

Legal Politics in The Democratic State of Timor Leste

Manuel João Baptista
Universidade Da Paz, Timor Leste
E-mail: ailaranslf@gmail.com

Abstract

Article Info:

Submitted:

11-04-2025

Final Revised:

17-04-2025

Accepted:

18-04-2025

Published:

29-04-2025

This research aims to analyze the role of legal politics in Timor-Leste in building a strong democratic system, as well as the challenges faced in law enforcement and the harmonization of legal regulations post-independence. The method used is normative analysis with historical and conceptual approaches, where data is collected through literature review, legal regulations, and related official documents. The results show that despite various legal reforms, the legal system in Timor-Leste still faces significant challenges, such as the imbalance between existing regulations and social needs and the limited capacity of law enforcement that hinders the effectiveness of policies. Additionally, there is still a strong political influence in the legislative process, which often affects the independence of judicial institutions. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of enhancing the capacity of law enforcement agencies and the strong commitment of all parties to strengthen the effectiveness of legal policies to support the achievement of sustainable democracy and the rule of law in Timor-Leste. This study is expected to contribute to developing legal policies that are more responsive to the country's evolving social and political needs.

Keywords: Legal Politics; Democracy; Law Enforcement; Timor-Leste; Legal Reforms

Corresponding: Manuel João Baptista

E-mail: ailaranslf@gmail.com



INTRODUCTION

East Timor gained independence in 2002 after a long struggle against colonialism and occupation. As a developing democracy, legal politics is the main instrument in determining the direction of legal policies that support democratic development (Deuskar, 2019; Hunter et al., 2020; Okafor et al., 2020; Shiba, 2023). The legal politics in Timor-Leste are influenced by various factors, including the legacy of colonial law, the legal system adopted in the Constitution of the RDTL, and the evolving socio-political dynamics. This article aims to examine the development of legal politics in Timor-Leste and its impact on the democratic system and the rule of law in the country (Johnston, 2023; Nuttall, 2021).

Based on the research conducted on legal politics in Timor-Leste, the development of legal

politics post-independence highlights the crucial role of law in supporting the country's democratic system. Although various legal reforms have been implemented, significant challenges remain in aligning national law with social needs and strengthening law enforcement agencies. Therefore, further research is necessary to identify solutions to these issues and explore the impact of legal politics on the people of Timor-Leste.

Further research could focus on evaluating the implementation of existing laws in society, particularly regarding their impact on social justice and human rights. Given that much of Timor-Leste's population still relies on customary law, examining how national law and customary law can be harmonized to create a more inclusive and representative legal system is essential.

Additionally, this research could suggest the importance of strengthening the capacity of judicial institutions by assessing how human resources and technological improvements can help enhance the justice system's effectiveness. In this regard, it is important to identify the factors hindering the strengthening of judicial institutions and propose solutions relevant to the context of Timor-Leste, such as further training for judges and prosecutors and improvements to legal infrastructure.

Moreover, further research needs to be conducted on the role of the legislative body in lawmaking. A detailed analysis of the law-making process and the political influences involved can offer a clearer understanding of the challenges in creating fair and unbiased laws. This research could include comparative studies with other countries recently undergoing democratic transitions, to gain broader perspectives on legal and political practices.

Furthermore, an evaluation of public participation in policy-making processes should also be explored further. An inclusive process in law-making will strengthen democracy and give marginalized groups a voice within the existing legal system. This research could involve surveys or interviews with Timor-Leste's citizens to understand better their perceptions of the current legal system and policies.

As democracy continues to develop in Timor-Leste, it is important to assess whether there have been any changes in the public's understanding of their legal rights. Further research could also investigate public legal awareness and how legal education and advocacy can help citizens better understand and utilize their rights within the national legal framework (Nahak et al., 2020; Pangastuti, 2022; Rumiarta et al., 2022; Verkhovets & Sahin, 2024).

Further studies could also focus on the political challenges that emerge in policy-making. This research could identify how political interventions in the legislative process may affect the legal system's independence and explore how the state can create more transparent mechanisms free from excessive political influence.

Lastly, future research needs to focus on the international impact on Timor-Leste's legal politics, particularly about its connections with global organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and other donor countries involved in legal development (Kolodyazhny, 2021; Lipstein, 2024; Wescott et al., 2023). Evaluating how international assistance influences local legal politics and the justice system will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the legal development process in Timor-Leste.

Overall, this follow-up research could significantly improve our understanding of the challenges and opportunities in legal politics in Timor-Leste and offer recommendations that can be applied to strengthen the legal system and support the country's democratic development.

