

# Interventionism and resistance: UN peace missions in Timor-Leste

António Leitão<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The UN interventionism in Timor-Leste aimed at creating a liberal state, which could be recognised by its international peers. The implemented model does not hide an external imposed project, with a social structural form resembling the Northern developed countries: the liberal democratic model of the market economy. However, local political structures keep reproducing its own organisational model, which has resisted and adapted to the interventionist project. There are elements of the resistance by the locals, which were alienated from the process and consider it as a form of colonialism, resembling the Indonesian and Portuguese occupation, and reclaim their recognition. The interventionist project is also considered, in synthesis, as an imposition of a model deemed superior. This essay aims to demonstrate how the UN missions in Timor-Leste have colonialist characteristics, framed by their own narrative of superiority, facing resistance at the local level.

## Introduction

The United Nations (UN) intervention in Timor-Leste aimed at creating a state following a liberal framework, which would allow it to be recognized by its international peers. This framework is externally imposed and mirrors a social structuration proper to Western countries, based on liberal democratic and market economy models. Local political traditional structures continued to reproduce specific forms of political and social organization, which resisted and adapted to the interventionist project. These elements, which found themselves alienated from the formal peacebuilding processes, considered the latter similar to Indonesian and Portuguese colonial occupations, and strived for recognition.

The UN Transitional Authority in Timor-Leste (UNTAET) faced the rise of local resistance, which considered that the UN intervention model reproduced colonial elements, based on the ideas of changing the *other*, due to its relative *inferiority*. This resistance was composed by locally recognized political structures respected by the Timorese population. We argue that the rhetoric of *capacitation* used by UN peacebuilding missions reveals the transformative nature and the superiority attributed

---

<sup>1</sup> Degree in International Relations, by the Faculty of Economics of Coimbra University. Masters Degree awarded by the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Bordeaux – International Studies. Masters Degree in Sociology by the Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra. PhD Candidate at the Programme “International Politics and Conflict Resolution”, of the Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra, and funded by FCT. Research fellow at the research project “Peacebuilding and sustainable peace: UN missions in Timor-Leste and Portugal's contribution” and in the project “PPAgua - Respostas públicas e privadas à falta de pagamento dos serviços de abastecimento de água: o caso português”. Junior researcher at the Project “Políticas de Intervenção: Uma Comparação do Envolvimento de Política Externa Alemão e Português na Ásia Central/Sul”, all funded by FCT.

to the liberal-democratic model deployed in Timor-Leste. We seek to demonstrate how the implementation of such models echoes practices and ideas imposed in colonial settings, which in effect produced resistance at the local levels.

### **Democratic-liberal synthesis: elements of mission civilisatrice**

The UN efforts of peacebuilding in Timor-Leste represented one of the most overarching and complex missions the organization has ever faced. After the independence referendum of 1999, UNTAET was created in order to establish the necessary grounds for the country's independence. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) provided broad powers to the Transitional Authority, including effective and total control over the legislative, executive and judiciary branches. Among others, UNTAET's mission included security related issues, the development of local administration and capacity building for self-government (S/RES/1272 1999). As a peacebuilding mission, the promotion of a specific political structure and internal system of government, in this case following the liberal-democratic framework, might be considered as an effort of *mission civilisatrice* (Paris 2002). Besides the focus on security issues, which were in the aftermath of the referendum highly relevant, the peacebuilding mission promoted a specific model of political organization. The international community deems this political apparatus as superior to any other political forms of ruling and actively promotes it through UN peace missions (Paris 2002). Furthermore, international agencies and states share the belief that post-conflict societies can be transformed, through the medium of liberal ruling mechanisms, namely regulations, which will in their due time change the behaviour of populations (Chandler 2010a). On the one hand, development of institutional frameworks, backed by democratic values and practices, would allow the free and equitable participation of all citizens in the political practices. On the other hand, the establishment of market liberalism would contribute to a better allocation of economic resources, promote economic freedom and assure equal access to opportunities by all. The successful implementation of the model is assessed internationally by the holding of *free and fair elections* (Chopra and Hohe 2004), which serve to measure political stability and popular and elite conformity with the established model (Chandler 2010b).

