Maintaining a Civic Nation: Social Cohesion in Timor-Leste

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Seemingly conventional interests in civil society in Timor Leste have been concerned more with the many agents of civil society, including non-government organisations and, to a lesser extent, community-based organisations. Political theory has underpinned this mainstream concept of civil society. Under this conception, civil society is seen as an organisational framework, designed to provide a political voice to citizens, lead to popular, direct democracy, and ensure the natural freedoms of citizens are not curtailed. However, this political theory conception is misguided in the context of peacebuilding. As this paper maintains, a civil society is more suitably understood, if set in a post-conflict environment, as the representation of a cohesive social environment. Bryant coined this the sociological approach to civil society, which he maintained is concerned with the "social relations and communications between citizens" (1995, 145). This sociological distinction has a great deal to offer to the literature on sustainable peacebuilding in Timor Leste, as we will see, because it promotes the importance of establishing a social culture that relies on interpersonal trust, civility and reciprocity. These relationship qualities are otherwise known in social theory, as indicators of social capital.

Building a civil society is particularly important for the attainment of sustainable peace in Timor Leste. The indigenous socio-cultural practices and values, which make up the current civil society, are starting points for peacebuilding. Based on the literature, this paper explores Timor Leste's capacity for a functional, peaceful society. It does so by applying the civil society/social capital theoretical framework to two cases in the nation's history: struggling for self-determination (principally, the 1990s) and post-conflict reconstruction (1999-present). These offer contrasting histories for understanding how the then-civil society influences social cohesion and national unity. The purpose of this is to commence a discussion on the nation's potential for creating sustainable peace, which Lederach and Appleby maintain "must eventually become the ordinary practices of the citizens and institutions on the society in question" (2010, 23).

Social Capital and Civil Society in Timor Leste

Within the pro-independence movement, resistance to the Indonesian occupation demonstrated social unity and togetherness. For pragmatic reasons, local civil society was strong and positive types of social capital, including a high amount of trust between the various agents within the pro-independence movement, were regularly demonstrated. This is particularly significant given the then environment of subversion and cynical tactics by the Indonesian military. Fretilin and the CNRM,[4] and their domestic and international affiliates, including Renetil, held much of pro-independence society together. These were represented through youth and student community-based organisations, women, political leaders, and the Catholic Church. The common sentiment that cooperation and collaboration would achieve independence for the nation permeated these ranks (Nicholson 2001).

Maubere became the collective title for the Timorese people and connoted the image of one, extended Timorese family. Fretilin leaders adopted the term *maubere* (for instance, in Radio *Maubere* and the National Council of *Maubere* Resistance) in order to inspire a sense of national pride and belonging (Traube 2007). The resistance movement identified with the hardship that the term *maubere* referred to. Furthermore, Catholicism increased in popularity during these times, partly because, as with the *maubere* title, it was a source of unity and harmony. Both of these symbols triggered a "profound

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[4] The National Council of Maubere Resistance (CNRM) was the auspice organisation, whichcoordinated the various fronts, domestic and international, of the resistance. The move was to strengthen the unity of the pro-independence force. Xanana Gusmao founded CNRM, after splitting from Fretilin. Fretilin subsequently became a member of CNRM.

sense of commonality" within the pro-independence movement, based on common suffering and endurance, between the otherwise ethno-linguistically diverse Timorese people (Anderson 2001).

However, following independence in 1999 the nation began to become fractured. The process of democratisation put enormous strain on the social fabric, which was so tightly woven during the resistance. The fractious early days of statehood ensured "that the post-independence period would be characterised by conflict and division" (Scambary 2009, 267). This divisive period arguably led to the 2006/07 crises with the emergence of a culture, which prioritised "practical relationships" and "practical kinships" (Scambary 2009), over national unity.[5] The product was a confused mix of interpersonal, inter-communal and inter-institutional violence. Leach (2008) warned that, consequently, a form of "balkanisation" was occurring and, politically speaking, people were splitting into eastern, central and western district blocs.

