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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Shoesmith, D. (2020). Party Systems and Factionalism in Timor-Leste. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 39(1), 167-186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103419889759>

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Party Systems and Factionalism in Timor-Leste

Journal of Current
Southeast Asian Affairs
2020, Vol. 39(1) 167–186
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DOI: 10.1177/1868103419889759
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Abstract

This study identifies and explains the factors that have shaped the evolution of the competitive political party system in East Timor from its beginnings in the 1970s to the difficult and sometimes violent transition since independence in 2002 towards a semi-developed competitive party system. It reviews the organizational character of the two major Parties: FRETILIN and the CNRT and the minor parties in the national parliament and the nature of intra-party factionalism in contemporary politics in what is an under-institutionalized and a predominantly personalistic system.

Keywords

party system, factions, Timor-Leste

Introduction

The development of a political party system in Timor-Leste and the degree of party factionalism in that system share some commonalities with the experience of other post-conflict, new states. The party system has been equally significantly determined by specific domestic factors and critical international interventions that make Timor-Leste a special case.¹ This study identifies and explains those specific factors that have shaped the evolution of the competitive party system in East Timor from its very unpromising beginnings in the 1970s to the difficult transition towards a functioning competitive party democracy since independence in 2002. It explains the working of inter-party factionalism in what is an under-institutionalised and predominantly personalised party system.

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A competitive party system is an indispensable condition for consolidated democracy, a democracy that can operate within accepted rules of free political competition that can allow a change government through fair elections (Przeworski, 1991). New states that have emerged from episodes of major conflict and have then established a competitive party system that can allow oppositions to win government are very rare. Attempts to achieve this mostly failed in the new post-conflict states in Africa in the latter part of the twentieth century. East Timor's success was hard-won and only guaranteed by two United Nations authorised international peacekeeping interventions in 1999 and 2006. Overcoming serious obstacles to democratic consolidation, the party system constituted under UN auspices in 1999–2002 has developed into a functioning multiparty system that has now permitted four times – in 2007, 2012, 2017, and 2018 – the constitutional transfer of government through genuinely competitive elections.

While the progress is substantial, the achievement of a degree of democratic consolidation since independence has been anything but assured and the transition to democratic consolidation remains incomplete. As will be explained here, the party system operates under significant constraints and the degree of institutionalisation of the party system is poor. The institutionalisation of the individual parties in that system is at best uneven.

Typically, post-conflict states have embarked abruptly and without forewarning or preparation on the process of democratic transition (Randall and Svåsand, 2002: 16). With the sudden end of Indonesian rule in 1999, the party that formed government at independence in East Timor already had a long history and was prepared to govern. Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (*Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente*, FRETILIN) was founded in 1974–1975 and the party that had fought for independence from Indonesia between 1975 and 1999 enjoyed a favoured position to assume power on independence as the dominant party that had presided over twenty-four years of struggle.

The party that was to emerge as FRETILIN's rival and successor in government, the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (*Conselho Nacional de Reconstrução de Timor*, CNRT), was founded very quickly just in advance of the 2007 election. Its success in that election, going against the pattern of uninterrupted dominant party rule in other post-conflict states, critically depended on the national status of CNRT's founder and leader, Xanana Gusmão, the resistance hero and first president.

The political contest between 2007 and 2013 was a polarised contest between these two major parties with a number of minor parties gaining representation in the national parliament, sometimes in opposition, sometimes as junior partners in a coalition government. The political rivalry between the two key leading political actors, Gusmão and Mari bin Amude Alkatiri, Secretary-General of FRETILIN and Prime Minister in the 1st Constitutional Government, has defined the operation of the party system in post-independence Timor-Leste. Gusmão and Alkatiri were founding members of FRETILIN in 1975 but became political enemies in the 1980s during the resistance struggle (Shoosmith, 2003).

It will be explained how the pattern of party politics first changed in 2007 with FRETILIN's defeat and the ascendancy of the CNRT. FRETILIN did not accept its loss

of government following the 2007 election but its acceptance of its second defeat in 2012 appeared to have signalled that the implementation of a competitive party system was taking hold. The outcome of the 2012 election also introduced a second major change in the system of inter-party politics. The political reconciliation between Gusmão and Alkatiri in 2013 and the appointment of a FRETILIN prime minister by Gusmão and the inclusion of four FRETILIN ministers in a “government of national unity” in 2015 was presented as putting the interest of the people above any other partisan interest (Araújo, 2015). The political rivalry resumed in 2017 when Gusmão’s CNRT in opposition, formed an opposition alliance which brought down the FRETILIN government in eight months

By the time of the lead-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2017, Timor-Leste occupied a seriously ambivalent political space. The creation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) in February 2015 set up what Arend Lijphart has termed a “consociational democracy” in Timor-Leste, an arrangement where the opposition, in effect, surrenders that role and possibly the opportunity to replace the government at the next national elections in return for a share in government. It is an arrangement between previously rival leaders and their parties, where national elites agree to share power. This is a type of “controlled democracy” intended to replace political conflict with political cooperation. The negative side of this reconciliation appeared to be a weakening of the function of political opposition in national politics. It can entail a loss of accountability and transparency and a consequent tendency towards political collusion, or worse (Shoesmith, 2017). These consequences did not follow: political rivalry resumed in 2017 when Gusmão’s CNRT in opposition, formed an alliance in the national parliament that brought down the FRETILIN government in eight months

Assessing Party Institutionalisation

It is necessary to apply a systematic approach to assess the current degree of the consolidation and the institutionalisation of the party system and of the parties themselves in Timor-Leste. The degree of institutionalisation of multiparty interaction and the degree of individual organisational integrity of the major parties is a key determinant of the actual operation of the party system and the potential for stability or destabilising intra-party and inter-party factionalism. The approach taken here will draw on Randall and Svåsand (2002) and their exposition of political party institutionalisation. Their analysis applied to the Timor-Leste case can inform a measured evaluation of the stage of political development of the party system. To the extent that individual parties and the party system as a whole in Timor-Leste have institutionalised the rules and processes of competitive politics then to that extent East Timor has progressed in the degree of accountability in the East Timorese political system.

