Dynamics of democracy at the *suku* level

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Introduction

From the first national elections in 2002 and first local *suku* (village) elections over 2004–05, the East Timorese people have repeatedly and enthusiastically exercised their right to choose their representatives through direct, secret ballot. The commitment of the East Timorese state to democracy has also been demonstrated through formal steps to safeguard fundamental political and civil freedoms. However, there have also been many challenges in the first decade of independence which have had a negative impact on community life. Violent conflict between members of different political parties has weakened harmony among the people and threatened post-conflict reconstruction.[2] In order to limit these negative impacts and to implement democracy in a manner that will positively contribute to people's lives, we need to understand what impact elections have had on development and community cohesion in the *suku*, and to incorporate this knowledge into our state-building processes.

The East Timorese have now conducted elections for *suku* leaders for two terms.[3] This article focuses on the impact of the 2004–05 elections but its findings are more broadly applicable. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in 2009, this article examines community members' experiences of, and hopes for, democratisation at the *suku* level through the electoral process. The authors collected data in eight *suku* across two districts, Manatuto and Bobonaro, as well as in a *suku* within the district of Dili. These *suku* represent a broad cross-section of communities; geographically, they are a mixture of rural, peri-urban and urban sites, and culturally they represent a spectrum of communities with some significantly urbanised while others still live in ways tied closely to their ancestors. In this article, we identify the impact of the democratic process at the local level, considering possible methods to reduce the negative impacts of *suku* elections and alternative methods and mechanisms that may act as routes for a successful democracy. Drawing on our fieldwork, we argue that in order to minimise violent political conflict a hybrid system of democratisation should be embraced at the local level. This would include the formal electoral system but also allow communities to reinforce this system through traditional methods.[4]

Introduction of elections for community leaders

Strengthening participatory democracy at the *suku* level is fundamental to national democratisation processes, as without this the political process will

only reflect the rhetoric of the political elite and the participatory spirit of democracy will be lost. Considering the importance of participation at every level, the role of the *konsellu suku* (village council) in conducting local-level politics and facilitating communities' participation in *suku* development processes is fundamental to the practice of democracy. The practice of local democracy exists to promote people's participation in social and political processes, and keeps decision-making close to the people. However, this can only occur if it takes into account the diversity of linguistic, social, cultural and economic conditions of different East Timorese communities. Because cultural traditions are so diverse across Timor-Leste[5], the process of democratisation must also reflect this diversity and provide space for people to participate in ways that make sense to them.

In the context of Timor-Leste's democratic life today, within *suku* the elected *xefe suku* (village chief) is the spokesman for guiding community development and resolving conflicts in people's lives. However, as discussed by Tilman, communities often have their own pre-existing and varied traditional governance mechanisms.[6] These traditional mechanisms comprise an essential part of local governance and have considerable economic and political significance in people's lives.[7] In such a governance environment, the local electoral system is a part of building democracy at the *suku* level, but it is not the only consideration.

There were a number of objectives that the elected *konsellu suku* were intended to fulfil. The first was to promote people's participation in local social and political processes. Ideally, the establishment of elections for local leaders transforms the relationship between community leaders and their constituents from *authority over* the community, to *representative of* the community. A second important objective was to promote political freedom at the *suku* level. It should not be forgotten that the opportunity to freely elect their representatives is a new phenomenon for most East Timorese who were denied many political freedoms and were unable to choose their leaders during Portuguese colonisation and Indonesian occupation. In some ways, local elections may be a more potent symbol of democracy for communities than are national elections, as they involve candidates that people personally know, and are hence a less abstract concept. A third objective was to encourage citizens to manage conflicting opinions and visions for the future in line with liberal democratic principles, channelled through participation in political party competition and elections.

In general, the party-political violence that has been experienced in local communities has been a result of divisions between national political elites being driven down to the local level.[8] While there has been some conflict between members of political parties during national elections, and party competition has in some areas affected the solidarity of communities (as discussed later) the 2004–05 *konsellu suku* elections show that East Timorese people's implementation of a multi-party political

system at the community level has been largely positive. As explained by a senior resident of *suku* Lahomea in Bobanaro district, this positive experience has also translated in some communities into the acceptance of different political parties working together in the *konsellu suku* following the election:

> In our entire [*konsellu suku*] structure in this *suku* most people are from FRETILIN. Even though we are from different parties we don't have any problem in doing our work. We always work together. During the election there was indeed competition between political parties, however after the election the political parties put it behind them and prioritised their work for all the people throughout the *suku*.[9]

This was a common theme in our fieldwork for this project; in some districts there were strong indications of people's enthusiasm for multi-party democracy. In some *suku*, too, there was a high level of political consciousness regarding electoral processes, such as in *suku* Malilait in Bobonaro, *suku* Lahomea in Maliana and *suku* Haturalan in Laleia. These factors bode well for state-building and democratisation in Timor-Leste.

