudes and policies, sometimes creating tensions with efforts to promote gender equality and human rights. Anthropologist Silva K. (2018) has explored the interplay between Christianity and local cultural practices, noting that during the Indonesian occupation, the Catholic Church facilitated mass baptisms to prevent conversions to Islam, as adherence to a monotheistic religion was mandated by the state ideology, Pancasila. This rapid increase in Catholic adherence, often without thorough religious instruction, led to a unique blend of Catholicism and indigenous beliefs in Timor-Leste.

Overall, while religious freedom is upheld, the interplay between religious beliefs and cultural practices continues to shape social dynamics in Timor-Leste.

5.3 Social inclusion and representation

In this section we look at inclusion and representation by focusing on two aspects, respectively, the role of civil society and the socioeconomic aspects of inclusion and representation. While in the first case we see the consolidation of a formal space for civil society action, especially in the context of agendas that are aligned with the liberal peace (such as democracy promotion and gender equality),

when it comes to socioeconomic inclusion we see the persistence of historical patterns that still keep the rural population ostracized and at the margins of power.

Historically, civil society played a pivotal role in the resistance movement against Indonesian occupation, with organizations such as the Catholic Church and student groups leading advocacy efforts (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2019). In the context of the transition to independence and its aftermath, civil society organizations (CSOs) have played a pivotal role in nation-building, emerging as influential actors, bridging the gap between the state and the public. These actors include local NGOs, international organizations, faith-based groups, youth movements, and women's associations, each with their own interests and agendas (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2019; Tanaka-Sakabe, 2021) and have contributed to different arenas, such as voter education, policy advocacy, and electoral transparency, particularly through organizations such as the Haburas Foundation and HAK Association (Braithwaite et al., 2012). During the constitutional drafting process (2001–2002), CSOs facilitated public consultations that included marginalized voices, ensuring broad participation in shaping the national framework (Leach, 2017).

In the post-independence period, the government has recognized civil society as a valuable partner in development efforts. However, civil society actors often challenge government policies and demand greater accountability and transparency (Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), 2024; Tanaka-Sakabe, 2021). According to Tanaka-Sakabe (2021), the relationship between the state and civil society is characterized by both cooperation and contestation, with the government sometimes viewing CSOs as adversaries rather than partners in governance.

Despite its growing presence, civil society's level of influence and representation in Timor-Leste's political landscape is mixed. On the positive spectrum, CSOs have successfully advocated for policy changes, particularly in the areas of women's rights and electoral reform. For instance, women's participation in Timor-Leste's political processes has seen significant progress due to legislative frameworks like the 30% parliamentary quota introduced after independence (Niner, 2021). This policy led to increased representation in the National Parliament, contributing to gender-sensitive policymaking and making Timor-Leste one of the leading countries in Asia for female political representation (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2019). Women's movements have been particularly influential in shaping the gender policy agenda, advocating for laws such as the Law Against Domestic Violence, and promoting greater female participation in political decision-making (Niner and Loney, 2019).

Civil society actors have also played a significant role in fostering grassroots engagement and civic participation. One of the most prominent areas where civil society has made an impact is in the electoral process, where CSOs such as La'o Hamutuk and CAUCUS Timor-Leste have worked to enhance the integrity, transparency, and inclusiveness of elections. Among other things, these organizations conduct voter education campaigns to increase awareness about voter rights and the importance of participation, thereby empowering citizens to make informed decisions (Hunt, 2004). This has led to higher voter turnout and more credible electoral outcomes.

Despite its achievements, civil society in Timor-Leste faces several challenges that limit its effectiveness. One of the main obstacles is the lack of financial sustainability, as many organizations rely heavily on donor funding. This dependency often forces CSOs

to align their work with donor priorities rather than local needs (Wigglesworth, 2013; Dibley, 2014; Niner and Loney, 2019). Donor preferences often center on broader “liberal peace” objectives—such as promoting democratic governance and human rights—while grassroots issues like local economic development, access to basic services, or community-based justice systems may receive less attention. This misalignment can lead to a disconnect between the needs of the community and the projects being implemented, limiting their long-term impact and sustainability (Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), 2024). Moreover, the imposition of liberal peace frameworks often results in a situation where CSOs, face resistance not only from the state but also from international actors who may prioritize their own development agendas over locally-defined needs (Smith, 2020). For example, Timor-Leste’s adoption of laws to improve transparency and combat corruption has been praised internationally but has often faced resistance from political elites who feel these reforms undermine their control over resources and power structures.