In a competitive party system that is institutionalised one can expect continuity among party alternatives, enhancing prospects of electoral accountability. This is the structural

component. The attitudinal component is that the parties accept each other as legitimate competitors, essential to the notion of political opposition. (Randall and Svåsand, 2002: 7)

Randall and Svåsand propose a four-cell matrix with which to assess the institutionalisation of political parties: two structural dimensions, “systemness” and “decisional autonomy” and two attitudinal dimensions, “value infusion” and “reification.” Systemness and value infusion are internal dimensions of party institutionalisation. Systemness concerns the “increasing scope, density and regularity of the interactions that constitute the party as a structure.” This involves routine application of accepted conventions guiding the party’s operations. Value infusion refers to “the extent to which party actors and supporters... acquire an identification with and commitment to the party which transcend mere instrumental or self-interested incentives for involvement.” It is an important aspect of party cohesion. Decisional autonomy and reification are external dimensions, defined by the party’s institutional relations within the political environment. The concept of party autonomy is contentious but it relates to the degree in which the party in itself has the capacity to decide its own policies and strategies in terms of its dependence upon or independence from sponsoring institutions or groups (Randall and Svåsand, 2002: 13). I would add here that a party’s decision-making autonomy can also be reduced by the dominant control of its leader and that this has been the case with Gusmão and the CNRT. Reification refers to “the extent to which the party’s existence is established in the public imagination”. In contemporary Timor-Leste, FRETILIN and the CNRT have firmly established themselves in the public imagination. It will be pointed out, however, that in CNRT’s case, this identification has been with the leader rather than the party.

The Location of East Timorese Party Politics

The institutionalisation of parties and the party system is located in several overlapping contexts. The first of these is historical. East Timor’s political history has moved through strikingly different phases: first, the founding of the first political parties in the last two years of Portuguese colonialism; then the one-party independence struggle led by FRETILIN against the Indonesian occupation (1975–1999). The Indonesian withdrawal was followed by the founding of a competitive multiparty system initially under United Nations auspices (1999–2002). FRETILIN formed the first government following independence, presiding over a period of almost *de facto* one-party rule (2002–2007). FRETILIN’s defeat in 2007 (following the political crisis of 2006) introduced the contemporary period of multiparty politics controlled by Gusmão’s CNRT.

The second context is that of the political legacy of the independence struggle. Alongside pride in its success, there remain deep political divisions within Timor-Leste from that struggle. Veterans from the struggle constitute a potentially disruptive force. Timor-Leste has faced the range of acute challenges confronting new, post-conflict states. Collier has identified these challenges and the likelihood of state failure and included Timor-Leste among those at risk (Collier et al., 2006). In 2006, without the

intervention of an international peacekeeping force under United Nations responsibility, Timor-Leste may well have become a failed state.

The third context is the composition and socio-political construct of a surviving and strong customary and traditional system in the districts with which political élites in the central state must work and which largely defines the actual operation of party politics at the local level (Hicks, 2009). The party system and the electoral system are highly centralised in Timor-Leste and a programme of decentralisation and local government reform has not yet modified this. The operation of the party system and the institutionalisation of party politics necessarily must achieve a degree of popular inclusiveness at the local level, a task all the harder in a grossly dualistic political economy divided between ambitious development projects supported from the billions of dollars in the Petroleum Fund and a subsistence, rural economy marked by high levels of poverty, illiteracy, and poor health.

The party system must be understood, then, not only in terms of the role and interaction of political parties within the party system but also in terms of the party system's operation within the broader political system. This includes the limited capacity of the National Parliament to perform an autonomous role and the unequal relationship between the National Parliament and the Council of Ministers (the political executive). More broadly still, the party system has to operate in a divided electorate and the immaturity of emerging institutions of a young civil society. It is only in this total context that the relative strength of the party system in government can be assessed. The focus here is on the party system operating within the political system. To anticipate the argument, it will be concluded that specifically within the structure of the political system, the party system in Timor-Leste is significantly constrained in its ability to perform its representative and accountability functions.

The Trajectory of Political Party History

Political parties in Portuguese Timor appeared abruptly in 1974–1975. The emergence of the style of party politics then and the primary role of FRETILIN was to set a trajectory which continued through the Indonesian occupation and largely continued to define party politics until the election of 2007.

In 1974, following the Carnation Revolution and the overthrow of the dictatorship in Portugal, the colonial government in Portuguese Timor called for the foundation of political parties in preparation for the end of Portuguese rule (Shoesmith, 2013). The discussion will focus here on FRETILIN. FRETILIN was the party of national independence. Other parties founded in 1974–1975 had different agendas. The Timorese Democratic Union (*União Democrática Timorense*, UDT) promoted a Lusified, Catholic East Timor in a close, continuing relationship with Portugal. The Popular Democratic Association of Timor (*Associação Popular Democrática de Timor*, APODETI) sought unification with Indonesia, building on the historic ties between East Timor and Indonesian West Timor (Leach, 2017: 16).

