

Security across the local and national in Dili, Timor-Leste

Damian Grenfell and Bronwyn Winch¹

Introduction

Across September and October 2013, Dili experienced a heightened period of insecurity due to a spate of violent incidents. On the evening of the 24 September, two assailants rode through the suburbs of Kampung Alor and Fatuhada stabbing people at random, injuring two people and killing one (*Belun* 2013b; *Suara Timor Lorosa'e* 25 September 2013). Over the following 48 hours, national security actors coordinated their efforts throughout Dili.² Security checkpoints were established throughout the capital, and the *Polisi Nasional Timor Leste* (PNTL) met with media outlets as well as with *Xefe Suku* (suku chiefs), disseminating information to the community (*Belun* 2013b). In the subsequent weeks, there was a steady flow of reports circulating about other attacks in the same vein of random, unprovoked stabbings, and it was difficult to ascertain clearly the number of victims. What initially seemed like isolated attacks by drunken youth began to be explained as the coordinated recruitment of civilians into organised crime groups (*Fundasau Mahein* 2013; UNDSS 2013).

The events across the latter part of 2013 had a tangible effect on the capital's population, not just with an increased security presence on the streets, but with a noticeable impact on the population's mobility (especially from evening on). The concern is not just people's actual security or the reallocation of limited resources in terms of policing, but also a question of a quality of life where people often already live with a high level of precariousness. Of course Dili has been the site of much violence, both during the Indonesian occupation and final withdrawal of TNI and militias in 1999, as well as during the 2006-2008 crisis where widespread violence occurred across the capital, and the latest round of events which of course remain minor in comparison. However, of interest is how the security situation remained relatively contained, as well as how law enforcement actors worked with local leaders to coordinate their efforts.

While there is an existing literature on security and conflict resolution in Timor-Leste, it remains far from comprehensive and there are still many areas of exploration and analysis to be made. Much of it focuses on security sector reform and development.³ This is consistent with the field of security studies more broadly, which tends often to be state-centric and focused on the legitimacy, performance and capacity of security sector institutions.⁴ As authors such as Hameiri point out however, it is insufficient to focus only on these dimensions when it diminishes the other social and cultural aspects of the way security is experienced and achieved (Hameiri 2010, 36). Other areas of analysis with implications for understanding security include those that consider the 2006-2008 crisis and more broadly violence in the capital, including those that focus on economic and socio-demographic factors.⁵

In order to make a small contribution to ongoing debate then, in this article we consider local conceptions of security in the post-crises years with a three-fold contribution; a survey of local

¹ Damian Grenfell works with the Globalism Research Centre at RMIT University and Bronwyn Winch is currently undertaking an internship with Belun in Dili. Our thanks to our colleagues in the Timor-Leste Research Program (for more information see www.timor-research.org) as well as the insightful comments from the anonymous reviewer.

² The Batalhão de Ordem or Public Order Battalion (BOP), Polícia Militar (PM), Falintil-Forças de Defesa de Timor Leste (F-FDTL) and PNTL.

³ See for example International Crisis Group (2006), Funaki (2009) and Lemay-Herbert (2009).

⁴ Chapters One and Two of the OECD's 2011 report on conflict and fragility is a good example of literature that centralises the state in determining the levels of security experienced by a population

⁵ By way of example of this literature see Curtain (2006), pp. 6-10 and Neupert and Lopes (2006) pp. 9-15. An article by Moxham and Carapic (2013) very usefully analyses the issue of urban violence in terms of the pressures of integration into the global economy and the strains of state-building

communities in Dili on security and peace, extending discussions away from more state-centric views to show how systems of governance and culture intersect to reproduce security, as well as beginning a process of clarifying how security might be defined and approached within sites of complex social integration. Police or military enforcement *may* create security in an immediate sense with check-points or arrests, but in Timor-Leste (and elsewhere) sustained security relies also on social integration across cultural domains, such as a relative consensus of norms, the dispersal of information via recognised forms of authority, as well as identifiable and meaningful avenues for conflict resolution.⁶

Following a discussion of the methodology, this article will first analyse how people viewed their security in the years following the 2006-2008 crisis. The argument here is that there is a kind of resilience that allows for communities to at least mitigate threats, one that works potentially to contain the risk of violence that we have seen across 2013. However, this needs to be understood in the context of the different ways security is understood and relativised by people. Building on this, the last section of the article argues that security in an urban setting is reproduced not only across different scales of modern governance (at the intersection of the local and national), but also across different patterns of social integration. That Dili is often understood as a modern urban space does not mean, for instance, that customary forms of social regulation do not play a role in enabling security.