The impact of CSOs is also limited by geographical and resources constraints, as their reach remains largely concentrated in urban areas such as Dili, leaving rural communities with limited access to advocacy and resources (Wigglesworth, 2013; Tanaka-Sakabe, 2021). Financially, the presence of numerous small organizations with overlapping mandates has led to inefficiencies and competition for limited resources (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2019). Furthermore, the lack of coordination between local and international actors sometimes results in duplicated efforts and a lack of long-term strategic planning (Tanaka-Sakabe, 2021). Niner and Loney (2019) also argues that some CSOs, especially those working in the gender equality space, struggle with the challenge of maintaining long-term advocacy momentum due to leadership transitions and shifting funding priorities.

Social and cultural factors also pose significant barriers to civil society engagement. Traditional governance structures, such as customary law and community elders, often operate parallel to modern civil society efforts, leading to conflicts in approaches and priorities. Deeply rooted patriarchal norms also hinder progress in areas such as gender equality and youth empowerment (Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), 2024; Niner and Loney, 2019). In the case of women, despite formal progress, traditional norms continue to limit women’s influence in decision-making processes, especially in rural areas.

A similar problem happens in the case of persons with disabilities. On the one hand, Timor-Leste has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2010 and adopted the Disability Law in 2008 (UNDP, 2011). Organizations such as Raes Hadomi Timor Oan (RHTO) have been instrumental in advocating for disability rights, focusing on accessibility in elections and public spaces. However, challenges remain, particularly in rural areas where physical infrastructure and public awareness of disability rights are limited. Even in urban areas like Dili, the implementation of accessibility standards is inconsistent. Public spaces, transportation systems, and government buildings often remain inaccessible to persons with disabilities, and there is still a lack of widespread knowledge among local authorities and service providers on how to meet legal requirements. These challenges are compounded by stigma and limited disability-related education, leaving persons with disabilities excluded from full participation in social, economic, and political life (UNDP, 2011).

Regarding the LGBTQIA+ community in Timor-Leste, it has increasingly gained visibility, though social stigmatization and cultural barriers persist. While the country lacks explicit legal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals, there has been growing advocacy from groups such as Arco-iris Timor-Leste and CODIVA (Coalition for Diversity and Action) (UNDP, 2017). Notably, the *Marcha da Diversidade* (Pride March), first held in Dili in 2017, marked a significant step in advocating for LGBTQ+ visibility and rights. Although the Timorese Constitution guarantees equality and non-discrimination, specific legal frameworks addressing LGBTQ+ rights remain limited, making grassroots advocacy critical (Niner, 2018).

Against this background of flourishing civil society, there is an important aspect that marks the dynamics of social exclusion in Timor-Leste, both economic and in terms of political representation, which is the rural–urban divide. While Dili serves as the political and economic center, rural areas often experience marginalization in policymaking and development priorities (UNDP, 2010).

The state-building process, heavily supported by international investment, has aimed to decentralize governance through the creation of municipalities and the incorporation of women and youth into local governance structures (Cummins, 2014). However, these efforts have not been sufficient to bridge the gap between urban and rural areas. Rural populations continue to face structural disadvantages, relying primarily on subsistence agriculture and traditional social structures for survival. As of 2022, 66% of the population lives in rural areas, with over 70% relying on subsistence agriculture and limited access to markets and financial services (FAO, 2013). These disparities hinder economic diversification and access to essential services like education and healthcare.

Although women’s participation in local governance has improved, only 24% of *suco*¹ (village) chiefs were women as of 2019, and youth engagement remains low due to structural barriers (The Asia Foundation, 2019). Unemployment is a pressing issue, with over 60% of rural youth either jobless or engaged in informal labour, often migrating to urban centres (International Labour Organization, 2018a,b). These challenges highlight the persistent urban–rural divide, emphasizing the need for stronger policies in infrastructure development, agricultural modernization, and inclusive governance.