FRETILIN proved to be by far the most successful of the parties formed in that period, surviving the Indonesian occupation and forming government at independence in

2002. Formed in 1975 from the *Associação Social Democrática Timorense* (ASDT) established the previous year, the party included moderate and radical nationalists and some Marxists who had been exposed to radical and Marxist movements in Portugal (Ramos-Horta, 1987). Initially, the party adopted a platform that was nationalist and socialist. Its early ideological focus was *Mauberism*, social justice for the common people.² Its leadership included moderate nationalists, radical nationalists, and Marxists. The Marxist faction identified with the communist party in Portugal and the revolutionary programmes of the national liberation movements in Mozambique and Angola. By 1977, this faction was to prevail during the resistance struggle against Indonesia (Shoesmith, 2013).

From the beginning, the party claimed an exclusive right to govern an independent East Timor. It made this claim soon after its foundation. In negotiations with the Portuguese government in 1975, FRETILIN demanded “recognition of the party as the only legitimate representative of the people of East Timor” (Nicol, 1978: 79). On 28 November 1975, FRETILIN unilaterally declared independence as the Democratic Republic of East Timor (*República Democrática de Timor-Leste*, RDTL). The Indonesian invasion, little over a week later, sent the FRETILIN leadership underground or into exile (Jolliffe, 1978).

Those FRETILIN leaders who escaped the Indonesian occupation spent their exile for the next twenty-four years in Mozambique. Known as the “Maputo Group” or the “Mozambique Clique,” they adopted the “revolutionary African nationalism” and the Marxism of their mentor, the Liberation Front of Mozambique (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*, FRELIMO). FRETILIN’s leaders, like FRELIMO’s President Samora Machel, intended from 1977, when both parties formally announced their Marxist–Leninist credentials,³ to preside over a closed, authoritarian, and revolutionary one-party system. This followed the trend among first-generation African new states towards one-party and dominant party systems (Carter, 1962), adopting Marxist–Leninist ideologies and capturing exclusive control of the state apparatus. The Marxist faction in FRETILIN became increasingly assertive and in 1977 seized control of the Central Committee. It introduced a Leninist model of the vanguard party under a secretary-general presiding over a Department of Political Orientation and Ideology and a Central Committee (Kiernan, 2008: 168). The party was renamed the FRETILIN Marxist–Leninist Party (*Partido Marxista–Leninista Fretilin*, PMLF). The armed struggle against Indonesia was to be a “protracted people’s war” guided by Marxist–Leninist ideology as defined by Mao Zedong. Relentless action by the Indonesian military made this strategy unsustainable (Kiernan, 2008: 168, 172). Marxist leaders of the newly named PMLF initiated “purging waves of massacres of nationalists” in 1977 (Niner, 2000: 134). The nationalist party president, Xavier do Amaral was arrested for “high treason.” Non-Marxist members of the Central Committee were assassinated as “reactionaries and traitors” (Kiernan, 2008: 209).

By around 1990, this pattern had begun to change in Africa as a number of one-party states moved on to limited and controlled multiparty politics. After achieving independence in 1975 and after winning a prolonged and bloody civil war, FRELIMO eventually in 1990 introduced a constitutional multiparty system while ensuring it

continued to rule through its control of national elections. FRETILIN's leaders witnessed this new political strategy.

By 1998, when it drew up a new constitution, FRETILIN had long abandoned its Marxist–Leninism but it continued to assume the exclusive right to govern as the party that had led the resistance movement and the struggle for independence. In 1998, in its draft constitution, the party embraced pluralist, multiparty politics. As it turned out, this was in advance of the introduction of that system by the United Nations Transitional Administration of East Timor (UNTAET). At the same time, FRETILIN remained what David Apter (1965) terms a “party of solidarity,” as distinct from “parties of representation,” actuated by the conviction of its historic and exclusive right to govern. FRETILIN's leaders regarded it as the “foundation party” of East Timorese nationhood.

The end of Indonesian rule in 1999 and the transition to independence under United Nations' supervision introduced a system of pluralist multiparty democracy, the regime type intrinsic to the United Nations' mandate (Tan, 2002). The leaders of 1975 re-emerged to be represented in the Council set up by the UN and to contest the Constituent Assembly election in 2001. FRETILIN won that election and as the majority party exercised decisive influence over the constitution adopted by the Assembly. The constitution contained a clause that transformed the Assembly on independence in 2002 into the first parliament, effectively handing FRETILIN government without a separate election for the parliament.

Once in government, FRETILIN assumed it would then remain in power. Its endorsement of a competitive party system rested on the premise that FRETILIN would always form government. It would preside over what, in effect, would be a predominant party system. Its loss of government in 2007 and its defeat again in the 2012 election required the party to reconsider the claim to an exclusive right to govern. By accepting a role in the 6th Constitutional Government, it effectively abandoned that claim. It did resume government briefly following the 2017 election but was soon brought down.

The Institutional Framework of Party Politics

The introduction of competitive party politics at independence in 2002 was facilitated by UNTAET. Although the transitional period was a brief two years, it defined, with FRETILIN's concurrence, the constitutional framework of a competitive multiparty liberal democracy. The UN remained after independence until 2005, providing support for political stability. It returned with the international peacekeeping force in 2006. The UN role and international support was an advantage enjoyed by East Timor that was not available for new post-conflict states in the other former Portuguese colonies in the earlier era of decolonisation. A competitive party system most probably would not have survived the 2006 crisis without a second United Nations international peacekeeping intervention.

It will be argued that the continuing institutional weaknesses of the party system and of individual political parties are not only an outcome of East Timor's political history but are also consequences of the formal framework of institutionalised politics and the informal manipulation of the political system by key actors. The formal party system in

Timor-Leste is broadly defined by the constitution adopted by the Constituent Assembly in 2001 and by supplementary legislation, such as Law No. 3/2004 Political Parties. The Fundamental Principles set out in the constitution recognise universal suffrage in a multiparty system.