The primary research problem in this study is the challenge of aligning national laws with the evolving social needs of Timor-Leste. While various reforms have been made since the country's independence, issues remain in ensuring that legal policies support the population's diverse needs, including marginalized groups. Additionally, the limited capacity of legal enforcement agencies hampers the legal system's effectiveness in delivering justice and protecting human rights. This research aims to identify how these problems can be addressed to strengthen the democratic system of Timor-Leste.

Another critical issue is the role of customary law in Timor-Leste's legal landscape. While the 2002 RDTL Constitution provides a national legal framework, many citizens still adhere to traditional customary law. The challenge lies in harmonizing these two legal systems to promote

justice while respecting cultural traditions. This study will examine the impact of this duality and propose solutions to foster a more integrated legal system.

The urgency of this research arises from the current state of legal politics in Timor-Leste, where the rule of law is still in a developmental phase. As a young democracy, the country faces the critical task of strengthening its legal institutions and ensuring that laws serve the broader goals of justice and human rights protection. The lack of alignment between national laws and social needs, along with challenges in law enforcement, calls for immediate attention. Timor Leste's legal system must evolve to support a robust democratic structure, and this research aims to contribute to this process by offering practical recommendations for improvement.

Research by Soares explored the judiciary's role in Timor-Leste, noting the significant challenges in law enforcement and judicial independence. The study highlighted the struggle for judicial autonomy amid political pressures and suggested reforms to enhance the effectiveness of legal institutions. Soares' research provides a foundation for understanding the institutional challenges, but does not delve deeply into the role of customary law in the legal system. Research by Silva and Pereira examined the influence of colonial legacies on Timor-Leste's legal system, arguing that the remnants of Portuguese colonial law continue to shape current legal frameworks. While their work emphasizes the historical context, it does not address the dynamic changes in Timor-Leste's legal system post-independence, particularly the integration of customary law. A study by Ferreira focused on the legal reforms post-independence, with an emphasis on the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste (RDTL). Ferreira discussed the constitutional provisions and their role in fostering democracy. However, the study did not explore the practical challenges law enforcement agencies face in enforcing the laws and ensuring justice for all citizens.

The gap in existing research lies in the integration of customary law with national law in Timor-Leste and the impact of this integration on the overall effectiveness of the legal system. While previous studies have touched upon the role of the judiciary, colonial legacies, and legal reforms, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis on how these elements interact with customary law. This research will fill this gap by exploring the harmonization of these legal systems and the broader implications for social justice and democracy in Timor-Leste.

This research introduces a novel approach by focusing on the dual legal systems in Timor-Leste—national law and customary law—and the challenges they present in the post-independence democratic context. It aims to bridge the gap between these two legal frameworks and offer solutions to harmonize them for a more inclusive and effective justice system. The novelty lies in exploring practical solutions for integrating these systems, focusing on human rights protection and justice for all citizens.

The primary objectives of this research are to analyze the development of legal politics in Timor-Leste, examine the role of state institutions in the legal framework, and identify challenges related to the integration of customary law. The study also seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of legal reforms and propose recommendations to strengthen law enforcement agencies. Ultimately, the goal is to contribute to developing a more cohesive and democratic legal system in Timor-Leste.

The findings of this research will offer valuable insights for policymakers, legal professionals, and academics in Timor-Leste. The study will help inform future legal reforms that promote justice and human rights by addressing the integration of national and customary laws. The research will also provide recommendations for strengthening judicial institutions and law enforcement agencies, strengthening Timor-Leste's democratic framework. The broader implications of this study will also serve as a reference for other countries undergoing similar transitions to democracy.

METHODS

This research employs a normative juridical method to analyze and evaluate the existing legal framework and its implementation within a particular jurisdiction. The normative juridical

approach focuses on legal norms, texts, and their interpretations, clearly understanding how legal politics function within Timor-Leste's legal system. By focusing on the legal norms embedded in the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (RDTL) and related statutory regulations, the study assesses how these legal instruments have influenced the development of democratic principles and human rights protections in the country. This method allows for a structured evaluation of both the content of laws and their alignment with the ideals of democracy and justice, which are central to Timor-Leste's post-independence development.

In addition to normative analysis, the research incorporates historical and conceptual approaches to provide context and deeper insights into the evolution of legal politics in Timor-Leste. The historical approach investigates the country's colonial past and the legal systems inherited from Portuguese rule, exploring how these historical legacies continue to shape the current legal framework. This historical perspective is essential for understanding the challenges and opportunities of integrating traditional legal systems, such as customary law, with modern national law. The conceptual approach further delves into key legal concepts such as sovereignty, human rights, and the rule of law, applying these to the specific legal context of Timor-Leste to uncover potential gaps and contradictions in the legal system.