The economic exclusion of rural communities is exacerbated by the limited capacity of the market economy to absorb the growing labour force. The expectation that independence would lead to an agrarian transition has not materialized, resulting in continued economic dependence on the state rather than productive employment opportunities. Initiatives such as the Programa Nasional Dezenvolvimentu Suco (PNDS) have aimed to address these imbalances by empowering village-level governance and resource allocation (Ximenes, 2016). However, infrastructural gaps and limited literacy in rural communities continue to affect meaningful political participation (Carmona, 2014).

Another critical dimension of social exclusion is the symbolic and moral exclusion of rural populations. Rooted in colonial-era divisions,

1 A *suco* is the smallest administrative unit in Timor-Leste, similar to a village or community. These units play a key role in local decision-making, dispute resolution, and the implementation of development initiatives at the grassroots level.

urban elites often perceive rural ways of life as backward and in need of modernization (Silva, 2011). The development industry's focus on urban-based initiatives has reinforced these perceptions, leading to feelings of misrecognition and marginalization among rural communities. This moral exclusion, combined with economic hardship, contributes to a sense of alienation from the national development process and has the potential to fuel political instability (Silva, 2012).

5.4 Governance dynamics

The dynamics of governance in Timor-Leste are shaped by a complex interplay of historical legacies, formal and informal governance structures, and enduring socio-political hierarchies. While UNTAET laid the groundwork for a centralized governance system modelled on Western democratic principles, this approach did not fully account for the deep-rooted traditional governance mechanisms that continued to hold sway in rural areas (Feijó, 2013; Cummins, 2014). Traditional governance, often centred around the practice of *lisan*², remains a vital component of local governance, addressing issues related to land disputes, social harmony, and conflict resolution through customary law (Cummins and Leach, 2012).

This dual governance structure often leads to tensions, particularly in land tenure disputes, where the state's legal framework requires official titles while customary agreements remain unwritten but widely respected. For instance, in Oecusse, traditional landowners resisted state-backed development projects, asserting ancestral rights over disputed territory (Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste (CAVR), 2005). Similarly, while democracy promotes electoral leadership, some communities still favour hereditary or consensus-based selection, creating parallel power structures that complicate local administration. These challenges highlight the need for hybrid governance models that integrate *lisan* within formal decision-making processes.

Efforts to decentralize governance and strengthen local institutions have been met with both successes and challenges. Cummins (2014) notes that decentralization efforts aimed to empower local communities through the creation of municipalities and the incorporation of traditional authorities into formal governance structures. However, these initiatives have often been met with resistance and skepticism, as local communities perceive state interventions as attempts to undermine their autonomy.

In practice, the coexistence of customary and formal governance systems contributes to inconsistencies in the application of democratic principles. While traditional governance structures play a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion, they often operate outside the formal legal framework, leading to jurisdictional overlaps and conflicts (Cummins, 2014). For instance, decision-making processes in customary systems may prioritize community hierarchies over inclusivity, which can marginalize women and youth. The challenge

lies in harmonizing these governance systems to ensure that democratic values—such as transparency, accountability, and equal participation—are upheld across all levels of society. As such, the relationship between formal state institutions and customary governance structures remains ambiguous, with the state relying on traditional leaders for legitimacy while simultaneously seeking to assert its authority over local affairs (Simião and Silva, 2020).

This hybrid governance model has also given rise to challenges, particularly in the form of political clientelism and patronage. Political elites, many of whom are former resistance leaders, have maintained their influence through extensive patronage networks that distribute state resources in exchange for political loyalty (Wallis and Neves, 2021). This has led to a concentration of political and economic power in the hands of a few, undermining the principles of democratic accountability and transparency (Jones, 2010).

Another factor that hinders effectiveness in governance and policy implementation is the limited capacity of government institutions, which significantly undermines their ability to enforce laws and deliver essential services. The judiciary and executive branches often lack adequate human resources and technical skills (Kingsbury, 2009), a factor that compromises the independence of these institutions, making it difficult for them to act in the best interest of the public (Soesmith, 2003).