The state shall value the contribution of political parties for the organised expression of the popular will and for the democratic participation of the citizen in the governance of the country. (section 7.2)

Section 65 on elections enjoins that the conversion of votes into a mandate “shall observe the principle of proportional representation” (section 65.4). Rules for the election and composition of the National Parliament are set out in section 93.

Law No. 3/2004 clarifies the role of political parties as to define government programmes and to “critically appraise the actions of government and the public administration” (section 2.c and section 16.e). The role of critical appraisal translates into the responsibility of the legislature to exercise scrutiny of the political executive, that is, the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers. The parliament, while critically reviewing the policies of government, has the power to enact laws.

The record of all governments since independence is that during both the FRETILIN period, and after the 2007, 2012, and 2018 elections, the executive branch has tended to dominate the legislature, a pattern typical of emerging democracies (Morgan, 2005). New legislatures generally lack the human and institutional resources and the experience to play anything like an equal role with the executive in policy-making. This has been the experience since independence in Timor-Leste. Once the pattern of executive dominance has been established, it is difficult for the legislature to later assert its independent powers.

In Timor-Leste, executive power has been predominant because of the legacy of the independence struggle and the key roles played by a handful of leaders from the generation of 1975. Prime Minister Alkatiri, when FRETILIN was the single party of government, regarded the opposition parties almost with contempt. The minor parties that made up the opposition were more or less impotent. The parliament itself was relatively marginal to government in the 1st Constitutional Government. The Council of Ministers ruled under the strict discipline of the Secretary-General. The opposition to the government was not so much in parliament as that provided by President Xanana Gusmão. Gusmão, when he occupied the prime ministership from 2007 to 2015, dominated the Council of Ministers and demonstrated impatience and sometimes hostility towards the junior parties in his own governing coalition.

Specific elements in the formal political system impose restrictions on parliamentary independence and powers of review. The separation of powers doctrine (section 69 of the Constitution) and the Electoral Law require members of parliament to resign their seats if they are appointed to the executive, that is, as ministers. Ministers cannot serve in the parliament. They are selected by the prime minister. Parliament’s access to ministers is limited. Ministers may attend parliament to be questioned on policy, particularly during the budget debates, but the Council of Ministers and individual ministers are not liable to parliamentary removal.

The constitution approves a dual system of law-making. The Council of Ministers can enact decree laws in its own right. Section 96 authorises the executive to make laws on a broad range of matters including, among others, crimes, sentencing and security matters, civil and criminal procedures, organisation of the judiciary, rules for civil servants, the monetary, financial and banking systems, environmental protection, and the mass media. Section 97 empowers the Council of Ministers as well as the parliament to initiate legislation. The parliament has restricted rights to appraise or amend or even terminate decree laws under section 98.1 In practice, these exclusive executive legislative powers have been exercised very broadly (Shoesmith 2008: 76–77).

The key policy debate each year in the National Parliament is that concerning the budget. FRETILIN as the Opposition since 2007 subjected each budget to serious scrutiny. The parliament, as a whole, undertakes substantial and sustained budget debates. The President has a limited veto power, which has been used, on the budget.

In common with the other former Portuguese colonies (except Brazil), Timor-Leste adopted a broadly Portuguese model of the state, a semi-presidential system that attributes the power to govern to the political executive, the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers but reserves certain powers to the directly elected president. Timor-Leste provides the directly elected president with one of the lowest levels of constitutional powers in the Lusophone states (Neto and Lobo, 2010: 11, 16). In 2001, when FRETILIN in the Constituent Assembly drew up the constitution, it deliberately limited presidential powers on the calculation that Gusmão, regarded as a serious political enemy, would win the presidency (Gorjão, 2002: 322). The president lacks the crucial power to appoint or dismiss the prime minister and cabinet. The president has limited power to dissolve parliament (section 86f). Notwithstanding, powerful individuals who have filled the office, notably Gusmão in 2002–2007, Ramos-Horta (2007–2012) and president, Taur Matan Ruak (José Maria Vasconcelos) (2012–2017), former resistance leaders. Presidents have drawn on their personal authority to act beyond their constitutionally limited role to challenge their prime ministers. When presidential power is assessed beyond the formal aspects of the constitutional role, Timor-Leste emerges with a much stronger presidency, a high 7 on the Siaroff Scale of Presidential power (reproduced in Neto and Lobo, 2010, Table 3).

The powerful political executive, the relatively limited role of the parliament in national politics and interventionist presidents obviously reduce the role of political parties in national governance and confine the operations of the party system.

Party Discipline and the Electoral System

The electoral system, an adaptation of the Portuguese model, constitutes Timor-Leste into a single electorate, a single voting constituency. There are no individual electorates. Candidates for parliamentary office appear ranked on single party lists. The Constitution directs that “the rules relating to constituencies, eligibility conditions, nominations and electoral procedures” are a matter for legislation (section 93.3). The electoral rules were encoded in Law No. 6/2006, the *Law on the Election of the National Parliament* which establishes that “There shall be only one single constituency in the election of the

National Parliament corresponding to the entire national territory, headquartered in Dili” (Article 9). Members of parliament “shall be elected through pluri-nominal lists, presented by political parties or party coalitions, and each voting citizen shall be entitled to one single vote in the list” (Article 11). Lists of candidates “must include at least one woman per every group of four candidates” (Article 12.3). This was subsequently increased to one in three. Since both the single national electorate and the closed party lists are established by legislation and not by constitutional requirements, presumably both could be rescinded and replaced by alternative electoral and voting systems.