At the same time, however, the situation varied significantly from one *suku* to the next. It was clear that in some *suku* the solidarity of *konsellu suku* in working for their community did not appear to be strong, and some *konsellu suku* members claimed that those who were not in the dominant party were habitually sidelined, or gave examples where resources were distributed according to family affiliations.[10] Such issues can be put down to a number of factors. First, East Timorese communities are still adapting to the requirements of liberal democracy. And second, in a number of communities, the people combine the local electoral system with their traditional system of leadership and governance in order to strengthen effective leadership within the *suku*. Such hybrid systems of governance are often necessary for effective democratisation in the *suku*, however (as elaborated later in the article) they also make for a more complicated local governance environment.

Another important objective and change has been the impact of *konsellu suku* elections on women's involvement in the political process. In both 2004–05 elections and 2009 elections, many women nominated themselves as candidates in the election and some were elected as community leaders. Historically in Timor-Leste, it has been very difficult for a woman to become a leader, due to a number of factors including influences from a patriarchal culture. As a result, the institutional structure of *konsellu suku* has provided four reserved seats: two for women's representatives, and two for youth representatives (one man, one woman). This provision ensures that there are at least three women on every *konsellu suku*. However, as has been noted by Cummins, there is still work to be done in transforming this descriptive representation into something more substantive.[11]

Advantages of elections for community leaders: positive effects

The 2004–05 *konsellu suku* elections were characterised by high rates of participation, suggesting strong community support for the electoral process. Having recently released themselves from authoritarian colonial power, the community leader elections allow an expression of individual pride and freedom, and have transformed the relationship between community members and local authority figures. During both Portuguese and Indonesian rule, community leadership positions were primarily accountable to the governing forces and interests; they were not considered to be accountable to the community, or representative of the community's interests and needs. Nevertheless, there were local leaders who protected their community, and those leaders who governed well during Portuguese and/or Indonesian times have retained the people's trust and loyalty since independence.

Political parties have also been accepted by many as appropriate vehicles for expressing and putting forward political ideas. We observed that there are families in which different family members belong to different political parties, but continue to live together. The *konsellu suku* can also be made up of people from a range of political parties. Our fieldwork suggests that there are many such cases where this works well, although it is also true that in some places the *konsellu suku* have found themselves unable to work together because of party-political difference, as discussed later and in other articles in this journal. The fact that there are some instances where families with multiple political parties can live together, and *konsellu suku* that can work together, suggests a growing capacity of East Timorese communities to live and work with political difference.

Elections for community leaders: negative effects

While the process of democratisation has revealed many advantages for communities, there have also been aspects that have had a negative impact on communities, although impacts have varied significantly from one *suku* to the next. The disadvantages can be identified as: the authority of the elected *suku* leader is diminished; there is a reduced level of community co-operation and participation in development projects in the *suku*; and the level of harmony within the community appears to be diminishing. For each of these disadvantages we will consider the underlying reasons as presented below.

Diminished legitimacy and authority of suku *leaders*

Legal formal legitimacy for community leaders comes from the democratic electoral process. However, in order for this legitimacy to be significant and actually carry authority within the governing process, it must stand together with the other two types of legitimacy identified by sociologist Max Weber, that is, the social-cultural legitimacy found in community's cultural life, and personal legitimacy, based on the capacities, reputation and history of the individual.[12]

Selection of leaders by election—particularly involving different parties and independents—represents a significant departure from traditional methods, which continue to be important in many *suku*, wherein the *liurai* ('lord of the land') and other authority figures gain their positions through inheritance. The authority of the *liurai* is closely entwined with the system of *uma lisan* (sacred houses) that continues to be important throughout the communities of Timor-Leste.[13] In many *suku*, it continues to be the case that elected local leaders come from the *liurai's uma lisan*.[14] However, in other *suku*, new community leaders have been chosen who are not of *liurai* descent. As has also been noted in other studies[15], this has meant that in a number of *suku* local leaders without *liurai* heritage have had difficulty maintaining their authority in carrying out their daily activities. This dynamic was clearly seen in *suku* Umakaduak in the district of Manatuto and *suku* Batugade in Bobonaro district. In the former, the *xefe suku* does not come from the *liurai's uma lisan*, and in the latter the *xefe suku* has married into the area and therefore cannot claim traditional authority. It was explained that the *xefe's* authority was at times not taken seriously by the community because they were not from the *liurai* clan. This is in stark contrast to other places, such as nearby *suku* Waturalan (Manatuto) and Malilait (Bobanaro), where the elected leaders come from the *liurai* clan and have therefore received a strong sense of trust from the community.