More broadly, judicial independence has been under strain due to political interference. Grenfell (2013) argues that, despite formal legal structures, the judiciary struggles with political pressure, particularly regarding appointments and legal decisions. This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that judges, prosecutors and public defenders often lack long-term job security, making them vulnerable to external influence. On top of this, the judiciary also suffers from resources constraints, with an inefficient number of trained legal professionals and delay in case processing, which further weakens its autonomy (Simoes, 2015).

The relationship between the judiciary, legislature, and executive remains complex. While Timor-Leste's Constitution establishes a separation of powers, in practice, the executive exerts considerable influence over both the legislative and judicial branches. The executive, led by the government, often dominates policy-making, while the parliament, despite being an independent body, is frequently aligned with ruling party interests rather than acting as a strong check on executive power. Legislative debates are often marked by political manoeuvring rather than substantive law-making, reducing the parliament's ability to hold the government accountable.

These governance challenges have direct consequences for democracy in Timor-Leste. Weak judicial independence, combined with executive dominance and an underperforming legislature, limits institutional checks and balances. As a result, political elites wield disproportionate power, weakening public trust in democratic institutions. If governance structures are not strengthened to ensure greater judicial autonomy and a more balanced relationship between branches of government, democratic consolidation in Timor-Leste will remain fragile.

5.5 Political economy and democracy

Economic inequality and youth disenfranchisement present significant challenges to the development of democracy in Timor-Leste. Despite progress in rebuilding the economy after independence, wealth disparities remain stark, with rural areas often excluded from development

² *Lisan* is the system of customary norms, values, and practices that govern social relations, spiritual beliefs, and communal responsibilities passed down orally through generations. Including rituals, laws, ceremonies, kinship rules, land use, and ancestors knowledge, and is upheld by traditional authorities such as *lian nain* (customary words).

initiatives. This economic divide perpetuates a sense of marginalization, especially among the younger population, who face high unemployment rates and limited access to quality education and training (Leach, 2017). Such disenfranchisement has broader implications for political stability, as frustrated youth are less likely to engage constructively in democratic processes and become more vulnerable to radicalization or protest movements.

Malnutrition is another critical factor that hinders the full participation of citizens in the democratic process. Timor-Leste has one of the highest rates of child malnutrition in the world, which directly impacts educational outcomes and workforce productivity (World Bank, 2021). A population burdened by poor health and limited economic opportunities is less likely to demand accountability from leaders or participate meaningfully in governance. Addressing these economic and social challenges is essential for fostering a more inclusive democracy where citizens, regardless of their socioeconomic status, can actively contribute to the nation's political and social development.

The country's economic dependence on oil revenues further complicates democratic governance. Timor-Leste's Petroleum Fund, established to manage oil and gas revenues, has been a critical source of state funding, but concerns over mismanagement and excessive withdrawals have raised alarms about its long-term sustainability (Guterres, 2014). With over 80% of the national budget derived from petroleum revenue, the economy remains highly vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices. Instead of diversifying the economy, successive governments have relied on oil wealth to finance public spending, often in ways that reinforce political patronage rather than long-term development. This dependency undermines economic resilience and limits the government's ability to implement policies that promote inclusive growth (Scambary, 2019).

In this context, clientelism and political patronage contribute to the institutional challenges facing democracy. Leach (2017) emphasizes that political leaders often distribute state resources to loyal supporters rather than addressing the needs of the broader population. This practice reinforces unequal power dynamics and stifles fair competition in elections, further entrenching political elites and undermining the democratic process. The Petroleum Fund, while designed as a safeguard for future generations, has been subject to political maneuvering, with large withdrawals often directed towards politically motivated projects rather than sustainable economic investments (Scheiner, 2021).

More broadly, corruption emerges as one of the most significant threats to democratic governance in Timor-Leste. Data from the Commission of Anti-Corruption (CAC) show that between 2010 and 2020, over 700 cases of alleged corruption were registered, with a significant proportion involving public procurement and management of state funds. Despite these reports, conviction rates have remained low, reinforcing public skepticism about the effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts. The CAC's 2022 perceptions survey revealed that only 28% of respondents believed that the government was serious in combating corruption, a notable decline compared to earlier years. This persistent problem undermines citizens' trust in democratic institutions and government transparency (Comissão Anti-Corrupção (CAC), 2022b).