Timor Leste's current levels of peace and stability are still threatened by numerous social challenges. The socio-politically complex 2006 civil crisis and the subsequent election violence in 2007 remain skeletons in the nation's cupboard. The crises signified deep socio-political issues, including land entitlement, limited confidence in the government's authority and legitimacy (particularly outside the Dili district), and rifts between the PNTL and F-FDTL[6] (Trindade and Castro 2007).

Scholars and practitioners have offered varying explanations for the civil unrest of 2006 and 2007, but we must consider the social implications of these times, too. How may we explain the growing social trends of exclusiveness and division? If relations between Timorese peoples have in fact strained since independence, as the events of 2006/07 suggest,[7] then peace theory would posit that the nation continues to be in danger of further episodes of civil unrest.

Theory: Conceptualising Civil Society in Peacebuilding

Before being too prescriptive in the analysis, what is the conceptual significance of linking civil society and social capital for the purpose of attaining sustainable peace? Under social capital theory, a civil society is the representation of the complex social inter-relations between individuals and communities. Civil society, in this case, is focused on social entities functioning in an inter-connected way. Therefore, notions of civility, respect and trust, and the norms upon which the ways of living, working and associating are accepted, are central in civil society theory. Paffenholz (2010, 57) explained that civil society promotes social cooperation and associational living, while also aiming to give support to the marginalised and disempowered. These depend on structural peace and non-violence. The significance of civil society peacebuilding is the consolidation of the social spheres upon which political and economic systems depend.

If we are to include all social groupings as a part of civil society, then it is necessary to consider that some can used for pro-social and anti-social ends. The martial arts groups of 2006 and 2007, which generated so much of the violence and unrest, may therefore be classified within Timor Leste's civil society. In light of peacebuilding, the question then remains, how does one determine what is positive or negative civil society? To answer this, this paper focuses on social capital theory.[8] Based on important contributions of Putnam, Coleman, and Bourdieu, Winter offers a useful definition of social capital, which this paper shall adopt: the "social relations of mutual benefit characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity" (Winter 2001).

Ethnic Nations versus a Civic Nation

Bryant (1995) provides useful distinction between the negative and positive products of civil society: respectively, "ethnic nations" and "civic nations". Whereas ethnic nations (*plural*) are constituted by

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[5] Scambary referred to practical relationships as the group formation along ethnic and political lines and practical kinships as group formation according to genealogical relationship.
[6] PNTL: National Police of Timor Leste; F-FDTL: Falintal-Defence Force of Timor Leste.
[7] As Dewhurst reflected in 2008, "such loss of trust within and between communities has given rise to a set of dynamics where the threat of conflict maintains group boundaries and sets up cycles of violence which hinder efforts to build peace" (2008:80).
[8] "An abundant stock of social capital is presumably what produces a dense civil society", Fukuyama wrote (2001:11).

mono-cultural participation in an ethnic or familial society, the civic nation (*single*) bridges the multiple cultures and sub-cultures by extending citizenship to all whom share in the national imagination (Bryant 1995, 145). The former depends on social homogeneity, while the latter accepts, and works within, heterogeneity. The assumption is that a inherent aspect of modern society is its openness to all forms of diversity.

For the purpose of this analysis, what are the causes of ethnic nations from a peacebuilding perspective? Putnam (2000) classified this sort of social capital as "bonding", referring to the social relations between like-minded people and the reinforcement of homogeneity. Ethnic nations build strong ties within identity groups, based on conformity. But ethnic nations may in turn accentuate the divisions between social groups by excluding those who do not qualify as group members. In peacebuilding theory, these inward-looking features would undermine the establishment of sustainable peace. Bonding social capital may inculcate prejudice and insularity among members of a particular group, which may in turn lead to "particularist civility" (Chambers and Kopstein 2001). An example of this would be party politics, which potentially spreads the exclusivist notion, 'us against them'.