Methodology

The statistical data in the article is drawn from a survey conducted in Dili in the first half of 2011, which had the general aim of understanding how people viewed their security in local communities across the capital. Did Dili residents feel secure, and how did they view the role of the state and other actors in the provision of security? These questions gained new importance following the resolution of various outstanding issues relating to the 2006-2008 crisis; namely the closure of refugee camps, a negotiated settlement with the petitioners, the diminished threat of armed groups, and the return of control of policing from United Nations Police (UNPOL) to PNTL in March 2011.⁷ While these events suggested the potential for an improved sense of security, the continuing presence of the UN-sanctioned International Stabilization Force did testify to a fear of renewed violence and a sense of a fragile peace.

The survey included a wide-range of questions on authority structures, information sources, people's perceptions of security actors, gender, and prospects for future security. Trained surveyors asked the questions and the surveys tended to be completed in and around people's homes. Most questions used a five-point Likert scale allowing graduated answers from positive to negative. Five sites were chosen across Dili, providing both geographic spread and variation in terms of the impact of the 2006-2008 crisis. Surveys were undertaken within the areas of Comoro, Bairo Pite, Becora, Lahane and Bemori, with an initial response target of approximately 160 surveys in each site. A total of 812 surveys were collected, supplemented by short interviews with community members.

While surveys provide one avenue for gaining insight into how a large group of people are willing to respond to a series of questions, as a method they are limited in their capacity for capturing subjective responses from people. To a significant degree this is because of the limitations of the application of this method in societies that we regard as deeply complex given their uneven levels of social integration. By this we mean that societies hold together essentially different 'ways of being in the world' (what is referred to as ontology, in effect the basic assumptions of existence). In sites such as Timor-Leste different aspects

⁶ In terms of existing literature, this article is more identifiably closer to the work of Anne Brown and her colleagues who have written intelligently on the intersection of culture, governance and peace, albeit without a particular focus on the urban domain. See Brown, Anne *et al* (2010).

⁷ See for example the 2009 and 2010 Timor-Leste Armed Violence Assessments which speak of the conflict potential of the IDP reintegration process, specifically that the pressure to quickly finish the process meant that not all of the IDPs were accepted back into communities, and also the government's attempts to facilitate dialogue between gangs and armed groups and their negotiation with the petitioners. For an analysis of the crisis and the impact of social change on identity, see also Grenfell (2008)

of social life are dominated by customary, traditional and modern life-worlds, and so in turn it is possible to have an *adat nain* (customary leader), a priest and a police officer, each drawing authority from a different life-world, and all involved in mediating social conflict.⁸ The differences between these life-worlds do not necessarily make for unsustainable forms of society, and in fact this article implicitly argues the reverse. However, it does make for complexity, including the ways in which research is done. Thus while surveys offer a way to think on things, results should be treated as a place to start inquiry rather than as an end in itself.

Local security in Dili

Across all five survey sites in Dili, responses were particularly positive when it came to answering questions about security within people's local communities. An overwhelming number of respondents (86 per cent) said they felt secure in the community where they were currently living (Question 8) and 86.5 per cent felt that there was peace in their local community (Question 12). With the intention of understanding the levels of resilience in local conflict resolution processes, Question 20 asked 'If there is a problem in your community, can people find a solution from within their community or not?'. Again, responses were overwhelmingly positive, with 84.1 per cent of people saying they were able to find solutions from within their community (76.1 per cent responding 'definitely yes'; 8.0 per cent responding 'probably yes'). Together, these sets of statistics suggest that communities were seen as sites of relative security buttressed by internal processes that could assist in negating threat.

The very positive responses at first appeared to jar with the observation of daily life while living and working locally in Dili where security appeared to be a constant concern. While there may not have been the high levels of violence of 2006-2008, or the kinds of occasional peaks of public insecurity as per the end of 2013, threats of gang violence, theft, and physical and sexual assault seemed part of daily life. Threats to security did tend to be reflected in survey questions that sought factual rather than subjective value-based responses such as Question 27 which asked people 'Over the last year, have you or your family been victims of crime?'. While the response to this question was a not insignificant 23.2 per cent, either the nature or site of the crime did not however translate into people identifying their communities as insecure or lacking peace. This suggests that post-crisis, people were finding ways to at least mitigate threats from within their communities, and we go on in the next section to argue that *one way* that this was occurring was through a layering of different forms of authority. Before turning to that however, it is worth outlining three intersecting issues that shape how security is understood in Dili and might account in part for the particularly high rates of positive responses.