Ultimately, corruption leads to a concentration of power in the hands of a few, weakening democratic competition. As Scambary (2019) suggests, those who control public resources frequently use their positions

to maintain power, limiting opposition and reducing political accountability. Economic mismanagement driven by corruption exacerbates inequality and hampers development, destabilizing democracy and affecting essential services such as healthcare and education, thus perpetuating poverty and deepening socio-economic disparities (Grenfell, 2020).

This scenario is reinforced by the weakness of the judiciary and the culture of impunity prevent accountability for corrupt practices. Highlights that corruption within the judiciary often prevents corrupt officials from facing justice, fostering a culture where unethical behavior is tolerated. This situation encourages further corrupt practices, as individuals feel emboldened by the lack of legal consequences (Shoesmith, 2013). Without stronger institutional reforms to combat corruption, ensure judicial independence, and promote economic diversification beyond oil dependency, democracy in Timor-Leste will remain fragile, vulnerable to elite capture, and disconnected from the broader population's needs.

6 Conclusion

Contrary to many cases where international intervention followed a period of protracted violence, Timor-Leste stands as a country that has managed to maintain stability and consolidate a democratic regime, even if "flawed" by some standards. Notwithstanding the complex legacies of Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation, and notwithstanding the 2006 crisis, civil liberties have been ensured, and so have multiparty representation and the overall functioning of institutions. Free and fair elections are consistently held, and civil society organizations actively participate in political discourse, advocating for transparency, accountability, and human rights. Improvements in civil liberties, such as freedom of expression and press freedom, have contributed to a vibrant public sphere where citizens can engage in meaningful debates. The proportional representation electoral system ensures broad political participation, allowing a diversity of voices and parties to influence policy-making. These are no small matter. Many countries sharing a colonial background and years of protracted violence have failed the test of consolidating democracy in the aftermath of peace.

This democratic resilience has been sustained by a combination factors. Nancy Bermeo's discussion on the legacies of armed conflict in this case is extremely relevant and points to the pertinence of the specific context and features of an armed struggle, in this case, a struggle for independence that engaged a whole population that was suffering from a brutal repression, including of its own identity. At the same time, the deep engagement of the United Nations between 1999 and 2012 also played a key role in the development of the country's democratic institutions and this should not be considered as a mere legacy of armed conflict. In fact, the outcomes of an international intervention are also dependent on the context and nature of the interaction between international and local actors. Paying attention to this interaction and the dilemmas faced by these actors, as discussed by Jarstad and Sisk (2008) and Watts (2023) remind us that different choices could lead to very different results in terms of institutional design, security sector reform, engagement with civil society, and so forth.

Importantly, what the case of Timor-Leste shows is that the path to peace and democracy is multifaceted and the result of the complex

interplay of historical legacies, internal agency, and international support in shaping post-conflict governance. In this regard, important strides in one front may lead to compromises and trade-offs on other fronts. As an example, the introduction of the veteran's scheme following the 2006 crisis was often criticised by external actors as a way of "buying peace" and an element that fosters clientelism; however it was a pillar that helped ensure stability and the resilience of the institutions. Similarly, while the UN was harshly criticised for its top-down approach, it also provided essential support in the immediate post-independence years, helping to establish constitutional rule, train public institutions, and oversee the initial democratic elections. It is in fact hard to imagine how the scenario would have been without the engagement of international actors in the immediate aftermath of the 1999 referendum and early years of independence.

The case of Timor-Leste also shows how difficult it is to overcome entrenched historical patterns, especially, in his case, patterns of social and economic exclusion, as well as how cultural patterns may contribute to, but also undermine, specific agendas linked with democracy.

In sum, Timor-Leste's democratic journey underscores that democracy in post-armed conflict scenarios is neither inevitable nor easily sustained—it is the outcome of ongoing negotiation between competing forces, shaped by both past traumas and future aspirations. The country's ability to maintain democratic institutions thus far is a significant achievement, but its long-term success will depend on how effectively it can address underlying social and economic inequalities, incorporate diverse forms of governance, and foster a more inclusive and accountable political system.

Author contributions

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