Political contestations in post-conflict societies, possibly in the form of elections or plebiscites, can be harmful to the establishment of peace. The Timorese national elections of 2007 were a case in point, reflected in the regionalisation of presidential and parliamentary voting preferences (Leach 2008).[9] Broadly speaking, the eastern districts (i.e. Baucau, Lautem and Viqueque) supported Fretilin, the central districts (i.e. Dili, Manatuto and Liquica) voted CNRT, while the smaller parties, such as PD and ASDT, were favoured in the western quarters.

"Bridging social capital", the ingredients of civic nations, on the other hand, refers to the building of social relations between heterogeneous groups, in the overriding pursuit of collectiveness. Accordingly, civic nation-ism relies on high levels of trust, including between strangers, and pro-social cultural norms. The massacres at Santa Cruz in 1991, for example, became a "powerful symbol" for the nationalist struggle against the Indonesian struggle. According to Nicholson (2001, 23-5) its occurrence effectively improved the levels of trust within the resistance movement.

These two variations of social capital are negatively correlated – where bonding social capital is the dominant form, bridging social capital is weak – and define the horizontal axis of society. However, even with bridging social capital, socio-political and socio-economic power may be exploited for personal advantage (Portes 1998). Development economist, Woolcock has accounted for the vertical axis of society, otherwise known as the social hierarchy. He introduced the term linking social capital, still suiting the civic nation ideal-type. Linking social capital acts to prevent the marginalisation of the socially, politically and financially poor by supporting "norms of respect, and networks of trusting relationships between people who are interacting across explicit, formal or institutionalised power or authority gradients in society" (Sretzer and Woolcock 2003, 6).

Diagram 1 – We may depict the conceptual relationship between social capital and civil society using horizontal and vertical axes

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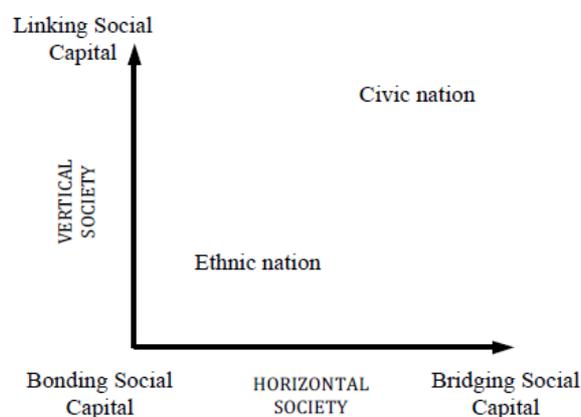
[9] Leach (2008) notes that with a few exceptions, the outcomes in the districts of both elections were paralleled.

As Diagram 1 depicts, the general civil society/social capital framework is as follows: where horizontal and vertical social capital measure low, civil society is negative, suggesting a social culture of insolence, prejudice and victimisation. Alternatively, the higher the measurement on both axes the more positive civil society reads, alluding to multi-cultural societies, collaboration and high amounts of social trust.[10]

What do these social capital variants offer for peacebuilding in Timor Leste?

Positive civil society is presented when linking social capital and bridging social capital are predominant; when people actively work together and share the community's resources. Civic nation-ism was presented in the independence movement, particularly in the 1990s. The movement was able to consolidate a profound sense of national identity based on a broad sense of suffering and endurance (Traube 2007; Nicholson 2001). Taylor (1991, 157) explained that the independence movement effectively bridged local "religious, cultural, educational and economic cleavages".

For instance, the significance of the term *maubere* was in its capacity to bring together the various actors within the resistance movement for the purpose of state-independence; a unifying aspiration for a large part of the population. This capacity was based on a high amount of social trust among individuals and groups who would otherwise have been unfamiliar. The resistance offered a point of commonality that all within the pro-independence movement related to. The increasing Catholic-Timorese community reinforced unity. Anderson (2001, 238) called this the "Catholic commonality", suggesting that this may be a reason for why the Indonesian occupation was consistently confronted by opposition amongst the Timorese themselves. The Indonesian offensive was unable to change this sense of commonality. In other words, the resistance movement became the impetus for, at last, an imagined Timorese community (Anderson 2001, 237).