The data for this study were gathered from primary legal sources, including the 2002 RDTL Constitution, laws, and regulations that form the backbone of Timor-Leste's legal system. In addition to these primary sources, the research utilizes secondary sources, such as academic journals, legal textbooks, and reports from national and international legal institutions, to supplement the legal analysis with expert opinions and empirical data. Combining primary and secondary sources ensures that the research comprehensively evaluates legal politics in Timor-Leste. The study examines how legal politics has been applied in forming regulations, the functioning of state institutions, and the operationalization of the judicial system, particularly in its role of ensuring the rule of law in a young democracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Legal Politics Development in Timor-Leste

Since achieving independence in 2002, Timor-Leste has faced the complex task of building a legal system that aligns with democratic values while addressing the unique needs of its people. The **2002** Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (RDTL) has been fundamental in shaping the country's legal and political framework. It emphasizes the importance of human rights, the rule of law, and the separation of powers, with a clear mandate for building a democratic state based on justice, equality, and respect for fundamental freedoms (Mugnier, 2023; Priyanto & Diwyanto, 2014; Winarna et al., 2022). The Constitution provides the legal foundation for the establishment of democratic institutions and the protection of citizens' rights, which is crucial for fostering stability and encouraging the active participation of citizens in political processes (Finkl & Makowski, 2021; Tilman, 2023; World Bank Group, 2019; Y. Amtiran et al., 2022).

In the years since independence, Timor-Leste has developed several legal policies designed to support its democratic transition and strengthen the rule of law. Among these policies are reforms in electoral law, political participation, land rights, and the creation of laws to protect human rights. These reforms aimed to ensure that the country's legal system could handle the demands of a newly established democracy and promote a culture of respect for the law. Moreover, Timor-Leste has worked to align its legal system with international standards, seeking to harmonize its national laws with international human rights norms and commitments to global peace, stability, and cooperation.

However, the implementation of legal reforms has encountered significant obstacles. One of the key challenges that Timor-Leste continues to face is regulatory inconsistencies. While laws have been enacted to support the democratic process, applying these laws has not always been consistent across the country. In many cases, there is a discrepancy between the legal text and how it is enforced in practice. This is partly due to inadequate legal infrastructure and insufficient

administrative capacity to implement these laws at the grassroots level. Additionally, the complex interplay between customary law, which holds a strong influence in rural areas, and formal legal structures has led to situations where national laws and customary practices conflict, further complicating the implementation of legal policies.

Another significant challenge is the limited resources available for law enforcement and the judicial system. While Timor Leste has made strides in developing its legal framework, it still struggles with underfunded institutions, a shortage of trained personnel, and the lack of modern legal technology. These limitations affect the overall functionality of the legal system, including delays in court proceedings, the inability to conduct thorough investigations, and the inefficiency in the prosecution of cases. Furthermore, there is a significant geographical divide in access to legal services, where urban areas like Dili have better access to legal institutions and resources, while rural areas remain underserved, which exacerbates inequalities in the legal system. These challenges hinder the realization of democratic legal politics and establishing a fully operational rule of law in Timor-Leste.

2. The Role of State Institutions in Legal Politics

The development and implementation of legal politics in Timor-Leste heavily rely on the active involvement of three key branches of government: the **legislature**, **executive**, and **judiciary**. These institutions play distinct but interdependent roles in creating, implementing, and enforcing legal policies that shape the democratic system.

The **legislature**, primarily represented by the **National Parliament**, is responsible for formulating laws. The Parliament plays a vital role in ensuring that the country's legal framework aligns with the principles of democracy and human rights set out in the Constitution. It is tasked with drafting, amending, and approving legislation regulating various government and society sectors, such as the economy, criminal justice, education, and healthcare. Parliamentarians are expected to represent the interests of their constituents while also considering the nation's long-term needs as a whole. However, despite its formal authority, the legislative process in Timor-Leste has faced significant challenges. These challenges include political gridlock, limited engagement of the public in the legislative process, and at times, the **influence of political parties** that prioritize their interests over national objectives. In some cases, legislative efforts have been delayed or blocked, failing to pass laws that could benefit marginalized groups or improve the functioning of state institutions.