Party list systems have some advantages: they can result in a parliament that represents the electorate through a greater number of parties (although this raised the question of whether a two-party system is a desirable characteristic of a consolidated parliamentary system). They can ensure, as Timor-Leste’s electoral system does, representation of women candidates for parliamentary office. The disadvantages include the removal of the direct link between parliamentary representatives and local constituents. The top-down electoral system denies voters the opportunity to choose individual, local members of parliament and, therefore, substantially diminishes the workings of representative democracy. Party leaders can decide who appears on their party list and in what ranking and who do not. Parties become heavily centralised as aspiring MPs are dependent upon the party leadership for any hope of election (Heywood, 2007: 263).

In terms of the dynamics of infra-party factionalism, the party list system reduces the likelihood of factional blocs within the larger parties represented in the parliament. In drawing up the party lists, party leaders can exclude candidates identified with factions unacceptable to the leadership. Xanana Gusmão personally drew up the CNRT party list for the 2007 election. FRETILIN exercises a different model of selection involving the central party leadership but with the decisive influence of the party Secretary-General, Mari Alkatiri.

The subsequent parliamentary election in 2007 demonstrated that even after the political crisis of 2006, political parties operated within the constitutional rules of national elections and that, despite FRETILIN’s rejection of the outcome, the party system produced a change of government. The 2012 election demonstrated convincingly that FRETILIN in opposition now accepted the return of the CNRT government. The ability of elections to change government is a major achievement. At the same time, a number of weaknesses in the organisational autonomy of individual parties and significant limitations in the party system itself that will be identified here suggest that, in terms of the debate on the “new institutionalism” of party systems, the party system in Timor-Leste is not yet sufficiently institutionalised (Soltan et al., 1998).

Communal Divisions

The conditions for inter-party and intra-party factionalism are affected by political divisions within the larger body politic. In terms of these political divisions, they are defined partly by class and partly by local and regional loyalties. National elections have reflected the political geography of local electorates that define political allegiances according to distinct local identities. The 2007 election revealed the demographic divide

between “Easterners” and “Westerners” that has its origins in traditional communal divisions but which acquired a violent political edge during the Indonesian occupation. Easterners, *Lorosa’e* (or *Firaku*), tend to see themselves as the true resistance fighters. The tendency in the eastern districts was to distrust the Westerners, *Loromonu* (or *Kaladi*) as more liable to act as accomplices of the Indonesians (Trindade and Castro, 2006).

There has been *Loromonu* resentment against a perceived *Lorosa’e* dominance of the state and its agencies, including the East Timor Defence Force (FALINTIL-FDTL). This resentment provoked 159 soldiers in January 2006 to petition the President and the Chief of the Defence Force to provide protection against alleged discrimination by Eastern officers against defence personnel from the Western districts. By March, 595 soldiers (one-third of the F-FDTL) were dismissed for disobedience (Trindade and Castro, 2006). The situation developed into open rebellion with defence force personnel killing police, mob violence and the forced resignation of Prime Minister Alkatiri. State failure was probably only averted by the intervention of an international peacekeeping force.

The parliamentary elections held on 30 June 2007 clearly reproduced the eastern–western divide. Highly regionalised party affiliations suggest wider problems of national unity (Leach, 2009: 227). FRETILIN’s core support in the 2007 election was with the *Lorosa’e* concentrated in the three eastern districts of Baucau, Lautem, and Viqueque. FRETILIN won in only four of the thirteen districts, including their three eastern strongholds. FRETILIN won twenty-one seats, outperforming CNRT with eighteen but in the subsequent negotiations to form a coalition government ASDT and PSD with their base support in the West refused to join FRETILIN to form government and instead joined an alliance government controlled by Gusmão’s CNRT. The east–west divide determined the outcome of the 2007 election. Post-election violence was most intense in Viqueque and Baucau, FRETILIN’s strongholds (Leach, 2009: 224).

Party Leadership

The workings of the party system and the parties in the system are singularly decided in Timor-Leste by the role of party leaders. During both the FRETILIN and the CNRT periods in government, the leaders largely defined the relationship between political parties operating in the parliament with the political executive, to the detriment of parliament. The limited organisational capacity of most parties in Timor-Leste encourages personalist politics. Personalised politics operate within networks of patronage and reward. The personalisation of politics weakens party institutionalisation. At the same time, however, personal styles of leadership and personalised politics operated in Timor-Leste until 2012 between two contrasted ideological models of state formation and nation-building, the centralist, exclusive ideology of FRETILIN under Mari Alkatiri and the inclusive, populist ideology of Xanana Gusmão’s CNRT. The political rivalry of the two key actors, Alkatiri and Gusmão is critical to an understanding of the political dynamics of East Timor politics. Their apparent reconciliation since 2013 disappeared in 2018. Alkatiri rules through his party organisation; Gusmão rules as himself. The CNRT Secretary-General conceded in an interview in 2010 that when

Prime Minister Gusmão preferred to operate independently of his party machine (Babo Soares, interview, 2010). A startling example of his independent action was his appointment of his replacement as prime minister in February 2015 from FRETILIN, not his own party.

An important exception to the personification of national politics is that of the FRETILIN leadership model. Mari Alkatiri's authority is institutional as well as personal. The leader of the party is the Secretary-General of the party, an institutional position decided by the Central Committee, not by the personal power or charisma of a leader. FRETILIN established from the very beginning a clearly organised party structure under a Central Committee and the leadership of the Secretary-General as party president. The structure largely survived through the purges and severe factional struggles in 1977 and, again, the factional split during the political crisis of 2006. This structural clarity for a time was weakened by FRETILIN's inclusion in the 6th Constitutional Government. When Xanana Gusmão replaced himself as prime minister with Dr. Araújo in February 2015, this effectively diminished FRETILIN's role as the opposition. As noted, this unity government disappeared in 2017–2018.