Negative civil society, on the other hand, in which there is a lack of social cohesion, often occurs when high levels of bonding social capital are measured along the horizontal and vertical axes. Here, ethnic nation civil society is characterised by groups that hold introverted attitudes. Indicators of ethnic nation-ism usually include: limited trust towards strangers and government; intolerance towards difference; little to no inter-group or community collaboration; and high self-interest and possessiveness of community resources (Onyx and Bullen 2000). With bonding social capital predominating, these factors suggest that inter-communal conflict is a possibility.

When reflecting on the 2006/07 civil crises, Scambary made conclusions that align with these ethnic nation indicators. He described, "groups united across ethnic lines into groups of common purpose" (Scambary 2009, 282) and "regional and localized identities still [held] sway" (Scambary 2009, 285). Dewhurst concluded in her analysis of these crisis, that "the polarization of people along regional lines has left communities so severely divided that huge numbers of people prefer to stay in IDP tents than return to their former communities" (2008, 83).

Furthermore, Trindade and Castro (2007) reflected on the traditional perspectives of the crises. These provide interesting insights for the purpose of the building peace through culture. They suggested that the 2006/07 crises were caused by popular detachment from the socio-cultural values, tradition and history that actively promote social unity and harmony. Although social capital theory would argue that social and cultural pluralism does not in its self undermine peace, intolerance or prejudice does.

Nevertheless, according to Trindade and Castro (2007), traditional values and practises attempt to overcome these, and inspire tolerance of diversity. Within the traditional culture is civic nation-ism. Practices such as *nahe biti-boot* (spreading the mat), for example, use dialogue to rebuild trust and overcome divisions between and within extended families. Moreover, the *feto saa umane* (wife-giver/wife-taker) marriage practice purposefully creates ties between families of different locations in order to improve their social security. Contrary to current socio-political pressures, traditional practices and values normalise difference and, in turn, promote unity. Underneath these traditional folklore and practices, the moral messages are based on inter-personal trust and reciprocity.[11] Embedded in the still-

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[10] Of course variations to this rule exist – for example, when the social capital axes measure asymmetrically – however these cases go beyond the scope of this paper and require far more discussion
[11] For examples, see Traube (2007) and Trindade and Castro (2007).

influential traditional culture, civic nation-ism is still a pro-social, normative system in Timorese society that should not be overlooked in this analysis.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been on attaining lasting peace in post-conflict Timor Leste. Using the Bryant's sociological approach to civil society, the paper reflects on positive and negative examples exhibited in Timor Leste's recent history. The purpose was to commence a discussion on the nation's potential for sustainable peace. The point of concern, therefore, was how the civil society and social capital theories may assist in measuring social cohesion and the progress of peacebuilding. The interpersonal relationship principles of social capital, such as trust, civility, reciprocity and tolerance of diversity, offer a way of identifying the nation's capacity for social peace.

The paper concludes that although a civic nation phenomenon was present during the independence movement, in some respects the country has since become divided along social and political lines. The "resistance era tactics of political opposition" (Leach 2008, 232) has been unhelpful in building an imagined community and until now, has segmented the nation. Dewhurst (2008: 83) pointed to the significance of this trend, arguing that this divisiveness "has had the most damaging effect on Timorese society."

This paper reaffirms that national unity seems to have weakened since independence times. However, it is important to consider, in the pursuit of sustainable peace, the socio-cultural values and practices that are indigenous to the Timorese nation. As such, this paper adds that an undercurrent of civic nation-ism is presented in many values of traditional culture. Timorese traditional culture offers a way forward for social unity and harmony. As others have argued before (e.g., Trindade and Castro 2007), this should be of interest to peace-builders. How actual this civic nation social attitude is within the traditional belief system, nevertheless, should be the focus of further peace research in Timor Leste.

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