The **executive branch**—comprising the **President**, the **Council of Ministers**, and various government departments—is responsible for ensuring that laws passed by the legislature are implemented effectively and efficiently. The executive oversees government agencies, implements public policies, and ensures that legal decisions are carried out nationwide. The role of the executive in legal politics is particularly important because it ensures that laws do not merely exist on paper but are put into practice in ways that benefit society. The executive also shapes legal reforms, often proposing new laws and policies based on the country's current needs. However, **political instability**, power struggles, and **lack of cooperation** between the branches of government have often hindered the ability of the executive to implement laws effectively. Additionally, budgetary constraints, limited administrative capacity, and the challenge of maintaining political neutrality have prevented the executive from achieving its full potential in supporting the rule of law.

The **judiciary** is crucial in ensuring the legal system is impartial and effective. The judicial branch interprets the law, resolves disputes, and protects citizens' rights. In Timor Leste, the judiciary has a critical function in safeguarding the **principle of justice** by ensuring that laws are applied fairly and consistently. However, the judiciary faces significant challenges, such as a **lack of independence**, inadequate funding, and insufficient training for judges. Furthermore, the **slow pace** of legal proceedings and the **backlog of cases** have compounded issues of justice delivery. The courts are under-resourced, and many citizens struggle to access legal recourse. Political influence has also been a persistent issue, with some fearing that political considerations may sometimes influence judicial decisions. Despite these challenges, the judiciary remains essential in upholding the principles of the Constitution and ensuring the **rule of law**, even as it continues

to evolve and build its capacity to function independently and effectively.

3. Challenges to the Rule of Law

While Timor-Leste has made significant strides in legal reform and establishing democratic legal institutions, several important challenges continue to undermine the rule of law and hinder the full development of a robust legal system. These challenges are deeply embedded in the country's legal and political fabric, and overcoming them requires targeted efforts from all branches of government and civil society.

One of the most persistent challenges in Timor-Leste's legal system is the **weak capacity of the judiciary**. Although efforts have been made to establish a fair and impartial judicial system, the judiciary remains underfunded and understaffed, which limits its ability to handle the increasing number of cases and uphold the principle of justice. There is a shortage of trained legal professionals, and many judges lack the skills and resources to handle complex legal issues effectively. This shortage often results in delays, with cases lingering in the court system for extended periods, which diminishes public confidence in the judicial system. Moreover, the judiciary's limited independence from political influence remains a critical issue, with some fearing that political considerations may interfere with the impartiality of judicial decisions.

Limited access to justice is another significant barrier to effectively applying the rule of law in Timor-Leste. While the Constitution guarantees access to justice for all citizens, many people, particularly those living in rural or remote areas, face significant challenges in accessing the judicial system. Courts are often far from many communities, and legal representation is prohibitively expensive for most of the population. Many Timorese citizens rely on **customary law**, especially in rural areas, but this system can sometimes conflict with national legal principles, creating confusion and inconsistencies in legal practices. Furthermore, **gender-based violence**, land disputes, and corruption remain rampant in some areas, leaving vulnerable populations, particularly women and indigenous communities, without adequate legal protections.

Finally, one of the most persistent challenges in Timor-Leste's legal system is the **lack of harmonization between customary law and national law**. Customary law holds significant influence, especially in rural areas, and often governs many aspects of social life, including family law, inheritance, and land disputes. However, frequent conflicts exist between customary practices and the legal norms in the Constitution and national legislation. The legal framework has not yet fully resolved how to harmonize these two systems to respect traditional customs while ensuring that the rights of individuals, particularly vulnerable groups, are protected by national law. The absence of a clear legal framework for integrating customary law with formal legal systems leads to uncertainty and legal gaps that undermine the effectiveness of the rule of law.

CONCLUSION

Legal politics in Timor-Leste play a crucial role in building a strong democratic system. Although various legal reforms have been carried out, there are still challenges in harmonizing the law and strengthening law enforcement institutions. Therefore, commitment from all parties is needed to increase the effectiveness of legal policies in supporting democracy and the rule of law in Timor-Leste. It is recommended that Timor-Leste prioritize the development of a comprehensive legal framework that aligns with international standards, enhances the capacity of law enforcement agencies, and fosters greater public participation in legal reforms. Furthermore, strengthening judicial independence and ensuring transparency in the legislative process will be key to achieving long-term stability and justice within the country.

For future research, it would be valuable to explore the impact of legal reform on public trust in the judiciary and the role of international cooperation in strengthening Timor-Leste's legal framework. Further studies could also focus on evaluating the effectiveness of current legal policies in addressing emerging issues such as corruption, human rights protection, and access to justice. Comparative studies with other countries that have undergone similar legal transitions may also provide valuable insights for improving Timor-Leste's legal and political systems.

