



Development  
Progress

## AFTER THE BUFFALOES CLASH

### From political violence to personal security in Timor-Leste

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For some in Timor-Leste, martial arts is a recreational sport, while for others martial arts practices have stronger ties of group identity which can lead to rivalries and violence. Photo: © Martine Perret for UN Photo

## Case Study Summary

*Security*

- Since Timor-Leste's referendum on independence in 1999, the young nation has known both impressive progress and dramatic reversals.
- Since 2008, there have been notable reductions in various forms of violence: according to one conflict monitoring group the average number of violent incidents per month halved between 2009 and 2014. Importantly, the 2012 elections were markedly more peaceful than those in 2007.
- The charismatic leadership of current Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão ('Xanana'), combined with a government willingness to spend oil and gas revenues to placate potential spoilers, has been central to keeping the peace.
- However, these strategies that have created stability in the short term could be Timor-Leste's undoing in the long term.

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## Why explore security in Timor-Leste?

In this summary, we analyse progress made in security by Timor-Leste since 2008. This period follows a political-military crisis in 2006, which was a reminder of the fragility of Timor's hard-fought gains.

We focus on improvements in personal security, understood as *personal safety from physical threat and fear of physical threat*.<sup>1</sup> Personal security is an essential part of wellbeing and development. It allows people to earn livelihoods and invest in the future; it enables governments and other groups to deliver public services. International efforts to put security issues on the development agenda globally have resulted in increased peacekeeping and donor funding for conflict-sensitive development.

Timor-Leste is a significant case study. The ample international support it has received begs the question of impact. It is a leading member of the g7+ Group of Fragile States, a voluntary association of 20 countries that self-identify as fragile and advocate deeper dialogue with international development partners, shaped by a clear national vision.

## What progress has been achieved?

Timor-Leste's progress has been achieved following centuries of colonisation and decades of occupation. The referendum in 1999 and subsequent restoration of independence in 2002 were major achievements. In terms of security, these steps finally reduced the dramatically high levels of violence (both direct and indirect) experienced over previous decades, which took the lives of over a hundred thousand people.

The foundations for improved security began in different ways during the period leading up to independence. For instance, in 2001-2002, Timor-Leste set up the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation to promote reconciliation for crimes committed between 1974 and 1999, and its own army and police force was established.

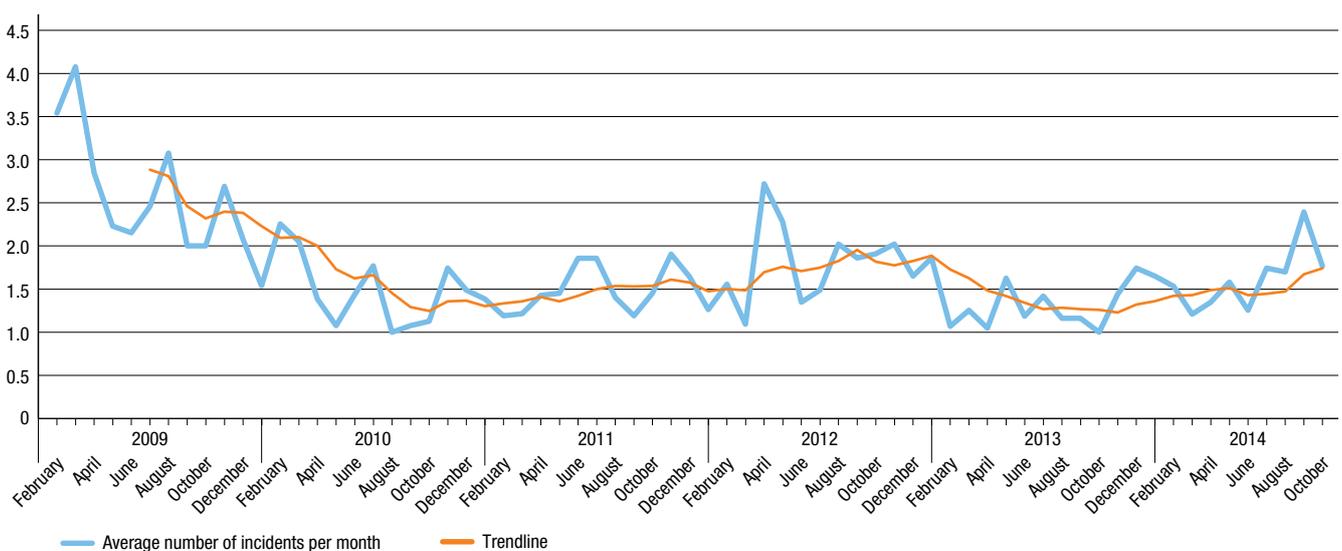
Timor-Leste is often cited as a post-conflict success story, although it has not followed a smooth trajectory. The political-military crisis in 2006 developed when a group of soldiers who became known as the 'Petitioners' wrote a petition to the Prime Minister and President calling for an investigation into discriminatory policies within the army. This sparked violence which led to up to 200 deaths and the displacement of around 150,000 people.

