Procedures, perspectives, politics and peace: The 2012 national elections in Timor-Leste

Emily Toome

The 2012 national elections in Timor-Leste were deemed free and fair by international observers and have been taken as an indicator that the young country is progressing towards democratisation and peace. While the conduct of elections is used to measure the relative success or failure of democracy and state-building in Timor-Leste, this paper argues that focusing on procedures alone ignores many of the nuances of how and why people engage in national political processes. Understanding such perspectives may offer important insight into ongoing social changes and the prospects for peace and stable governance. In this paper, I first consider literature on the promotion and measurement of democracy in post-conflict countries, including Timor-Leste, and then introduce findings from research conducted during the 2012 elections.[1]

Promoting and measuring democracy

In Timor-Leste and elsewhere since the 1990s, international peace-building interventions have tended to share a broad goal of transitioning societies affected by conflict to what Addison and Brück (2009, 7) term the '3Ps' of 'peace', 'political participation' and 'prosperity'. National elections are an archetypal (albeit debated) indicator of the 'p' of political participation, and are also posited as important for peace—as democracies are supposedly less prone to internal and external conflict—and prosperity, compelling government response to the needs of its citizenry (for a critical account of these assumptions, see Tadjbakhsh, 2011; Newman, Paris, & Richmond 2009).

Rui Fiejo (2012, 32) explains that 'Elections are a *sine qua non* condition for a polity to claim democratic status', giving citizens a voice and endowing the political leadership with local and international legitimacy. He, along with other election observers and political commentators (for instance, Australia Timor-Leste Friendship Network, 2012; EU Election Observer Mission 2012), assessed the 2012 East Timorese elections as being "free and fair", for the most part meeting international standards of transparency, accessibility, open competitiveness, administrative neutrality and non-coercion. While these measures of democratic procedure have some importance, they give little indication of how East Timorese subjectively feel about elections, democratisation, politics or governance.

In their critique of conventional measures of democratisation in post-colonial states, Koelble and LiPuma (2008, 7-9) argue that measuring democracy is treated as a scientific exercise; that is, that the quality of governance could be objectively measured without the views of the governed. They further argue that the use of indicators derived from established Western democracies imply that all nations will follow in the same trajectory, ignoring difference and the potential for autonomous direction. Studies of peace-, state- and nation-building in Timor-Leste have increasingly acknowledged that these processes entail a hybridity or entanglement of endogenous and indigenous visions, wedded between history, the present and the future, local mores and international models (for instance, Brown & Gusmao 2009; Cummins 2010; Cummins & Leach 2012; Richmond 2011). However in analysis of elections in Timor-Leste, attention is sometimes restricted to the procedures of the modern state,[2] as if other social factors are irrelevant to citizens' engagement.

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[2] Notable exceptions include Hohe 2002; McWIlliam & Bexley 2007.

Field research

While the empirical research we conducted in 2012 did not disregard procedural dimensions of elections or conventional indicators of democracy, our greater interest was in the subjective: what value does voting have for East Timorese? What factors influence decision-making about who to vote for? How connected do East Timorese feel to their national government?[3]

The methods of our research comprised: surveys of 393 East Timorese across three *suku* of Dili;[4] fourteen semi-structured interviews;[5] collection of election related materials; and observations that we made in the field during the second round runoff for the Presidential election. While the surveys were quantitative in form, here I treat them in a qualitative sense, using some of the patterns that emerged in the responses to open up discussion, rather than presenting a statistical breakdown of responses for each question.[6] An area for future research, which we were not able to explore in any depth in 2012, is how East Timorese understand the concept democracy, what values and processes they see as integral to democracy and the degree to which national and other forms of politics are viewed as democratic.[7]

While this paper refers to 'East Timorese perspectives', what I am discussing are the perspectives of respondents based in Dili; it is conceivable that there would be differences outside the capital, where the modern state has lesser presence. The timing of our research also bears consideration. The national elections gave us a tangible point for enquiring into perspectives on democratisation; it would be interesting to compare views offered outside of election periods, in the absence of the political rallies, promotional banners, graffiti, posters, stickers, and civic education materials that regularly punctuated public spaces during the time of our fieldwork.