The deployment of such model is promoted by an ensemble of international actors which, through conditionality, exert their influence throughout the process. The World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) condition much needed financial aid to economic liberalization policies; NGOs financed by Western countries reproduce their countries of origin pre-established values (even as *grass roots* approaches promise new, locally-based intervention practices); consultants and experts from donor countries are recruited to work on recently created public administration offices. All these agents and processes promote, under the premises of 'technical assistance', a specific ideological model, which inevitably reflects the interests of the most powerful donors (Paris 2002). Intervention practices, labelled recently as 'country-owned' (or in this case, *timorized*) scarcely hide the prevalence of conditionality as a major form of imposition: a supposedly locally-driven process of development continues to be effectively controlled by 'internationals' (Chandler 2006).

Two elements are shared between liberal peacebuilding and colonization processes: first, the downplay of the importance of local characteristics, including cultural traits, in favour of Western models deemed superior. Secondly, the discourse on neutrality and technical assistance hides the entrenchment of proxy-governance structures. These rely

on the co-optation of a local elite, which agrees and legitimizes the interventionist model.

### **The ‘incapacitated’ local and UNTAET’s mission in Timor-Leste**

Although the old civilized – non-civilized binomial has disappeared from the liberal interventionist narrative, the ideological structure underlying state-building remains reflecting the *mission civilisatrice* logic (Paris 2002). According to Chandler (2010a), this rhetoric can be found nowadays on concepts such as *capacity-building* and *institution-building*. For the liberal framework of post-conflict reconstruction, *civil society* appears as the main object of the intervention as well as the element, which structures the *other’s* behaviour in the setting. Nineteenth century colonial narratives based on race or cultural superiority were replaced by this new narrative, which allows for the transformation of intervened societies. The intervened object is no longer considered ‘unchangeable’, as nineteenth century racist discourses argued. A specific type of rationality can be promoted throughout them: it is necessary to correct the non-rational elements that populate civil society. This process of correction ought to make individuals act rationally, according to post-conflict objectives: non-rational elements might provoke a relapse to conflict (Chandler 2010a). In this discourse, the intervened is not depicted as *incapacitated* due to his/her essential character, but rather due to its relative position in a determined environment, which is the main object of intervention. However, such shift in perspective, from the transformation of *man* to the transformation of *environment* does not hide a fundamentally paternalistic way of looking at the *other*.

This paternalistic character is confirmed by the ways used by the West to represent its own actions regarding the object of intervention. International aid is framed in ‘technical’ terms, that is, embedded by a sort of neutrality, which, somewhat paradoxically, gives it a beneficial character. The interventionist efforts are rhetorically framed as action with the *other’s* needs in mind: the intervened is the focus of the efforts developed by international organizations and states alike. There is a happy coincidence between the needs of the *other*, depicted as *needy* and *incapacitated*, and the interests of the international agenda, determined by Western powers. This shift in focus provides legitimacy to interventionist projects, even as the objects they seek to change are created by themselves. Increasingly complex ensembles of international threats and menaces, e.g. the poverty-terrorism nexus, all arising from the *other’s* inabilities and incapacities, justify a evermore all-encompassing models of intervention (Chandler 2006). These seek to provide the necessary ground for the cohabitation of both *proxy-governance* and the idea of national sovereignty (Cunliffe 2012).

Turning our attention to the case of UNTAET in Timor-Leste, we can argue for several shared elements with Chandler’s reading, demonstrating its colonialist characteristics. The lack of accountability towards the Timorese people, by UNTAET, is a major example (Chopra 2000). Sérgio Vieira de Mello, who led UNTAET, considered that the UN mission represented the effort of developing a sort of “benevolent despotism” (Beauvais 2001). UNTAET acted as a powerful ruling body which, considering that there was a an effective vacuum of power in the territory, imposed its will as if it was dealing with a *tabula rasa* nation (Chopra 2000). The concentration of power in the UN was essential to promote legislative reforms and represent the territory internationally (Beauvais 2001). The renegotiation made at the time between the UNTAET and the government of Australia, over the exploration of oil resources in the Timor sea, without

the need to consult the Timorese population nor its representatives, reveals clearly the *modus operandi* of the mission (Chopra 2000). Only UNTAET was considered as being capacitated enough to act according to the interests of the Timorese people.