Such experiences indicate that in many cases local leaders need to draw on a combination of state-based (elected) authority and traditional authority in order to maintain their position in the *suku*. In many *suku*, without roots in social-cultural standing and personal capacity, legal formal legitimacy would be just floating around, like a car whose engine is running but which has no wheels or steering. This reflects the transitional nature of East Timorese communities, as they adapt to the new liberal democratic processes of the East Timorese state, and also indicates the need to take seriously the hybrid nature of local politics in Timor-Leste as it impacts on daily governance in the *suku*.

Co-operation and participation in community service work in the suku

Another major concern identified during fieldwork relates to levels of co-operation and participation in community work. Contrary to hopes that democratisation would contribute to greater involvement in community development, a common theme that was raised during our interviews and focus group discussions was that, on the whole, community participation in development activities remains fairly low. Many programs and decisions made by leaders from political parties are seen as being in the interests of the political party which in turn diminishes overall participation in those programs. Even where people consider that certain decisions have been made in the interests of the general community, these situations can become politicised, and individuals from an opposing political party may refuse to co-operate or participate. The freedom of every person to participate in a political party according to their own desires has impacted on co-operation

and participation in community activities, both in terms of the leaders and among community members.

Such concerns were raised in several of the *suku* we visited, including *suku* Ailili, Kairui and Umakaduak in Manatuto district, and *suku* Lahome, Holsa and Batugade in Bobonaro district. In *suku* Alili, for example, some individuals refused to respect rules that the *konsellu suku* established regarding the maintenance of animals, because they refused to accept the authority of people from parties that they did not support. A senior resident recounted a case where the *konsellu suku* had established rules in the area, including for governing the management of animals.[16] A wandering pig was later captured in the village centre and the owner was fined. But the owner refused to accept the authority of the *konsellu suku*, which was dominated by a party he did not support, and he would not pay the fine.

Diminished sense of harmony within communities

Closely related to the issue of co-operation and participation in the *suku*, a third concern frequently expressed during fieldwork was a rising level of social disharmony. Individuals struggling against each other for political positions can at times have a negative impact on community harmony. This is of particular concern given East Timorese culture and traditional governance where emphasis is laid on maintaining and restoring community cohesion and balance.

According to East Timorese culture and customs, people have a strong spirit of solidarity within their community. Within any single family it is often seen that members should not separate or be divided because their blood-related connections tie them strongly together as a family. This sense of connection means that there tends to be great emphasis on community and family members collaborating and working together. As recounted by McWilliam, this solidarity, based on family relationships tied together through the *uma lisan*, was one of the great strengths of the resistance movement.[17] Even though they faced difficult challenges, East Timorese communities had a basis for working together towards a common goal.

However, these cultural values embedded within communities are being threatened as democracy is being implemented at the *suku* and *aldeia* level. A common theme that arose during fieldwork was that before the formal democratic process was introduced family members lived together in harmony, but after its introduction suspicions arose that diminished social harmony. It appears that although people have embraced their right to be involved in political parties and electoral competition, the divisive impact of these processes can work against community cohesion and threaten the positive elements of family and community networks. While it is true that the *konsellu suku* elections have been conducted largely without incident, the divisive impact of political parties has nonetheless been felt in communities. This side effect of political transition to liberal democracy needs to be

carefully managed by leaders at every level of governance. As a society in transition, many people are not yet familiar with a democratic culture that can tolerate different ideas and politics. As such, adequate civic education on the rights and responsibilities in a democracy requires time, supporting structures need to be in place, and communities need to actively incorporate these norms into their local politics.

The existence of traditional authority in the *suku* democracy

Following independence and the introduction of liberal democracy, many questions arose about the power of our traditional leaders within communities and what the relationship between traditional leaders and elected community leaders would be like. Adequately addressing questions such as these is extremely important for effective democratisation at the local level, and for supporting development within the *suku*.

The fact that people have embraced the electoral process as a method for choosing their leaders does not mean that their traditional leaders are not taken into consideration. During fieldwork, we found that in the majority of *suku* traditional leaders continue to be important authority figures. While people have chosen their community leaders through *suku* elections, and many of those community leader candidates come from political parties, traditionally-legitimated leaders such as the old *liurai*, *dom*, and *dato* continue to command respect and retain power over important areas of community life.