Embracing democracy

A local working in democratisation programs told us that the high turnout of eligible voters during national elections since 1999 has been because people embrace the value of 'one man one vote' (E. Timorese male, April 2012). Overall, a majority of East Timorese participants in our research professed a positive view of democracy. For instance, survey questions about the impact of democracy on Timor-Leste to date and the anticipated impact of the 2012 elections on the respondent's life both elicited highly positive assessments – over 70% of respondents for each question stated that they thought the impacts had so far been, or would be, 'Definitely positive'. By contrast, 8% stated democracy definitely has not been good for Timor-Leste and 7% stated the impacts would definitely not be positive. Responses to another survey question seemed to validate the role of elections as means for determining government legitimacy; nearly 85% of survey participants stated that people definitely should have to follow the law even if the political party that they vote for does not win, with only 3% stating that they definitely should not have to.

Other responses were more ambiguous. Just a little over half (54%) of the survey respondents expressed high confidence that by voting during elections they could definitely impact the political system, with 14% stating that they felt they were definitely unable to impact the political system by voting, and roughly a tenth either neutral about the impact they could have, or choosing not to

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[3] The study was something of a follow up to research during the previous round of national elections (see Toome, Grenfell & Higgins 2012), and is part of a broader, ongoing enquiry into the subjective sense of connection that East Timorese hold to evolving political processes and forms of community (see Timor-Leste Research Program, www.timor-research.org)

[4] A roughly equal number of survey participants (of each gender) were sought in each *suku*: 134 in Becora, 123 in Fatu-Hada and 136 in Tasi Tolu. Our East Timorese research assistants administered the surveys verbally, in Tetun or one of the other languages they had fluency in, approaching residents in the streets or at their houses.

[5] Eight interviews were conducted with East Timorese following their participation in the survey, two interviews were conducted in English with East Timorese involved in state-building activities, and we carried out four interviews with internationals who had worked long-term in Timor-Leste, in the areas of peace-building, security and human rights.

[6] The full survey results will in the future be available through the Timor-Leste Research Program website, www.timor-research.org

[7] For instance, the term *democracia Timorense* (Timorese democracy) has sometimes been used by East Timorese political figures, suggesting something of a pushback to imposed models of democracy.

respond. The somewhat subdued enthusiasm about how one's vote might impact the political system could be due to various factors, including procedural features,[8] or the sense that voting can impact which party/leader enters the political system, but it is not an effective way to compel change of that system.

One international observer suggested that national elections serve as the primary point of connection between many people and the East Timorese state: 'I think it's the one thing that they have, the one way they have of participating, of changing something' (International male, April 2012). This same interviewee suggested that voting could therefore entail an element of anger or payback, particularly given what he termed the "Kafka-esque" bureaucratic hurdles to accessing government services. A similar point was raised by an East Timorese interviewee, explaining that if people were dissatisfied with how the government recognised them, East Timorese will say '"Your destiny is at the edge of nail in our hand". It means that we will decide, whether you like it or not, we will decide' (E. Timorese male, April 2012). The long denial, or at least severe constraint, of this form of democratic expression was reported by several interviewees as contributing to high rates of voter participation:

> it's historical because of the 1999 vote and that's when people really got it, that 'Wow, it's important to vote'…that 1999 vote was just so seminal, I mean, and such a big point in many people's lives (International female, April 2012).

Nonetheless, when questioned about the importance of voting in national elections responses were somewhat polarised. While 60% of people surveyed said that they thought it definitely mattered if people do not vote, a sizeable 25% gave a response at the other end of the scale, stating that it definitely does not matter if people do not vote. This latter figure is comparable to the roughly 25% of eligible voters who chose not to vote in the three 2012 national ballots,[9] itself reflective of a gradual decline in the rate of eligible voter participation.[10] If voting is not perceived as an effective means to compel change, voter apathy may overcome the sense of compulsion to vote that this East Timorese man alluded to: 'It is people's duty to go to vote, but all that we really want is that one day we can eat three times a day' (E. Timorese male, April 2012).