Apart from the degree of party institutionalisation, in terms of intra-party factionalism it will be argued that, while factionalism has been pronounced in most of the minor parties active since independence in 2002, it has been a low to medium characteristic of the two major parties and they have generally not been plagued by factionalism (with the exception of FRETILIN in 2006). Minor parties that have split over factional leadership contests include the Association of Timor Heroes (*Klibur Oan Timor Asu'wain*, KOTA), that, in 2010 had two rival presidents, and the Christian Democrat Party (*Partido Democrata Cristã*, PDC) in which one faction aligned itself with FRETILIN and another with the conservative UDC (Shoesmith, 2011). The minor parties tend to revolve around a few individuals who compete for party control. The Timorese Social Democratic Association (ASDT) experienced internal factional struggles after the 2007 elections with attempts to split the party under rival leaders. National Unity Party (*Partido Unidade Nacional*, PUN) lost one of its three members in the 2002–2007 parliament when he quit the party and sat as an independent.

This low level of factionalism in the two major parties is the outcome of very different causes. FRETILIN has generally maintained its tight centralised party that provides a tight system of party control. Low levels of factionalism in the CNRT have reflected not so much a centralised party structure as the personal dominance since its creation in 2007 of its founder and charismatic leader. The question for the CNRT is how it will survive Gusmão's eventual final departure and if this will encourage a rise in factional competition within the CNRT. Senior CNRT party members have experienced political frustration and a check to their own ambitions. For both FRETILIN and the CNRT the challenge is to reinvent themselves after the passing of the generation of 1975 leaders.

Party Politics 2002–2012

In government, Prime Minister Alkatiri exhibited little tolerance for the political opposition (Kingsbury, 2007: 20). With fifty-five of the eighty-eight seats, FRETILIN

formed a single-majority government against a fragmented opposition of some eleven parties holding between two and seven seats each. FRETILIN members of the National Parliament tended to dismiss the opposition parties almost with contempt, dismissing them as “irrelevant” (interview, April 2006). This situation was made more complicated by the outcomes of the 2007 election. Ten parties and one independent won seats in the sixty-five-seat parliament.

In the 2007 parliamentary election, FRETILIN won twenty-one seats, the largest single party result; the CNRT won eighteen. FRETILIN was unable to form a coalition to form a government. Gusmão was able to negotiate a coalition of four parties with a total of thirty-nine seats and President Ramos Horta authorised him to form a government. FRETILIN claimed that with the largest number of seats it was entitled to govern and did not accept the CNRT government’s legitimacy. Nevertheless it took on the role of an active, disciplined and critical opposition in the parliament. In effect, the 2007 election, after the major political crisis of 2006, delivered a change of government. If Timor-Leste had not yet attained a fully mature, consolidated multiparty system it had made significant progress in that direction.

The coalition alliance was an awkward and uneasy one, including long-standing political rivals, even enemies. Rather than a predominant party, as FRETILIN had aspired to be, the CNRT was a governing party dependent upon a predominant *leader*. This time it was Prime Minister Gusmão who had little patience with the three minor parties in his coalition.

In the July parliamentary election, CNRT, with 36.6 per cent of the vote, increased its seats from eighteen to thirty. FRETILIN, with 29.8 per cent of the vote, increased its seats from twenty-one to twenty-five. PD, with 10.3 per cent, won eight and the new party, FRENTI-Mudança, the break-away faction from FRETILIN, won two. The CNRT, PD, and FRENTI-Mudança formed a governing coalition (Shoesmith, 2013). FRETILIN accepted the outcome of the election and took the role of the opposition.

Factionalism has been a characteristic more of the minor parties than FRETILIN or the CNRT. In FRETILIN’s case, the party structure and its ideology are centralist and concentrate control in the powerful Central Committee and in the leadership of the Secretary-General. This did not prevent a faction in 2006 from challenging Alkatiri’s leadership and seek to reform the party from within. The faction rejected what they saw as the authoritarian political ideology of the leadership. They formed the breakaway party, FRENTI-Mudança, which supported Ramos-Horta for president in 2007 and the CNRT in the 2007 parliamentary elections (Shoesmith, 2011). FRENTI-Mudança was a junior partner in the governing coalition after 2012.

In the case of the CNRT, Gusmão as founder and leader and as prime minister exercised such a dominant role that the opportunity for factional challenges was just not there. As noted, the party-list system allows the leadership of both CNRT and FRETILIN to rank their favoured candidates so as to exclude party members who might represent a potential faction. Gusmão personally drew up the final party list of CNRT candidates at the last moment before the 2007 parliamentary elections (interview with Babo Soares, 2010). The alternative to inter-structural factionalism has been provided by the opportunity to seek election to the national parliament as a candidate on the party list of one of

the smaller parties. This may have been a factor in the proliferation of smaller political parties in the Constituent Assembly and the National Parliament from 2002 to 2007. The 2012 election reversed this trend when only four parties gained representation in the National Parliament (down from seven), the CNRT (thirty seats), FRETILIN (twenty-five seats), PD (eight seats), and FRENTI-Mudança (two seats) (Shoesmith, 2013).

Party Politics Post-2012

Political developments since the 2012 election have remade the party system and the configuration of political leadership in Timor-Leste. On 6 February 2015, Xanana Gusmão formally resigned as prime minister. Given that the government and the ruling party, the CNRT, were his creations and relied on his leadership, the resignation introduced a period of major changes.