Firstly, in this survey security (in the above questions 8 to 10) was explained to respondents in terms of 'feeling safe', and breached if there was an obvious threat or attack to body or property (explained by use of examples). The word *seguru* was used, and where necessary explained with alternative phrases/descriptors such as '*senti paz iha*' (is there a peace here), '*hakmatek* (calmness), and the Indonesian '*aman*' (peaceful/secure). However, it is worth noting that the way security was discussed through these interactions had a very public quality to it; security was something outside or beyond the domain of the household. As such, someone may report feeling secure (in this public sense) even though, by way of example, they experience acute levels of violence within the household. This is a point that narrows the definition of security to being a public thing, an important point given for instance recent studies show that 33.8 per cent of ever-married women in Timor-Leste have experienced physical violence (Taft 2013, 3).

Secondly, to understand how security is constituted is not just a matter of how it is categorised, but how it is relativised in terms of the degree in which a sense of threat has been normalised. Survey data does not show the ways people self-regulate social activity to an extent where risk mitigation becomes so normalised that there is little conscious sense of it. For instance, that people responded that their

⁸ These categories and their application to Timor-Leste have been discussed at much greater length in Grenfell 2012 and Carrool-Bell (2013). For the development of the analytical categories and the theoretical foundations, see James 2006.

communities are secure does not mean that people are willing to walk freely at night. Similarly, and from observation while living long-term in East Timorese households, there seem to be internalised norms and social habits. For example, homes are not typically left unoccupied, young women very often leave for and return from school in pairs, and daily movements tend to be mapped across singular trajectories (i.e. between home and market, home and school and so on). Even the ubiquitous kiosk, and gravesites in front yards, are at one level answering to a security dimension of daily life with their close proximity to homes. In the effect of daily habits, such regulatory and conditioned behaviour may become so normalised that it is not seen as answering to threats.

A third factor to consider is the effect of the survey itself. That people are being asked about their community in the wake of significant social turmoil may mean that people respond so as to negate the chance of recriminations from within their communities.⁹ Taking this a step further, there is a strong tendency, especially in rural areas, for people to view their community in the context of genealogical and kinship ties (Grenfell *et al* 2009, 17). Even if the community is not ‘one family’ in an objective sense, communities are seen as being formed around deeply embedded connections as part of an *uma kain* (extended family). While rural-urban migration has resulted in communities in Dili being far more diversified and the density of kinship ties tends to reduce (Trindade & Castro 2007, 30-31), there are still familial and more broadly ethno-linguistic patterns in terms of how people settle in the capital (Scambray 2013, 1939-1940). It is possible that there is a cultural carry-over into the capital where people are particularly unwilling to speak negatively against their communities, as it has the subjective sense of speaking against ones kin.

This contextualisation of how security might be understood is not to detract from the general trend which showed consistently positive responses with regards to people’s conceptions of security in their own communities. These statistics suggest a particular form of resilience within local communities in Dili in the years following the 2006-2008 crisis that may have helped contain the kinds of violence seen in 2013. We argue in the next section that this kind of resilience is formed across two domains, one modern across the national and local systems of governance, and one ontological across the customary to the modern.

Security and conflict resolution across difference

Timor-Leste’s administrative divisions (district, sub-district, *suku* and *aldeia*) reflect the geographic layers of modern governance across the country, including in Dili. The *suku* typically comprises a cluster of *aldeia* (villages), and in practice *xefe sukus* (*suku* chiefs) tend to constitute a very important element in governance due to their relevance to the daily livelihoods of community members (The Asia Foundation 2012, 9; Jütersonke *et al.* 2010, 42). This is especially the case as *suku* leaders are seen to be a critical information node (both dispersal and gathering, as per the violence across Dili in late 2013), and often play a negotiation and ceremonial role in the arbitration of conflicts. Police however, in comparison, are given authority in different ways and in turn can *claim* a legitimate monopoly over the use of violence.¹⁰

Mirroring this national-local governance tendency for coordination, the survey data showed that both sets of actors are seen to be relevant to security provision in communities in Dili. Question 18 asked ‘If there is a problem in your local community, do you prefer to call the police rather than the local authorities to assist in its resolution?’. In their responses, a significant number of people indicated that they preferred to call the police to assist in the resolution of problems in local communities (53.9 per cent of people responded ‘definitely police’, and another 5.4 per cent responded ‘probably police’, bringing the total to 59.3 per cent). In saying this, a substantial minority of 33.8 per cent still indicated they would prefer

⁹ A similar conclusion was made in another survey which removed questions regarding domestic and sexual abuse as they identified it to be a ‘potential catalyst for further violence’ and thus could endanger the respondents. See Jütersonke *et al.* 2010, 38.

¹⁰ Here we are taking a Weberian approach to our definition of the state with the emphasis on legitimation and violence

to either ‘definitely’ (22.9 per cent) or ‘probably’ (10.9 per cent) call local authorities.¹¹ Taken together, this data suggests that in the wake of the crisis different institutional forms—including local governance and the state—were re-integrating with communities in the capital, at least in terms of being seen as systems of authority that could variously assist with threat management.