## 1. Since 2008: less violence and improving perceptions of security

Most kinds of violence have declined since 2008 (Belun, 2014). Violent incidents have decreased from an average of 3 incidents per month per sub-district in 2009, to 1.5 in 2014 (Figure 1). International comparisons support the idea that, relative to the events it has suffered, Timor-Leste's security progress has been strong. Timor-Leste was ranked 69 out of 162 countries in the 2014 Global Peace Index, a drop from its 2013 position of 51, but still a high ranking for a fragile state.<sup>2</sup>

Results of perception surveys also show marked improvements. In a 2008 nationwide survey, over half of respondents felt their security had improved from the previous year. There were particular improvements in Dili, where 78% of people believed that security had improved

Figure 1: Average number of incidents per sub-district, february 2009 to october 2014



Source: Belun, 2014

1 This is narrower than the accepted definition of human security, which would incorporate health, education, or political voice (Valters et al., 2014).

2 This index uses a range of international datasets; for more information see <http://www.visionofhumanity.org/>.

## ‘The 2006 crisis was like a big hit to remind everyone that they had to work towards peace’ (Local NGO leader)

compared to the previous year – which is perhaps unsurprising given that Dili bore the brunt of violence associated with the crisis (The Asia Foundation, 2008: 15). Data captured in a 2013 survey equally shows that people in Timor-Leste are increasingly optimistic and believe the country’s security situation has improved over the previous year once again – which is notable in light of the departure of the UN peacekeeping mission in 2012 (The Asia Foundation, 2014).

### 2. Reductions in political violence and martial arts related violence

Politically motivated violence and martial-arts violence stand out because of their potential to spark an escalation of violence and therefore affect the personal security of the Timorese.

Other than the election-related violence in 2007, wide-scale political violence has decreased over time. Several incidents had the potential to spark wider violence, such as the purported attempts on the life of then-President José Ramos-Horta and Xanana in 2008, and the 2012 elections. That they did not shows that, although the structural causes

of violence in Timor-Leste are far from resolved, state and society appear increasingly resilient to wide-scale violence and unrest.

Since independence, martial-arts groups have been involved in many security incidents and their links with various political actors escalated the violence during the 2006 crisis. However, since 2008, violent incidents related to martial-arts groups have declined, although certainly not disappeared (Belun, 2014). This is consistent with The Asia Foundation’s survey of 2013: only 8% of respondents said that martial-arts groups are either somewhat or very active, compared to 38% in 2008 (The Asia Foundation, 2014).

### What are the factors driving change?

#### 1. International support

The commitment of international actors since 1999 has been an important part of Timor-Leste’s progress in security to date, strengthening Timor-Leste’s legitimacy as a state and backing it with peacekeeping forces and ample financial resources.



UN and national police training. Photo: © Martine Perret for UN Photo

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## **‘Politicians are realising it is better to work together. It is a better way: for them to come together, share their knowledge, the capabilities that they have, experience that they have... this is better than dividing the country which would bring more conflict’ (Religious leader, Baucau)**

Timor-Leste has hosted five UN missions and two non-UN international peacekeeping interventions, with peacekeeping funding amounting to over \$3.2 billion and development assistance reaching \$4.2 billion over 1999-2012.<sup>3</sup> The International Force for East Timor (INTERFET), deployed to contain violence following the 1999 referendum, is generally perceived as successful, particularly in pushing Indonesian militias back to West Timor (Wassell, 2014: ii). Similarly, a 2011 survey shows that 63% of Dili residents felt that International Stabilisation force (ISF) and UN Police deployed in response to the 2006 crisis had a positive impact on security in the capital (Grenfell and Winch, 2014).