Policies, programs, patronage, peace

Notwithstanding variations in how democracy is conceived, Koelble & LiPuma (2008, 18) contend that above all else it is founded on the notion of the sovereignty of the citizenry and their ability to decide on their leadership and political preferences. The responses to our survey suggested this aspect of democratic decision-making was of high importance, with policies and leadership qualities as the most frequent considerations informing voting choices. When asked their most important reason for choosing to vote for a particular presidential candidate or political party in the parliamentary elections, the most common response, given by just under two thirds of respondents to each question was the candidate or party's policies and programs.[11]

Unfortunately, the design of our survey means it's impossible to know what exactly respondents had in mind when giving this answer, for instance whether there were specific policies or ideologies that they felt informed their voting decisions. Complicating things further, many interviewees suggested that policies and programs tend to be poorly formulated and/or communicated

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[8] For instance, the threshold of votes required for a political party to receive a parliamentary seat and the proliferation of competing parties mean that many fail to enter government; supporters of such parties may feel they have lost their ability to have a political impact.

[9] According to the CNE website, rates of eligible voter participation in 2012 are as follows: First round Presidential ballot 78.2%, second round Presidential ballot 73.1%, and Parliamentary ballot 74.8%.

[10] Eligible voter participation in 2007: first round Presidential ballot 81.7%, second round Presidential ballot 81.0%, Parliamentary ballot 80.5%. In 2002 86.2% of eligible voters participated in the Presidential election, 91% in the 2001 vote for the Constituent Assembly, and 98.9% in the 1999 referendum.

[11] While space constrained by space here, it is worth noting that some East Timorese interviewees explained that the personal qualities of particular political leaders are of great importance, sometimes trumping an individual's allegiance to a political party.

in Timor-Leste, with one international observer describing it as a 'policy free zone' (International male, April 2012) and another noting surprise at having observed little discussion of a distinct difference in policy between the shortlisted presidential candidates (International female, April 2012).

A potential explanation for this pattern of survey response then could be that 'policies and programs' stood in as something of a shorthand or substitute term to signify the personal benefits that might follow from a particular candidate or party's election into government. Such benefits may indeed derive from the government's implementation of particular policies, however can also flow through informal networks, such as familial-based support, patrimonialism or clientelism (Scambary 2015).

National and other forms of community – The ambiguity of family

Prior research has shown complex and changing relationships between national politics and subnational forms of community, notably the family and customary structures of *uma* (house) (for example, da Costa Magno & Coa 2012; Gusmao 2012; Leach 2012; Tilman 2012). For many locals the family continues as a key provider of material security, and in the context of scarce formal employment opportunities and uneven levels of development, having family ties to a member of government[12] or state employee can be an important lifeline. As an East Timorese interviewee explained, her kinship relations to a party member influenced her family's affiliation to that party, stating that 'if the party won, the family all win' (Female interviewee, April 2012).

Access to resources is not the only familial consideration; customary worldviews that precede (but are not static) the independent state of Timor-Leste intersect and inform how locals imagine their nation (Traube 2007; Wallis 2013), such that association to their familial *uma,* customary regulation of *lisan* and belief in *lulik* can also shape an individual's participation in modern political processes. As noted by Damian Grenfell (2015, 173), analysis and representation of Timor-Leste frequently portray it as a society that is a modern nation and polity alone, 'rendering large parts of social life either negatively, or, almost more powerfully, simply beyond consideration'. For instance, he points to the EU Election Monitor's comment that the East Timorese electoral roll is not regularly 'cleansed of deceased people' (EU 2012, p. 4) proposing that attention to local lifeworlds (rather than modern state procedures alone) suggests that the reluctance to remove names from the electoral roll could in part be because of respect for *matebian sia* [souls of the dead] and fear of reprisals from ancestors if not given suitable recognition. The cosmological worldview in which the dead exist alongside the living and contribute to their fate was evident in how some interviewees during the 2007 research explained that respect for deceased ancestors compelled their family's allegiance to a particular political party (Toome, Grenfell & Higgins 2012, 33-4).[13]