From 2013, Gusmão at first set out to reconcile the FRETILIN leadership to his government. He appointed Mari Alkatiri in January 2013 to lead discussions on creating a Special Social Market Economy Zone (*Zona Especial de Economia Social de Mercado*, ZEESM) in Oecusse, the East Timorese enclave in West Timor. ZEESM was established in June 2014. The ZEESM Law created “an unprecedented degree of independence” for the Oecusse Special Administrative Region (SAR) with a wide range of executive powers (La’o Hamutuk, 2014). Alkatiri was appointed by the Council of Ministers as the head of the Special Administrative Region, providing the opposition leader with governing powers in this autonomous zone. The independent Non-Government Organisation, La’o Hamutuk, observed that “Perhaps it shows the real purpose of this project – bringing opposition leader and former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri under the tent of current Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão.” It warned that this action undermined FRETILIN’s role as the opposition and therefore weakened East Timor’s democracy (La’o Hamutuk, 2014).

Gusmão’s purpose to bring FRETILIN into a “coalition of national unity” was realised in 2015. On his retirement and acting on his own initiative, Gusmão appointed as his successor as prime minister, Dr. Rui Maria de Araújo, who was sworn in on 16 February 2015. Araújo, a medical doctor, had served as the Minister of Health in the FRETILIN government between 2002 and 2007. He had played a role in the clandestine student movement, RENETIL, but he became a member of FRETILIN as late as 2010 and was made a member of the party Central Committee only in 2011. As well as appointing Dr. Araújo as prime minister, Gusmão invited four other senior FRETILIN leaders into the ministry, including Estanislau da Conceição Aleixo Maria da Silva as one of the two Ministers of State and as Coordinating Minister of the Economy. The effect was to form a government of national unity that now included all four parties in the National Parliament and their representation in the Council of Ministers.

The creation of a government of national unity appeared to weaken the opposition led by the CNRT. Gusmão’s unexpected move to appoint Dr. Araújo disconcerted if not dismayed some CNRT senior party members who naturally assumed that the incoming prime minister would be chosen from among them (Babo Soares, interviews, 2010 and 2014). At its national conference in 2013, the CNRT had agreed that the Prime Minister

could decide who would have what position in the ministry and to seek a resolution of political divisions in national politics. His decisions in February, 2015, went beyond this brief. He saw himself, it was said, as acting as the Father of National Unity by including FRETILIN in the project of nation-building and state-formation (Babo Soares, interview, 2015). Two senior CNRT representatives indicated that this had unsettled the CNRT party leadership and also could have had an unsettling impact at the grassroots level (Babo Soares, interview, 2015).

The appointment of Araújo in February, 2015, also had consequences for the FRETILIN party leadership. The reconciliation with FRETILIN then left the scrutiny and critique of government almost entirely to Timorese civil society (Nygaard-Christensen, 2016: 350). In interviews with three senior leaders of the party, they claimed that FRETILIN continued its role as the opposition. They offered the curious distinction that Dr. Araújo had accepted the prime ministership with FRETILIN's approval but he was prime minister as an individual and not as a representative of his party. FRETILIN would contest the 2017 election as a real alternative government, offering the electorate a real choice (interview with FRETILIN leaders, 2015).

Gusmão maintained an active and probably still predominant role in the Council of Ministers as Minister of Planning and Strategic Investment and as a national mentor. Nevertheless, he will not lead the CNRT into the 2017 election as Prime Minister. Voters possibly experienced some confusion over FRETILIN and the CNRT's respective roles as forming alternative governments.

One further new unsettling element in party and electoral politics from 2012 was the assertive and critical role undertaken by President Taur Matan Ruak, the former FALINTIL resistance commander. The President outspokenly attacked both the former prime ministers, Gusmão and Alkatiri. He compared them in an unscripted speech before the National Parliament to the former Indonesian dictator Suharto saying that there was "widespread discontent" among the public that their families were benefitting from lucrative government contracts (Allard, 2016). In 2012, he opposed the appointment of Gusmão's choice for the ministry of defence. This was not presented as a private decision but made publicly, creating a serious challenge to the Prime Minister's government. In 2016, he used for the first time the presidential power to summon a special session of parliament to make public his critical views on the appointment of the commander of the army. He supported the formation of a new political party, the People's Liberation Party (PLP).

The outcome of the July 22 2017 parliamentary elections led to the formation of a minority FRETILIN government. FRETILIN won almost 30 per cent of the vote, securing twenty-three seats, while Gusmão's CNRT secured twenty-two seats. The PLP won eight seats and the *Partido Democratico* (PD) won seven. Unhappy with what he saw as a personal rejection of his primacy, Gusmão formed a majority opposition bloc, Change for Progress Alliance (AMP) comprising the CNRT, PLP, and PD. Within a month of the installation of Alkatiri as Prime Minister the AMP began a campaign to overthrow the government. The long history of conflict between the two leaders had resumed. The opposition majority forced an early election after eight months of deadlock. Gusmão's AMP won 49.6 per cent of the vote in the May 2018 elections, securing

thirty-four of the sixty-five seats (ABC News, 30 May 2018). FRETILIN won 34.2 per cent of the vote. The AMP government, led by Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak, the former president and then an outspoken critic of Gusmão, found itself in immediate difficulty with President, Francisco Guterres from FRETILIN, who blocked several ministerial appointments on the grounds of corruption (Leach, 2019).

The political conflicts of 2017–2018 were a return to the pattern of Timor-Leste party politics since independence, with the interregnum of “national unity” in 2015–2017. The pattern is the continuation of personal rivalries between the leaders of the generation of resistance leaders, of factionalism provoked by these personal rivalries and ambitions with the qualified exception of FRETILIN which continues to have a clearer institutional base.

