CONSOLIDATING TIMOR-LESTE


Review by Paul Hainsworth

Timor-Leste (formerly East Timor) is one of the world’s newest nation-states and member states of the United Nations (UN). The state acquired its independence from the Republic of Indonesia following a referendum in the territory in 1999 that was preceded by a quarter of a century of severe occupation and rule by the Indonesian state. A brief interlude of UN caretaking led the way to the formal and fully fledged statehood and independence of Timor-Leste in 2002. Leach and Kingsbury’s edited volume, focusing on post-2001 developments, needs to be seen against this backdrop.

The book focuses on key issues that have confronted and continue to confront the country, as it proceeds to consolidate a new democratic polity. The range of topics that is dealt with in the fourteen chapters includes politics (with contributions on political parties, constitutionalism, institutions, local government, decentralisation, foreign policy, etc.), justice and security matters, and gender, civil society and development issues. Overall then, a relatively wide overview of post-independent Timor-Leste is provided. Arguably, the chapters on ‘Development Strategy’ (Tim Anderson), ‘The Politics of Gender’ (Sarah Niner) and ‘The Justice Sector’ (Andrew Marriot) will be among the contributions that have most interest for readers of this journal. However, the book’s breadth enables the reader to understand the emerging political and democratising arena in which such themes can be explored and understood.

Anderson points to the formulation of a National Development Plan (NDP) and the specific practice of two post-independence governments as key factors as regards development strategy. Much of the chapter is given to paving the way to concentrating on Timor-Leste itself. Thus competing models of developmental strategies are explained and discussed – private market economy, developmental state and human development. The 2002-2020 NDP is seen as

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a complex and hybrid document in which human development themes, such as participation and inclusiveness, are combined with elitist, economic liberal approaches. The left-leaning Fretilin government of 2001-6, understandably and unsurprisingly, pursued human development policies with development state ideas in agriculture, finance, education and health. The succeeding AMP (Parliamentary Majority Alliance) coalition (2007-11), led by Xanana Gusmão, represented a move away from Fretilin hegemonic leadership and, in the light of International Monetary Fund (IMF) influence, was marked more by market economy approaches. As a result, argues Anderson, fragile and relatively neglected sectors such as agriculture, health care and education needed and need more support and public investment.

Turning to gender as an issue, Niner’s chapter argues that ‘research on gender roles in Timor-Leste is sparse, and a locally grounded debate on gender roles between men and women is still in its infancy’ (258). Indeed, most male academics and analysts are deemed to have been gender-blind and unreliable in their research on Timor. A theme of the chapter is the renegotiation of gender roles for women, which entails a tension between ‘traditional’ roles for women (itself a contested concept) and ideas of a more modern, dynamic and public role for women. Whilst Niner points to a key (albeit often not acknowledged) role for women in the resistance movement and a growing role in socio-political life, she also notes inequalities and deficiencies such as lower pay, lower participation in the formal work process, and high levels of domestic violence against women. Moreover, issues of masculinity and militarisation (as a social phenomenon) are seen to be insufficiently addressed and monitored, respectively.

In the latter respect, demobilisation is seen to have been accompanied by ‘the deep imprinting of violent masculinities in former combatants’ (256). However, despite the deficits, Niner argues that there are reasons to be optimistic on the gender front, not least in view of the strength of the local women’s movement, the campaign against domestic violence (and its international resonances), the less conservative values of younger elements and the gains made in education and health matters. At time of writing, a notable and relevant development in September 2013 has been the official clampdown on martial arts practices (N.B., for further on these latter manifestations, see in
the book James Scambary’s informed chapter on the topic) in view of the violence and disorder emanating from this arena of social militarisation.

As regards issues of justice, Marriot’s chapter focuses upon achievements, challenges and comparisons. Marriot contends that, after a decade of statehood, Timor-Leste has ‘yet to put the wrongs of recent history fully behind it’ (99). Indeed, despite truth commissions, special courts and other mechanisms of justice, impunity for those who have committed heinous crimes remains a serious issue in Timorese and Indonesian society. Marriot, like many other observers, praises the painstaking work of the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Reception (CAVR), seeing it *inter alia* as ‘an extensive testament to the hardships of [Indonesian] occupation’ (103). Again, like many other critical commentators, he highlights the undoing of prosecutorial justice via the use of the Presidential Pardon mechanism – as Timor-Leste’s leadership, via political pragmatism, seeks to come to terms with its post-independence relationship with Indonesia. In 2008, Marriot recalls, over eighty individuals were pardoned, including some serving sentences for war crimes and crimes against humanity. What Marriot’s chapter indicates is that matters of impunity and justice remain unfinished business in the fledgling state and there is no guarantee that they will be dealt with satisfactorily for the victims and survivors of the occupation.

A short review such as this cannot do justice to the breadth of the book, but those readers seeking information on and analysis of the party political and political institutional aspects of Timor-Leste will be rewarded as various authors explain the warren of political parties (Dennis Shoesmith), the nature of the semi-presidential system (Rui Graça Feijó) and the unpacking and interpretation of the constitution (Damien Kingsbury). As London South Bank University’s Professor John G Taylor rightly claims on the flap-jacket, the book is ‘an essential reference point for anyone concerned with the most important political issues to be addressed by the country in the coming years…a highly useful guide for assessing the possibilities for the continuation and development of democratic processes within Timor-Leste’. More specifically, the book – quite unique in its focus and specificity – will serve as a timely first port-of-call for professionals from a variety of backgrounds – such as international relations/politics, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), conflict resolution,
development education, etc. – who are seeking to get to grips with the emerging Timor-Leste, its concerns and its overall progress.

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