

# Understanding the tipping point of urban conflict

## The case of Dili, Timor-Leste

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# Why Dili?

- The **tipping point**:
  - The “Crisis” in Dili, started in April 2006 and ended with the elections of 2007;
  - The death of dozens, the destruction of around 2,000 houses, and the displacement of 150,000 people.
- The violence occurred in a setting marked by high youth unemployment and the presence of a variety of martial arts and rituals arts groups, as well as street-corner gangs.
- While these individuals may have been involved in the escalation of violence, societal conflict emerged out of a dispute over unequal treatment within the armed forces.

# A brief history of Timor-Leste

- Located on the eastern half of the island of Timor
- Official independence in 2002
  - independence from Portugal in 1974
  - Indonesian occupation from 1975-1999
  - popular consultation in August 1999 (where 78.5% voted in favour of independence from Indonesia)



# Contextualizing Dili

- The capital, and the major urban centre of Timor-Leste, is Dili
  - located on the northern coast of the island
  - Population of around 250,000 (roughly 25% of the total population)
- “Primate” and over-determined city
  - political and economic centre
  - local and international civil society
  - high presence of the United Nations and other development agencies

# Particularities of Dili

- Important features that make Dili different from the rest of Timor-Leste
  - heterogeneous population
  - weak traditional beliefs
  - land insecurity
  - a plethora of security providers
- Territorial and cultural “disembeddedness” of the city



# 2006-07 Crisis

- **Fault lines:** empirically observed or perceived societal divisions along which tensions are structured and interests defined
  - traditional forms of authority (*lisan*) vs. the values of liberal democracy
  - distinction “easterners” and “westerners”
  - disembedded nature of the urban space
- **Conflict drivers:** imminent conditions that have the potential of triggering social unrest
  - social jealousy
  - historical problems among the political elite,
  - high youth unemployment,
  - land insecurity
  - fragmentation in the security sector
- By mapping onto the fault lines described, these conflict drivers provided the context in which key actors could exploit individual and group interests and pit them against each other.

# Recommendations

1. Recognize Dili as an **urban space**
2. Recognize the **complexity of security** provision in Dili

# Dili as an 'urban' space

- Our findings suggest that Dili needs to be recognized as a genuinely *urban* space
- In practice this means:
  - Building of structured public spaces
  - Participatory planning procedures
  - Municipal structures
  - Long-term urban plan
  - Building up of other regional urban centres (such as Elmera, Bacau)



# Complexities of security provision

- Dili is marked by the presence of a multitude of local and international, public and private, formal and informal security providers.
  - international forces
  - military (F-FDTL) and police (PNTL)
  - various youth groups



# Dealing with complexities of security provision

- Tackling security sector fragmentation could include:
  - creating local security forums
  - fostering intergroup interaction
  - a professional and impartial police force

# Next steps

- Analysing patterns of rural-urban migration;
- GIS mapping of security perceptions over time;
- Organizational ethnographies of formal and informal security providers.

# Thank you!

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