However, perhaps the most important role played by the international community has been in helping to grant Timor the legitimacy to become an independent state. One prominent Timorese professor we interviewed argued that ‘the whole UN intervention until withdrawal was a process of legitimisation [of us] as a state and as a people ... The UN presence has made East Timor a country and that is something to be proud of.’ This should not be overlooked, yet nor should it encourage what local NGO La’o Hamutuk has called ‘historical amnesia’ about the international community’s failure to recognise Timorese sovereignty and the plight of the Timorese between 1975 and 1999.

There have been further criticisms that early international support did not acknowledge local leaders or assets possessed by the country, rather treating it as ‘a blank slate’. While these criticisms are valid, there is an important question of the counter-factual: would Timor-Leste have been better off alone? For all the mistakes made, few interviewees argued this would have been the case.

### **2. Relatively stable political settlement: the role of Xanana**

Historically, political contestation in Timor-Leste has often culminated in violence greatly affecting civilians. As a former Timorese MP said to us: ‘When two buffaloes clash, it’s the ground beneath them that gets trampled.’ However, the election of Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão (‘Xanana’) and his coalition government in 2007 signalled a shift. There is continuing deference to Xanana’s leadership and a growing elite consensus on policy goals. This has produced a relatively stable political settlement that has driven reduced political violence since 2008.

Timorese politics is characterised by a strong focus on personality, and participation in the resistance remains the

primary way in which politicians assert their legitimacy (ICG, 2013). This dynamic is embodied by Xanana, who was a leading figure during the resistance struggle. For instance, in response to the 2006 crisis, Xanana created and assumed the role of Minister for Defence and Security, which sits above other security and defence ministers – ostensibly to bring the police and military closer together. This has been a successful strategy insofar as there has since been no institutional breakdown. Through his authoritative position, Xanana has been able to exercise sufficient control over these fragile institutions (Kocak, 2014). As one Timorese security analyst argued, ‘It is a very, very peaceful situation now. But behind the peace are hidden many, many things that can lead to collapse... There is a legacy of problems from 1975-1999 and also those from the recent years. There are a lot of cases where Xanana is keeping issues like this [clasps hands together].’

Since 2012, a consensus-based model has emerged. The 2012 elections were markedly more peaceful than those in 2007, and since then the FRETILIN opposition appears significantly invested in the status quo. This current model of consensus originates in the Maubisse dialogue led by the Catholic Church in 2010-2011 (ICG, 2013: 15). To some extent it reflects what one former FRETILIN MP argued could be called a ‘mature approach’ to resolving differences. However, for the ICG (2013: 15), ‘CNRT is widely identified as the “big tent” party, happy to distribute benefits to a wide range of actors, including former political enemies’. This creates considerable incentives to maintain the status quo, deterring violence.

### **3. ‘Buying the peace’**

According to the wide range of stakeholders we interviewed, growing oil and gas revenues since 2005 have given the Timorese government increasing confidence and freedom to be selective in choosing sources of finance, set the agenda and manage its own affairs. It has allowed the government to improve state services, but also to ‘buy the peace’ through cash transfers. This has been an important part of improved personal security, at least in the short term.

In the aftermath of the 2006 crisis, the government offered \$8,000 to each petitioner who chose to demobilise and return to civilian life. This amount represented, at the time, 70 times the monthly minimum civil service wage (ICG, 2013: 3).

This increased the pressure to financially compensate veterans of the resistance. Although veterans represent roughly 15% of the population, Timor-Leste spends

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<sup>3</sup> One fifth of development assistance includes non-military dimensions of peacekeeping.



A member of the Timorese Defence Forces. Photo: © Martine Perret for UN Photo

around 40% of the cash transfer budget on veteran payments. Payments started in 2008, first reaching 2,000 beneficiaries, rising to 64,000 recipients by 2012 (Barma et al., 2014: 265).