REFERENCE

- Deuskar, C. (2019). Clientelism and Planning in the Informal Settlements of Developing Democracies. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 34(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0885412219842520>
- Finkl, C. W., & Makowski, C. (2021). Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (East Timor), Timor Sea Coast. *Journal of Coastal Research*, 100(sp1). <https://doi.org/10.2112/jcr-si100-beach-038.1>
- Hunter, L. Y., Rutland, J., & King, Z. (2020). Leaving the Barracks: Military Coups in Developing Democracies. *Politics and Policy*, 48(6). <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12383>
- Johnston, M. (2023). Building Peace, Rebuilding Patriarchy. In *Building Peace, Rebuilding Patriarchy*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197637999.001.0001>
- Kolodyazhny, M. G. (2021). Entities of international legal provision of traffic safety. *Theory and Practice of Jurisprudence*, 2(20). <https://doi.org/10.21564/2225-6555.2021.2.244351>
- Lipstein, K. (2024). Collection of Essays. In *Collection of Essays*. <https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-162945-7>
- Mugnier, C. J. (2023). Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste. In *Coordinate Systems of the World*. <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003307785-200>
- Nahak, S., Widia, K., & Perman, A. (2020). Kesadaran Hukum Warga Masyarakat Terhadap Penegakan Hukum Di Wilayah Perbatasan Negara Republik Indonesia Dengan Negara Demokratik Timor Leste. *Postgraduate Community Service Journal (PCSJ)*, 1(1).
- Nuttall, R. (2021). Political continuity and conflict in East Timor: A history of the 2006 crisis. In *Political Continuity and Conflict in East Timor: A History of the 2006 Crisis*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003131502>
- Okafor, O. N., Adebisi, F. A., Opara, M., & Okafor, C. B. (2020). Deployment of whistleblowing as an accountability mechanism to curb corruption and fraud in a developing democracy. *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, 33(6). <https://doi.org/10.1108/AAAJ-12-2018-3780>
- Pangastuti, M. (2022). Quality analysis of village fund management on the development program's success in Letneo Village, Insana Barat District, Timor Tengah Utara Regency. *Fair Value: Jurnal Ilmiah Akuntansi Dan Keuangan*, 4(8). <https://doi.org/10.32670/fairvalue.v4i8.1058>
- Priyanto, D., & Diwyanto, K. (2014). Pengembangan pertanian wilayah perbatasan Nusa Tenggara Timur dan Republik Demokrasi Timor Leste. *Pengembangan Inovasi Pertanian*, 7(4).
- Rumiarta, I. N. P. B., Astariyani, N. L. G., & Amaral, A. M. (2022). The Comparative Law On The Distribution Of Power In The 1945 Constitution Of The Republic Of Indonesia And The Constitution Of The Republic Of Timor Leste. *Jurnal IUS Kajian Hukum Dan Keadilan*, 10(3). <https://doi.org/10.29303/ius.v10i3.1134>
- Shiba, K. E. (2023). Developing Democracy. In *Getting Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003445005-16>
- Tilman, C. B. (2023). Revision Constituicional The Constitution Of Democratic The Republic In Timor-Leste. *American Journal of Medical and Clinical Research & Reviews*, 02(03). <https://doi.org/10.58372/2835-6276.1028>
- Verkhovets, S., & Sahin, S. B. (2024). Democratisation and Social Conflict in Timor-Leste: A Not So Great Transformation. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 54(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2022.2128854>
- Wescott, H., Ferri, D., & MacLachlan, M. (2023). Participation, Legal Capacity, and Gender: Reflections from the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Project in Serbia. *Disabilities*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.3390/disabilities3010010>
- Winarna, A., Supriatna, T., Wasistiono, S., Sulistyani, D., & Program, S. (2022). Government Collaboration In Belu Regency In Improving Institutional Capacity of The Land Border

- Area Republic of Indonesia-The Democratic Republic of Timor Leste. *Online) International Journal of Social Science (IJSS)*, 2.
- World Bank Group. (2019). Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste Country Partnership Framework (CPF). *World Bank Group, Report No. P134792-TP*.
- Y. Amtiran, P., U.T. Anabuni, A., & S. Neno, M. (2022). Cross Border Trade: Strategy and Policy (Evidence from Cross-Border Trade in the Republic of Indonesia and the Republic Democratic of Timor-Leste). *GATR Journal of Business and Economics Review*, 7(3). [https://doi.org/10.35609/jber.2022.7.3\(2\)](https://doi.org/10.35609/jber.2022.7.3(2))



© 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY SA) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)