Conclusion

The historical review of the development of party politics in Timor-Leste has helped identify those specific factors that have shaped the evolution of the competitive party system from its origins in 1974–1975, through the independence struggle of 1975–1999 and since independence in 2002. These have included the ideological remaking of FRETILIN from a nationalist to a Marxist and then again a nationalist party while its basic organisational structure first set out in 1975 has survived. They include the unusual failure of the independence party to retain government after its first term. The institutional framework of party politics remains weak and exposed to the operation of the party-list system in a single national electorate that imposes limitations on the representative value of parties and individual members of parliament who are not answerable to an electorate. The party-list also reduces the opportunity for factionalism by fixing selection of the ranking on the list to party leaders, a control Xanana Gusmão exercised personally over CNRT candidates and that Alkatiri, as Secretary-General, similarly was able to exercise over FRETILIN candidates. The institutional framework privileges the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, the political executive, over the parliament. The Council of Ministers has the power to enact legislation. Its ministers do not sit in parliament. The capacity of parliament to hold the executive to account is limited. In a semi-presidential system, presidential powers are constitutionally quite limited but presidents have intervened seriously in national politics and challenged incumbent prime ministers. This is another factor outside the province of the party system.

Following this review of political parties and the party system, it is possible to return to Randall and Svåsand four-cell matrix and to apply it to an assessment of party institutionalisation in contemporary Timor-Leste.

In terms of the first internal factor of “systemness,” it is apparent that only one significant political party, FRETILIN, has a semi-autonomous internal structure and procedural regime. At the same time, Alkatiri has played the pivotal central role in FRETILIN in government and opposition. Eventually, and probably sooner than later, the generational politics dominated by the 1975 resistance leaders must necessarily give way to a later generation of political aspirants. Whether this could introduce a tendency for institutional politics over factionalism is problematic. The CNRT has yet to develop

systemness, given the individual control of party and policy Gusmão has exercised since 2007. When he goes, a likely scenario is that the CNRT will diminish as a national political actor.

In terms of the second internal factor of “decisional autonomy,” again, FRETILIN’s decisional autonomy is institutionalised by party organisation and the role of the Central Committee but, again, this has to be significantly qualified by the long period of Alkatiri’s dominant role. Currently, the CNRT, even according to its own Secretary-General, has very qualified decisional autonomy.

In terms of the first external factor of “value infusion,” the extent to which party actors and supporters acquire an identification with and commitment to the party which transcends self-interest, FRETILIN has represented, as the party of the independence struggle, a set of national values and aspirations that is understood and supported but, according to the 2007 and 2012 elections results, by a minority of the electorate, located predominantly in three eastern districts. It will be interesting to watch how its traditional supports respond in 2017 to the arrangements the party agreed to in 2015. A larger share of the electorate identifies with the values and status ascribed to Gusmão. This rebounds on his party. It may be that policies that he and CNRT have pursued that are attractive to the electorate may provide CNRT itself with autonomous electoral appeal but this is uncertain. There is a perception in the community, identified by then President Taur Matan Ruak, of unfair élite privilege and corruption that may be undermining the degree of trust and therefore the extent of value infusion in party politics.

In terms of the second external factor of “reification,” the extent to which the party’s existence is established in the public imagination, both FRETILIN and the CNRT enjoy high identification and commitment in the electorate. In CNRT’s case, it has been noted that identification and commitment in the electorate is fixed more on the leader, Gusmão, than on the party as such. His partial exit from the scene in 2015 but his intervention in 2018 to bring down the FRETILIN government and install his AMP coalition government must further undermine public recognition of the CNRT as a robust and free-standing institution.

The application of the Randall and Svåsand four-cell matrix to the Timor-Leste party system suggests, then, that the degree of institutionalisation of multiparty interaction was marginal during the FRETILIN period in government (2002–2007), polarised during the first CNRT government (2007–2012), was dissolved to some extent through the formation of a government of national unity in 2015 and has not progressed since the 2017 and 2018 elections. In terms of the individual organisational integrity and the institutionalisation of the major parties, the analysis has shown that CNRT has had a low level of organisational integrity and markedly low autonomy from its charismatic leader. FRETILIN has had a clearer institutional structure based on its original character as a centralist, radical party. FRETILIN’s substantial loss in the 2018 election represents, then, a diminution of institutional integrity in an already under-institutionalised and personalist polity.

In terms of the operation of the party system within the broader political system, the limitations on its functions and the obstacles to its institutionalisation have been explained in terms of the dominance of personalist politics, the relatively limited

capacity of a less than autonomous parliament, the unequal relationship between the National Parliament and the Council of Ministers (the political executive), and in terms of the larger context of a divided electorate and the frailty of the political institutions of civil society. Political parties are obliged to operate in a socio-economic context that is marked by significant levels of poverty and illiteracy, by the operation of traditional systems of governance and local loyalties and by a strikingly dual economy between rural subsistence agriculture and the billion-dollar developments made possible by the Petroleum Fund. The issue of corruption is a rising concern. Despite the progress that has been made, remarkable progress in terms of the utter devastation of the country in 1999 and the trauma of the Indonesian occupation, the party system in Timor-Leste is significantly constrained in its capacity to perform its representative functions for its constituents or its role to hold the political executive to account.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. The designations of the country used here are East Timor as a general term, Portuguese Timor for the period up to 1975, and Timor-Leste after independence in May 2002.
2. "The term *mau bere*, 'my brother', was a local Mambai greeting that the Portuguese appropriated and used to denigrate East Timorese as backward and primitive people from the interior." FRETILIN used it as term of pride an popular identification (Ramos Horta, 1987).
3. In practice, FRELIMO adopted a Marxist–Leninist ideological position from the late 1960s.

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