The idea that the Timorese people were unable to govern themselves was widely shared (Chopra 2002). Their traditions and habitus were dismissed as folklore, completely inadequate for the task of state-building (Hohe 2002). This perception, as well as the lack of recognition of the authority of local traditional chiefs, led to growing opposition between the *modern-traditional*, leading to social disruptions which were later considered as sources of conflict (Cummins and Leach 2010). UNTAET sought, at a point, to recruit Timorese elites to top positions. However, invitations were made mostly to former Timorese activists in exile, and this was not welcomed satisfactorily by the people. This move by UNTAET had two major objectives. First, it sought to accommodate different political elites within the administration, in a logic described by Chopra as “divide to rule”, through which the involvement and legitimation of the UN mission was traded by preferential seats (Chopra 2000). Secondly, this process was seen as an effort to respond to recent criticism about the lack of Timorese participation in the UNTAET by local communities. Amidst growing concerns about the lack of a sense of belonging by the Timorese concerning the UN intervention, they were to become the ultimate drivers of the state-building process (Beauvais 2001).

### **Resistance: colonized again?**

A feeling of strangeness shared by many Timorese throughout the ruling of the UNTAET gives further impetus to claims of the interventionist process sharing colonial-like characteristics. Although one might consider some of these examples as minor, even negligent aspects, the role they play on the everyday life, feelings and perceptions of the Timorese people remains important.

Conditions applied differently both to UN staff and the Timorese population increased the feeling of colonial times. Amongst them there were the sometimes impressive difference in wages paid to UN international staff and the average earnings of the local population; the immunity status UN staff enjoyed in the country, while the Timorese were subject to the authorities and rules of UNTAET; the difficult access of Timorese workforce to jobs provided by the mission; and finally, the idea that the Timorese were destined to serve a richer, non-local group increased this perception (Chopra 2000; Castro and Trindade 2007). Many political reforms as well as institutional developments were not recognized by the population, namely because the Timorese had hardly any influence in the process (Cummins and Leach 2012). Such impositions were seen by the Timorese as an affront to their local particularities, among others because they benefited a small elite group who had sought refuge outside the territory during the Indonesian occupation. Many did not recognize any sort of authority to UN appointed local leaders (Castro and Trindade 2007). The development of a centralized government authority found little to no referential in terms of traditional structures of power within the Timorese population. The behaviour carried out by the UN was interpreted as one *bullies* typically have, namely due to their capacity to impose, where questions were not asked, and their choices upon the Timorese population (Chopra 2000). Neoliberal reforms carried out in the economic field, mostly related to foreign investment conditions, rose the issues of unequal development throughout the territory and brought back the ghost of foreign economic domination (Candio and Bleiker 2001).

However, resistance to implemented reforms at the local levels of power was the most striking example. Even throughout Portuguese and Indonesian occupations, local forms of power, rule and authority, continued to exist in Timor-Leste. These were founded by kinship networks and hierarchies, entangled by marriage practices. The stability and peace at the local and community levels were maintained with and by these important mechanisms, which dealt with major day-to-day issues, namely disputes about property and the conduction of local affairs (Hohe 2002). After stability was restored in the aftermath of the referendum, many local and community leaders were chosen following traditional mechanisms and legitimacy parameters. Age, personal character, status, influence in the community and participation in the resistance were some of the elements to recognize in a good leader. When the Transitional Authority decided to appoint its own representatives for territories outside the city of Díli, its appointees became mere transmission links between traditional chiefs and the UN mission. The local population did not recognize the authority the UNTAET had provided to its chosen ones. These were mostly young, educated adults, who did not have any connection to the territories and peoples they were responsible to govern (Chopra and Hohe 2004). The possibility for cooperation between local authorities and UNTAET was at the hands of the National Timorese Resistance Council (CNRT), which, at a certain point, argued for civil disobedience concerning the UN and claimed a unilateral declaration of independence (Chopra 2000).