Another way the government has been able to buy veterans and other potential spoilers into the peace is by ensuring they receive state contracts – including at the district and sub-district levels. This has created a growing patronage system. One well-known veteran and gang leader argued that: ‘The police, F-FDTL and veterans are getting contracts for three reasons: one, if they are well-known people or have the right connections; two, if people respect them; and three, if people are afraid of them. Those are the three reasons people can lobby to get contracts.’

Finally, the government offered one-off payments to the people displaced by the 2006 crisis and living in camps in Dili to return and rebuild their homes. This was part of a National Recovery Strategy that was praised for being a ‘remarkably efficient and effective way of ending a displacement crisis in what, so far at least, appears to be a durable manner’ (Van der Auweraert, 2012: 17).

#### 4. Ongoing development of a national police force

The Timor-Leste police took full responsibility for domestic security after the withdrawal of UN forces 2012. The force is not fully established across Timor-Leste (particularly in rural areas), and is still lacking in discipline at times. However, civil society observers and government representatives alike

acknowledge that recent reforms have brought a degree of meritocracy to a force whose hierarchy is often dominated by relationships forged during the resistance.

Despite some community reluctance to engage with the police, in a 2013 survey 94% of general public respondents and 92% of community leaders believed that the relationship between the police and members of their community was good. This is a huge improvement from 2008, when only 48% of general public respondents and 78% of community leaders felt the same way (The Asia Foundation, 2014).

These changes align with what seems to be a growing focus on community policing in Timor-Leste. This approach seems to have been adopted as the ‘philosophy’ of the police, although exactly what this means in practice remains unclear, and a dedicated budget is lacking. This means that success depends heavily on the personality and interest of district commanders.

Finally, accountability remains a sensitive issue in Timor-Leste, given the wide-scale pardons offered by former President Ramos-Horta to those police and army members involved in the 2006 violence (CIGI, 2011). This is controversial, as it may be that ‘the long-term threat to establishing the rule of law and stability outweighs the short-term benefits of political reconciliation without justice’ (CIGI, 2011). Furthermore, a recruitment vetting process initiated by the UN after the 2006 crisis was widely seen as ineffective (ICG, 2010: 5).

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**‘The very same things that have allowed Timor-Leste’s stability could be Timor-Leste’s undoing... The current phenomenon is not a development of law and order but a development of power... they have enough resources to buy the peace for the moment, [but] it is not peace, it is stability for the elite’ (Local NGO leader in Dili)**

## **5. Effective state responses to security threats**

Government responses to security incidents since 2006 have involved a range of strategies. Most of these approaches have led to direct improvements in security conditions, at least in the short term. For example, between 2006 and 2008, Dili was the scene of regular political, communal and gang violence. In 2008, a mix of financial incentives, weapons collections, negotiation, dialogue and coercive pressure ended the standoff between the government and petitioners.

Violence associated with martial-arts gangs has been dealt with in various ways, from security-force-led crackdowns, to brokering ‘peace processes’, to banning some or all groups. While these responses have led to an immediate reduction of related violence, banning martial arts groups may just mask the problem and prevent peace-building efforts at the local level in the long run.

Finally, some groups in Timor-Leste dispute the legitimacy of the constitution crafted under UN stewardship (1999-2002) and of the resultant army and police force. The state’s response has so far kept the peace through a mix of approaches, including dialogue, banning groups and strong security measures.

## **6. Local responses to violence**

Local responses to violence may not be the main driver of security progress in Timor-Leste as they are heavily dependent on broader national dynamics. However, local responses are often the most relevant to the Timorese in their day-to-day negotiation of violence and insecurity. Important local actors include: local authorities, village (*suco*) councils, customary leaders, conflict prevention and response networks, community policing councils, youth groups and martial-arts groups.

Local responses to violence almost always involve a negotiation between various forms of authority. For example, it is commonly accepted that the police are required to deal with criminal matters where ‘blood is spilled’, but in practice the police work closely with local leaders, even deferring to local practices or ceremonies rather than dealing with matters according to the formal criminal code.

## **What are the challenges?**

### **1. Persistent, under-reported and new forms of violence**

While several indicators point to fewer violence incidents and the improved personal security of the Timorese, certain forms of violence persist. Some forms of violence are under-reported (such as sexual and gender-based violence); some remain despite reform (violence by security forces and martial arts violence); and some forms appear to be increasing (land, youth and urban violence). One interviewee from an international NGO in Dili argued that Timor is ‘not a low crime environment, it’s just that lots of crime isn’t being recorded’.