As has also been noted in other studies[18], the continuing legitimacy of traditional leaders is a strong determining factor affecting who is voted into community leader positions. In many communities across Timor-Leste, including some that we visited during fieldwork for this research, elected *xefe suku* have also been members of the *liurai's uma lisan*. The importance of traditional legitimacy also has an impact on the acceptance of elected *xefe suku* who are not of *liurai* descent, as mentioned above with regards to *suku* Umakaduak in Manatuto district. In this *suku*, because of their dissatisfaction with the non-hereditary leader, the community encouraged the son of the old *liurai* to stand and instead elected him for *xefe suku* in the recent 2009 elections.

It is clear that many communities continue to trust their traditional leaders and their descendants. The reasons that people give for this are often simple: 'they have the right to lead the people even though today we have democracy'. The phrase 'they have the right to lead', however, is telling. Communities who continue to support traditional legitimacy claim that their traditional leaders have authoritative knowledge and a spirit of humanity. This can be reinforced by the fact that many people of *liurai* heritage have also had access to a good education, so they have been exposed to new ideas and therefore are seen to have a high level of knowledge and moral dedication. With these advantages, it is expected that they can lead their community calmly and will display moral responsibility. In addition,

communities trust their traditional leaders because of the spiritual authority they hold and their connection to the ancestors. This authority, however, can at times also be lost because of their behaviour or events in the past, as had occurred in some of the places where we conducted fieldwork, including *suku* Kai Rui, Holsa and Lahomea.

In one particular *suku* visited in the district of Bobonaro, traditional leaders continue to hold authority, and community leaders who stand for *xefe suku* are nearly always descendants of the *liurai*, or are someone whose father or grandfather was a leader of the people.[19] The *xefe* of this *suku*, who was elected for the 2005 to 2009 period, is a descendant of a *liurai* from a nearby *suku*, and his wife is a daughter of the *liurai* of the *suku* that he now heads. This is a slightly unusual situation, as having married into the area the *xefe suku* is not from the *suku* he leads. Nevertheless, he has been recognised as a legitimate leader because the current *liurai* of the *suku* does not have any sons who could inherit the leadership. Even so, his leadership is challenged by the fact that he cannot draw on the combined forms of traditional and modern legitimacy, and as per his following explanation, demonstrates clearly the need for both forms of authority to be present:

> There needs to be a combination between the traditional authority system and the modern democratic system so that we can have a community leader who is effective and can push the development process forward at the *suku* level. As well as this we cannot just make space for the modern democratic system that is being introduced and lose our traditional values that are part of our East Timorese identity. The process of combining the systems is already being practiced by people in [this *suku*] and perhaps also in other places.[20]

The cultural legitimacy of traditional authority figures is backed up by various rituals and prohibitions. For example, as this leader went on to explain, while anybody can be elected to *xefe suku*, a leader who is not a descendent of the *liurai* cannot receive and eat *kelebokar* meat (the meat that is offered to the *liurai* leader when there is a celebration or ritual). If they do eat it, they must cut it up and then pass it on to the leader who comes from the *liurai* family. If this process is not followed, the meat could cause them to become ill or die.[21] The prominence of this ritual is an ongoing reminder to the community that he is not from the *liurai's uma lisan*, and has the effect of subliminally undermining his authority.

Variations on this political hybridity appear across the *suku* of Timor-Leste. During fieldwork, similar dynamics were noted in a number of *suku*. In these places, traditional leadership is still extremely important, and traditional methods of governing through the *uma lisan*, and through ceremonies and rituals such as *tarabandu*, are vital for maintaining order. Communities sometimes struggle in their attempts to combine the traditional system and the democratic electoral system. If democratisation is however to encourage greater political participation at the local level, the ways that local traditional

practices can potentially form the basis for a hybrid system that draws on the strength of both customary and electoral legitimacy need to be actively considered. Many communities are already doing this on their own terms, for example by holding a ritual ceremony to hand over power from the customary *liurai* to the elected *xefe*.[22] In some places the elders from the *liurai's uma lisan* will tie a sacred cloth on the elected leader and hand over a sacred cane stick as a symbol of authority.

While rituals such as the ones discussed here can assist the community in accepting the elected *xefe suku*, this does not always work. For instance, the *xefe suku* discussed above from Bobanaro district acknowledges that he has less authority with the community because there was no ritual such as this. This is not just an issue of authority but is also connected to matters that are *lulik* (sacred/spiritual), whereby breaking of spiritual sanctions can potentially carry very heavy consequences, such as illness or death. However there are also some difficult choices to be made in embracing political hybridity. While it is certainly possible to combine the traditional and modern systems in some ways, things that are *lulik* cannot be transformed. The question of how to combine traditional and modern systems is therefore up to the communities themselves, as they negotiate what can and cannot be changed.