The local traditional model of political authority was considered non-democratic by Western standards, and as such it had to be replaced. This led to destabilizing pressures towards it. At the first national elections, to elect an Assembly responsible for drafting the country's constitution, such pressures were made evident. In local settings, factions supporting different political candidates disputed a space normally reserved for traditional chiefs. Because these elections coincided with the end of the CNRT, they brought additional pressure to local chiefs (Hohe 2002). Electoral processes, first at the national and later at the local levels, produced considerable disturbances in the social element. First, political competition replaced ancient conflict resolution models and communitarian decision-making processes, which involved all (male) members of the community. Local political compromise was replaced by political competition as a way of accessing power. A conception of liberty as "freedom to do everything" spread quickly as the authority of traditional figures declined. Social conflicts hatched, namely in urban settings where Western values expanded first and more rapidly (Castro and Trindade 2007). Traditional local structures continued to exist despite the wave of democratization that swept the country after the independence, and in 2009 local traditional power structures were regulated by law, being recognized as an essential element of political life. Despite the existence of democratic institutions, both at the local and national level, that ought to represent them, the Timorese population continued to feel represented mostly by local, traditional power structures. In effect, a candidate that presents himself to elections has a higher chance of winning if his profile matches the traditional character attributed to traditional chiefs.

## **Conclusion**

The UN's administration in Timor-Leste did not promote a considerable or clear component of economic exploitation typical to colonial times. However, one can pinpoint certain elements that are present both in peacebuilding missions and colonialism. By exporting a model that is deemed as superior, the UN and other international actors necessarily think the intervened, and its way of life, as *inferior*. The

logic behind capacity building does not efface this dimension. The will to transform intervened societies, rendering them apt to deal with liberal democracy, recognizes this inferiority.

The interventionist project acquires a colonial dimension that is visible in two moments. First, through the way the process of social transformation is conceived, from the outside to the inside, but also from the type of relationship it creates in societies, of subordination and dependence from the local to the foreigner. Second, through the resistance that it provokes, essentially at the local structures of power, the ones that survived the Portuguese and Indonesian occupations, capable of resisting the delegitimization and transformations brought about by the Western liberal democratic model.

## **Bibliography**

Beauvais, J.C. (2001) Benevolent Despotism: a critique of U.N. State-building in East Timor. *Journal of International Law and Politics - NYU Law*. 33.

Candio, P. & Bleiker, R. (2001) Peacebuilding in East Timor. *The Pacific Review*. 14 (1), 63–84.

Castro, B. & Trindade, J. (2007) *Rethinking Timorese Identity as a Peacebuilding Strategy: The Lorosa'e – Loromonu Conflict from a Traditional Perspective*.

Chandler, D. (2006) *Empire in Denial: The politics of State-building*. London, Pluto Press.

Chandler, D. (2010a) Race, Culture and Civil Society: Peacebuilding Discourse and the Understanding of Difference. *Security Dialogue*. 41 (4).

Chandler, D. (2010b) The uncritical critique of 'liberal peace'. *Review of International Studies*. 36 (SupplementS1), 137–155.

Chopra, J. (2002) Building State Failure in East Timor. *Development and Change*. 33 (5), 979–1000.

Chopra, J. (2000) The UN's Kingdom of East Timor.(role of United Nations). *Survival*. 42 (3).

Chopra, J. & Hohe, T. (2004) Participatory Intervention. *Global Governance*. 10, 289–305.

Cummins, M. & Leach, D. (2012) Democracy Old and New: The Interaction of Modern and Traditional Authority in East Timorese Local Government. *Asian Politics & Policy*. 4, 89–104.

Cummins, M. & Leach, D. (2010) Democracy or democracy? Local experiences of democratization in Timor-Leste. *Democratization*. 17 (5), 899–919.

Cunliffe, P. (2012) Still the Spectre at the Feast: Comparisons between Peacekeeping and Imperialism in Peacekeeping Studies Today. *International Peacekeeping*. 19 (4), 426–442.

Hohe, T. (2002) The Clash of Paradigms: International Administration and Local Political Legitimacy in East Timor. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International & Strate*. 24 (3).

Paris, R. (2002) International peacebuilding and the ‘mission civilisatrice’. *Review of International Studies*. 28 (4), 637–656.

S/RES/1272 (1999) Resolução 1272 do Conselho de Segurança.