The Dominance of the ‘Conflict Paradigm’

Since 1999, when a UN transitional administration was established in the wake of the vote for independence from Indonesia, the case of Timor-Leste has been a relative mainstay in research and policy debates on post-conflict reconstruction. Timor-Leste is often characterised by scholars as a ‘post-conflict’ country and, as a consequence, compared to other countries that have recently emerged from political strife. The small South-East Asian nation serves as ‘a cautionary tale or case study for debates surrounding post-conflict fragility and the UN state-building approach’ (Scambary forthcoming, 2). What this has meant is that surprisingly little scholarly attention has focused on the connections, points of similarity and interrelations between Timor-Leste and its near neighbour and former occupier Indonesia.

The focus of international policy and scholarly attention on the UN’s state-building efforts is understandable given the size and scale of these efforts in Timor-Leste over the last decade-and-a-half. However, it has also resulted in a tendency to frame Timor-Leste within a ‘conflict paradigm’ (see Bexley 2010). This paradigm views developments in Timor-Leste through an ahistorical, and state-centric, ‘security focused’ lens (Bexley 2010, 9). The nation is seen as a ‘tabula rasa’ that began its transition to independence following the 1999 referendum. Where history is considered, East Timorese are viewed as ‘victims’ of the conflict and the experience of the Indonesian occupation is constructed as ‘wholly negative’ (Bexley 2010).

This paradigm is problematic because it means that East Timorese agency in the state-building endeavour is downplayed, and also because it overlooks the extent to which the Indonesian occupation, although oppressive, has had an enormous influence on social, political and cultural life in Timor-Leste.

The lack of international scholarly attention to the points of connection between Timor-Leste and Indonesia is somewhat surprising given that, even to the casual observer, these links are strong. For instance, one of Indonesia’s largest banks, the state-owned Mandiri, is based in Dili. Indonesian satellite TV beams into East Timorese homes, and there are as many East Timorese undertaking higher education in Indonesian universities as there are in Dili.

Deep historical and cultural ties between Timor-Leste and Indonesian West Timor, and the profound sociocultural and structural legacy of the 24-year Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste, are all important in facilitating close economic, political and people-to-people ties. In recent years, pragmatic international relations between the two governments have also played a vital part in binding the countries together. Relations between the two countries are remarkably warm given their recent pasts, and are underpinned by an implicit deal to ‘forgive and forget’ crimes committed by the Indonesian military during the occupation.

Exploring Multiple Dimensions of Timor-Leste–Indonesia Relations

Only recently have researchers begun to explore the multiple dimensions of Timor-Leste–Indonesian relations and unpack the relationship across a range of sectors (e.g. see Nygaard-Christensen 2013). The authors of this In Brief have contributed to this endeavour by publishing an SSGM Discussion Paper that highlights the different ways in which Timor-Leste and Indonesia remain intricately entwined (see Peake, Kent, Damaledo and Thu 2014). The paper presents four discrete case studies that explore the relationship between Timor-Leste and Indonesia across different scales ranging from the institutional to the level of individuals and families.

Case study one shows how Indonesia is the prime reference point for East Timorese police officers and how these bonds become strengthened further by commercial ties. It demonstrates that, rather than being built from scratch after independence, the ‘new’ police force has been significantly shaped by Indonesian experiences and practice. Case study two explores the lives of East Timorese women who, during the occupation, were coerced into sexual relationships with members of the Indonesian military, and who continue to encounter stigma and
difficulties in their newly independent homeland. While it highlights their experiences of victimisation and ongoing marginalisation, it also shows that the women evince, and continue to evince, negotiation and survival skills. Case studies three and four examine the lives of tens of thousands of East Timorese who fled to Indonesian West Timor following the 1999 referendum. By examining how many people continue to negotiate lives, families and businesses in both countries, they highlight that the border is not as ‘fixed’ as it might appear.

In very different ways, the case studies illustrate the enduring but sometimes fraught nature of ties between Timor-Leste and Indonesia. They also show that, although influenced by history, this relationship is constantly evolving, and is renegotiated by both political elites as well as ordinary people.

**Insights for Scholars and Policy-Makers**

The insights from the case studies point to the need for researchers and policy-makers to develop more complex narratives of Timor-Leste and Indonesia relations — accounts that move beyond the ahistorical ‘conflict paradigm’ and engage with the long-standing historical, cultural, social and political ties that exist between the two nations.

Greater recognition of the ties between Timor-Leste and Indonesia should lead policy-makers to eschew the idea that Timor-Leste is a post-conflict *tabula rasa* in which key institutions have been developed from scratch, and accept that those institutions have been significantly shaped by Indonesian experiences and practice. By developing a more historically grounded understanding of how Indonesia has influenced and continues to influence the formation and practice of key institutions, scholars and policy-makers might gain insight into how these institutions function in the present and how they might evolve in future.

A more complex, multidimensional narrative of Timor-Leste–Indonesia relations might also see academics and policy-makers moving beyond the oft-repeated statement that ‘pragmatism’ lies at the heart of this relationship. While pragmatism is certainly a feature of bilateral diplomatic relations between political leaders, to stop with this observation does not do justice to the deep ties that exist at the level of everyday people-to-people relations.

A focus on the everyday lives of East Timorese and their interactions with Indonesians, both historically and in the present, might lead to more nuanced understandings of how people conceptualise the state, and their local and national identities. A focus on the everyday highlights, for instance, that despite the violence of the occupation, ordinary people do not display animosity towards Indonesians. It also reveals a great deal of cross-border mobility, suggesting the need for more flexible policy responses in relation to border policing, visas and the provision of basic social assistance to displaced East Timorese seeking to return to their country of origin.

This is very much a new topic of research and further work is required to elaborate the extent of linkages, relationships and entanglements between Indonesia and Timor-Leste. Already, however, it would seem that, when transposed with the existing literature, exploring the influence of Indonesia may present a fuller picture to understanding ongoing processes of state and nation formation in contemporary Timor-Leste.

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**References**


**Endnotes**

1. The vote took place during a UN-sponsored referendum.
2. Many Indonesian students and activists played an important role in supporting the independence campaign of their East Timorese peers in the 1990s.