Last words

Our fieldwork demonstrated that while democratic elections are embraced in East Timorese people's lives today, in many communities the system of *uma lisan* and the *liurai* nevertheless continue to be central to maintaining social order. As elections and associated changes have been implemented in the *suku*, the interaction of state-based and traditional systems has sometimes been to the detriment of communities. In instance where people no longer work together, there is diminished social harmony and the level of community participation in the development of the *suku* can be reduced.

To transform this situation we need ways to support a hybrid democracy at the *suku* and *aldeia* level, wherein the formal democratic system is reinforced by traditional methods. This would mean creating a democratic process that is full of customs, and which can empower communities and be used to develop the people's own lives. By recognising the reality of people's lived experience in this way, democracy can move beyond procedural institutions such as the electoral system to a more substantive democracy that would respect the place of *lisan* and be empowering to communities. The implementation of a hybrid democracy would vary significantly from one *suku* to the next, as *lisan* also varies from one community to the next. But the defining characteristic that would connect these systems would be the desire for substantive democracy, so that *lisan* and the formal democratic system reinforce one another to ensure that people's lives are sustainable, harmonious and prosperous.

Endnotes

1   This article draws on research undertaken for and funded by an AusAID Development Research Award. The authors would like to express their appreciation to AusAID for making this research possible.

2   See, for example, R. Engel, *The Building of Timor-Leste: International Contributions to a Fragile State*, Center for International Conflict Resolution, School of International and Public Affairs Columbia University, New York, 2007; J. Scambary, 'Anatomy of a conflict: the 2006–2007 communal violence in East Timor', *Conflict, Security and Development*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2009, pp. 265–88.

3   The first term rolled out progressively through *suku* over 2004–05 and ran until 2009, and the second term is from 2009 to 2013. The 2004–05 *konsellu suku* elections involved six political parties—FRETILIN, ASDT, PD, PSD, Partidu Sosialista Timor and KOTA. Across the 442 *suku*, candidates registered as part of a political party or ran independently (with 134 independents elected). In the 2009 elections, the relevant legislation had been changed, with candidates no longer allowed to run on a party platform (although they may be members of parties). The *konsellu suku* in the new legislation also runs as a single ticket—they are not elected individually, but as part of a ticket with the *xefe suku*.

4   See V. Boege, M.A. Brown, K. Clements and A. Nolan, 'On hybrid political orders and emerging states', *Berghof Dialogue Series*, no. 8, Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, Berlin, 2009, pp. 15–35.

5   See M. Tilman, this volume.

6   ibid.

7   Also see D. Cummins, *Local Governance in Timor-Leste: The Politics of Mutual Recognition*, PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2010.

8   D. Cummins, *Local Governance in Timor-Leste*; R. Engel, *The Building of Timor-Leste*.

9   Interview with senior resident, *suku* Lahomea, Bobonaro district, September 2009.

10   Similar issues of weak council structures and distributive equity have been noted in other studies. See, for example, D. Cummins, *Local Governance in Timor-Leste*; C.J. Shepherd, 'Participation, authority, and distributive equity in East Timorese development', *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2–3, 2009, pp. 315–42.

11   D. Cummins, *Local Governance in Timor-Leste*.

12   M. Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds and trans, Routledge, London, 1991.

13   See M. Tilman, this volume.

14   See, for example, Z. Grimshaw, *Interview with Comandante Ular Rihik/Virgilio dos Anjos*, 16 October 2009, Dili, Timor-Leste, <http://www.etan.org/et2010/01january/16/14intrvw.htm>

15   See A.B. dos Santos and E. da Silva, this volume; D. Cummins and M. Leach, 'Democracy old and new', *Asian Politics and Policy*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2012, pp. 89–104.

16   Interview with senior resident, *suku* Alili, Manatutu district, 15 September 2009. Editor's note: This is the kind of issue covered in customary arrangements by a *tarabandu*, as discussed in M. Tilman, this volume.

17   A. McWilliam, 'Houses of resistance in East Timor: structuring sociality in the new nation', *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2005, pp. 27–44.

18 See, for example, D. Cummins and M. Leach, 'Democracy old and new'.

19 Geographically, this *suku* could not be considered 'remote' as it is linked by road to a number of key population centres.

20 Interview with *xefe suku*, Bobanaro district, 26 September 2009.

21 ibid.

22 See also M.A. Brown, this volume.