### **2. Maintaining political stability and limiting political violence**

Two overlapping issues may threaten the sustainability of Timor-Leste’s current political stability. First, Xanana has been a key figure in holding the young nation together, and citizens have given him a wide remit due to his sacrifice and commitment to Timor. However, it appears unlikely any future leader will have that same level of public confidence. Timor-Leste’s next Prime Minister will probably ‘face the challenge of how to address potential sources of social and political unrest without Gusmão’s unparalleled authority’ (IPAC, 2014).

Second, while buying off potential spoilers with cash payments and contracts has led to immediate political stability, this may lead to political grievances and instability in future. Projections of spending based on current policies show that benefits will be paid to veterans and their heirs until 2122, representing cumulative spending of between \$2.8 and \$7 billion (La’o Hamutuk, 2013; Scheiner, 2014).

### **3. Tensions in the security sector**

Despite the improved security system and its positive impact on citizens’ personal security, army and police officers maintain a variety of political and internal allegiances, weakening command and control. Equally, the military is expanding its role in internal security

**‘You can cut down a tree, but if you don’t pull up the roots, the tree will grow again’ (Village chief, Baucau)**

responsibilities, creating challenging institutional dynamics linked to tensions between the police and army.

Furthermore, while conducted in the name of stability, there are also concerns about some of the heavy-handed government responses to martial-arts violence, youth gangs and political groups. This approach can provoke future violence and discourage citizen activism and dissent – an important check as Timor-Leste attempts to consolidate its young democracy.

rapid urban drift, growing expectations and finite oil and gas reserves, there is still some way to go if the Timorese are to embed the gains of their nascent security progress.

#### 4. Socioeconomic problems threatening long-term security

While Timor-Leste has made a number of significant development gains since 1999, and oil and gas revenues have been used successfully to buy the peace, there are concerns that revenues are not being spent in ways that can sustain growth, development and indeed security over the longer term. For example, far more people die from malnutrition than violence in Timor-Leste. Given Timor-Leste's rising youth population, high levels of poverty,

### Lessons learned

- **State-building practices need to respond to local realities and citizen expectations, with broad consultation important for establishing legitimacy.** In the early years of state building, international policy-makers abolished decentralised governance structures and local services. This led to many Timorese people losing trust in the state. Similarly, in creating the army and police, the international community relied on partisan advice, embedding grievances among veterans and regional groups. These grievances were significant factors fuelling the 2006 crisis, and continue to pose threats.
- **There is a need to understand history and key personalities in post-conflict settings, as these relationships are likely to define what security progress is possible in post-conflict contexts.** The political settlement in Timor-Leste has been defined by the interpersonal relationships built through the resistance period. These relationships are the foundation upon which a highly personalised leadership has taken root and on which politics more broadly continues to play out. Reliance on charismatic figures has proven key to Timor-Leste's improvements in security, which provides both positive lessons as well as warnings for other countries and international actors.
- **Successful strategies to maintain peace in the short term may undermine prospects for sustainable and equitable security arrangements in the long term.** Maintaining the peace is a critical precursor to development, but solutions that encourage patronage and centralise political power with individuals are likely to be effective only in the short term. Beyond that, it is critical that citizens experience a development dividend in order to ensure grievances are not fomented that could undermine peace in the longer term. This means shifting to inclusive development in which the peace dividend is shared widely, not just with elites or those that pose a threat.
- **Unconventional solutions can work well but bring their own challenges.** Generous cash transfers and Xanana's bringing together of the police and military have contributed to stability. However, over the long term, command and control and civilian oversight should be upheld, and civic engagement and peaceful activism should be recognised and respected.
- **A diversity of actors shape personal security, and hybrid forums bringing together state and non-state actors are central to sustainable peace.** Community resilience to national and local pressures depends on relationships between local actors – including traditional leaders, district commanders, martial-arts groups and youth groups. Recognising this diversity and drawing on these groups' relative contributions to security provision is essential for peace-building strategies.

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This summary is an abridged version of a research report and one of a series of Development Progress case studies being released at [developmentprogress.org](http://developmentprogress.org)

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This publication is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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