Seeking insight into the significance of the family, our survey asked whether the respondent thought that East Timorese normally vote the same way as their families, to which over three quarters (76%) said 'Definitely not', compared to 13% who said 'Definitely yes'. Our wording of this question had been informed by research in 2007, during which there was a resoundingly negative response – 91% of respondents in Dili saying no and just 4% saying yes – when survey respondents were asked 'When you chose a candidate/vote for a party, were/are you influenced at all by your family?'. The research team in 2007 found there had been a clear issue with the Indonesian translation of 'influence' (*pengaruh*), as rather than being neutral the term was interpreted negatively to mean a kind of 'undue influence' (Toome, Grenfell & Higgins 2012). Despite the adamant rejection of the influence of the family, 37% of Dili-based survey respondents in 2007 nonetheless stated that all of their family voted for same candidate or party, suggesting a familial influence. Attachment to the democratic rhetoric of

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[12] The increasing number of political parties competing in the parliamentary elections and the requirement of listing some 80 names per organisation amplify the chances that a voter will know or be related to a candidate (McWilliam & Bexley 2008, 67; Feijo 2012, 47).

[13] See Hohe (2002) for a suggestion that FRETILIN tapped into customary fears of ancestral sanctions in their electoral campaigning in 2001. While a hybridity or entanglement of woldviews and practices appears to be common, the outcomes of deliberate attempts to utilise custom for the purposes of modern politics are never certain (see for example McWilliam, Palmer & Shepherd 2014; Trindade 2008; Wallis 2013).

"one man, one vote" and the definite freeing up political choice since independence likely triggered a strong rejection to the idea that one's voting choices could be forced by another.

Returning to the 2012 research, reflections made by our East Timorese research assistants suggested that despite framing the survey question in a less personal manner, some respondents still perceived it as implying a compulsion for families to vote the same way. The survey respondents' strong refutation that family members vote the same way seemed to jar with opinions expressed by East Timorese and international interviewees, who acknowledged that hierarchical and patriarchal relations within families and communities were still influential.[14] Other interviewees believed that the secrecy of casting a ballot, as well increased education and willingness to debate politics within families means that there is growing divergence in how family members vote; however some suggested this is less common and may cause familial conflict.

(Re)imagining the nation?

This paper notes some ambiguities that emerged during our 2012 research into East Timorese perspectives on political decision making at the time of elections. Democracy was largely perceived as being positive; however, there was some doubt about the efficacy or necessity of voting. While policies reportedly motivated voter choices, they were described as being under-formulated or indiscrete. Survey participants largely rejected the proposition that there was similarity in how family members vote, however it was suggested to be likely by interviewees, who challenged the image of the isolated decision-making individual of "one man, one vote", and instead pointed to individuals' embeddedness within families and other groups.

While further research would be needed to explore reasons for such ambiguities, I finish here by questioning whether sometimes the expression of democratic rhetoric might reflect somewhat aspirational or performative claims: unlike in the past, as citizens of modern Timor-Leste we can make our own educated voting choices, free from the coercion of others. In saying this, I do not mean to imply those we spoke to were duplicitous or blinded by some false consciousness, nor do I want to discredit or devalue the opinions expressed to us. Instead, I tentatively wonder whether the perspectives encountered might be indicative of (both practical and rhetorical) means by which East Timorese delineate the nation's oppressive past from the independent present.[15] At the same time, the past is inextricably woven into the present, for instance as evident in the ongoing significance of customary governance, role of historical leaders, or endurance of subsistence material conditions for many. Future prospects for peace in Timor-Leste depend not just on the functioning of democratic procedures, but rather on how well sometimes competing visions of the nation are reconciled with lived experiences.

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[14] The influence of the family was explained to occur in various ways, including direct instruction of who to vote for (not that this necessarily results in compliance), or the more subtle, longer term process of socialisation, such as youth accompanying their parents as they attend political party events.

[15] Selver Sahin (2014, 5) has described how East Timorese political leaders actively fashion the national identity by creating a temporal "other", delineating the contemporary nation from its prior form as a colony, internationally governed territory, or "fragile" or "failing" state. In a different context, Richard Ashby Wilson (2003) describes how participation in Truth and Reconciliation Commissions help inscribe individuals into a new vision of the national self, which is forged by, but discontinuous from, the oppressive past. While Wilson and Sahin predominantly focus on how leaders attempt to shape the national self, those being 'led' might also engage in a re-imagining of their nation.

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