Important to our argument is that, in balance, we hold the *suku* to be part of a modern administrative system of regulation. While the authority of a *xefe suku* (*suku* chief) often still intersects with customary and traditional forms of social relations, the *suku* as an administrative system of governance was nevertheless introduced through Portuguese colonialism (Hohe 2002, 573) and consolidated in the new national form by state law and with leaders subject to election.¹² In this context, the survey data confirms a tendency to draw on a plurality of security providers—state security actors as well as local leaders—from across a modern spectrum of national and local governance. Why one might be preferred over another could be attributed to a range of factors; nature of the crime (Pigou 2003, 30-31; The Asia Foundation 2008, 47-52), a person’s relationship to their community, past experience of police and local authorities, and whether the threat was seen to originate within the community or from beyond it. Whatever the motives, this data suggests either that policing is taking on a particular form where there is a high level of engagement with local governance,¹³ or that as institutions such as the PNTL develop community reach (and recover from the crisis), they remain reliant on localised systems of authority in the interim.

Security provision and conflict resolution do not just occur across the national-local spectrum of modern governance, but also encompass authority structures across different social systems, including the customary system of *adat* or *lisan* (customary law). It is not uncommon to hear that ‘there is no *adat* in Dili’, suggesting that there is an absence of *adat* and customary practices (*Belun* 2013a, 22-23). However, when people were asked in the survey if traditional¹⁴ law was normally used to resolve problems in their community (Question 19), 68.9 per cent of people agreed (60.8 per cent responded ‘definitely yes’ and 8.1 per cent responded ‘probably yes’; by contrast 15 per cent said traditional law is ‘definitely’ not part of normal practice). There are a variety of ways in which *adat* can be seen to have a social regulatory role in Dili, two of which we will outline here.

Firstly, the most obvious way that customary practices play a role in the production of security is in how it determines both the form and substance of an agreement between parties, as well as in terms of binding that agreement (McWilliam 2007, 1-2). In such instances, *adat* is used together with the modern law of the state, and at times with the church (as an expression of what we call a traditional ontology), in an attempt to bind people into legitimate and sustainable compacts (Grenfell et al. 2009, 110-111; Arnold 2009, 384). This drawing together of different symbolic and cultural elements speaks to the uneven social integration we discussed at the beginning of this piece, in effect suggesting that a practice on its own from within a modern, a traditional or customary ontology, would not be enough to secure a meaningful resolution to conflict.

A second way of understanding the high percentage of respondents who said customary law is often used in conflict resolution in Dili is that practices that are deemed ‘traditional’ may in reality be an adapted or less rigid articulation of an act that carries symbolic significance. While this would require more extensive ethnographic work, we suggest here that conflict resolution may occur in a way that is patterned on customary systems, such as through involvement of familial networks (as opposed to a singular victim-perpetrator model of conflict resolution), the use of extensive dialogue in order to find an acceptable solution (resembling *nahe biti* for instance, the practice of unfolding a mat and speaking until an issue is resolved), and the act of drawing in of elder patriarchs to adjudicate. Another example would be how families remain at the centre of negotiations rather than pushing outwards to the state or even the *xefe suco*.

¹¹ For Question 18 only 5.5 per cent of people surveyed responded neutrally and just 1.4 per cent had no opinion

¹² República Democrática de Timor-Leste ‘Law 3/2009 on Community Leaderships and their Election’, <http://www.jornal.gov.tl/lawsTL/RDTL-Law/RDTL-Laws/Law%203-2009.pdf>, viewed 9 October 2013

¹³ It would be very unusual for instance in Australia for a Mayor to be so involved in police operations

¹⁴ Here the use of ‘*tradisional*’ in Tetun suggests acts that could incorporate elements of *adat/lisan*, though just to make clear when we write in English we use the anthropological category of customary

In this sense, conflict resolution practices feel subjectively close to the customary, and in turn this may have increased the rate of positive responses to questions in this survey.

Conclusion

The response to insecurity in Dili across the end of 2013 reminds us both of the challenges facing post-colonial and post-conflict urban centres such as Dili, as well as demonstrating different ways in which security is re-established and how attempts are made to mitigate threat. From the research discussed here, we have argued that in the wake of the crisis, local communities were seen as sites of relative security by the majority of people, though while that is the case there needs to be careful consideration around the social context of how security is interpreted (and the methods used to undertake research on it). While security can be produced in a whole range of ways, the second part of this essay has argued that one important element in the production of security has been the diversity of actors involved, not only in terms of modern forms of governance involving both local and national actors, but also across customary and modern forms of social integration.

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