



Rui Graça Feijó

# Dynamics of Democracy in Timor-Leste

The Birth of a Democratic Nation,  
1999-2012

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*Rui Graça Feijó*

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To the memory of David B. Goldey (1936-2014)  
My friend

*It is impossible to understand a country without seeing how it varies from others.*

*Those who know only one country know no country.*

– Seymour Martin Lipset

*A country is likely to attain democracy not by copying the constitutional laws or parliamentary practices of some previous democracy, but rather by honestly facing up to its particular conflicts and by devising adaptative procedures for their accommodation.*

– Dankwart A. Rustow

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# Foreword

*Nancy Bermeo*<sup>1</sup>

*Dynamics of Democracy in Timor-Leste: The Birth of a Democratic Nation, 1999-2012* presents a vivid and panoramic view of an emerging country's attempt to build both a new state and a new democracy simultaneously. Though state-building is, predictably, still underway, Timor-Leste has made remarkable strides towards the construction of a viable democracy. Democratic institutions, such as unions, courts, parties and a free press, remain underdeveloped, but Timor-Leste's freely elected governments and constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of assembly, association and worship are vibrant enough to place the country above the minimal threshold for democracy (Freedom House 2014; Kingsbury 2014b: 187, 193-195). The 2012 parliamentary elections were deemed 'free and fair' by 'internationally recognised standards' (Kingsbury and Maley 2012) and a United Nations mission recently described the country as a 'place of peace, democracy, celebration and optimism' (United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste [2012] in Swenson 2015).

Given the country's deeply troubled history, even qualified success is a remarkable achievement. When Timor-Leste gained independence in 1999, the deck seemed stacked against democratization. Four hundred and fifty years of Portuguese colonization, plus nearly a quarter of a century of Indonesian annexation, had left the nation with a tiny middle class, few formally educated leaders and one of the poorest economies in the world. The legacies of internal war made the likelihood of successful democratization seem even more remote. The Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN), and later on the broad umbrella for the Resistance, the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT), had mobilized broad popular support and had eventually secured independence but only at enormous human cost.

The tragedy unfolded in December 1975 when, less than a month after securing independence from Portugal, the country was invaded by Indonesia. FRETILIN's slogan of 'Independence or Death!' proved to be much more than political rhetoric as Indonesian forces met with unexpectedly fierce resistance. The official figures for lives lost in the fighting and famine

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that ensued have been computed as high as 183,000 (CAVR 2005: 9-11) from a population that, by 1975, barely reached 600,000 individuals.

Even when the Indonesian dictatorship led by Suharto fell and a new Indonesian government agreed to let East Timor decide its own fate through a 1999 Referendum, violence continued. Between 5,000 and 6,000 people were killed by anti-independence Indonesian paramilitaries (Taylor 1999: xxiv), and over 75% of the East Timorese population was displaced (Chopra 2000: 27). The violence was accompanied by a brutal campaign of arson which caused massive damage to multiple towns and cities (United Nations Security Council 1999). In the capital Dili 'hardly any buildings were left undamaged' (United Nations Security Council 1999). State structures collapsed alongside physical structures. The judiciary, for example, had ceased to exist, and eventually had to be rebuilt from the ground up. Eyewitnesses report that the first-ever East-Timorese jurists received their robes in the burnt-down shell of Dili's courthouse (Strohmeyer 2000: 263-264).

Even after the worst of the violence ceased, the situation continued to be bleak. Lethal fighting between groups of East-Timorese occurred frequently in Dili and Bacau throughout January 2000 (United Nations Security Council 2000) and UN Peacekeepers fought skirmishes with militia groups throughout the summer of 2000 (United Nations Security Council 2001).

Continual fighting decimated the country's educational infrastructure, destroying an estimated 95% of schools and causing 70-80% of the predominantly Indonesian senior administrative staff and secondary school teachers to flee the country (Millo and Barnett 2004: 722). When the country faced its first free elections in 2001 only 43% of its population was literate (Millo and Barnett 2004: 47), and over 40% of the population lived on less than US\$0.55 per capita per day (United Nations Development Program 2002: 16-17).

In short, Timor-Leste started life with few if any established state institutions, a ruined infrastructure, frail physical security, and with most of its buildings burned to the ground. When regional animosities within the military led to massive urban rioting in 2006 many observers assumed Timor-Leste's inchoate democracy would take the route so many poor democracies had taken in the past and simply disintegrate. The fact that it has endured so long is a telling story of democracy against the odds.

What explains this surprisingly positive outcome? Rui Graça Feijó is uniquely well suited to offer us an answer. Combining an Oxford University doctorate with years of practical policy experience in East Timor and elsewhere, his analysis has much to offer scholars and policy-makers alike. Six lessons stand out: five are highlighted explicitly in the chapters of the

volume, on democracy, constitution-making, elections, semi-presidentialism and decentralization. A final lesson, on the weight of institutional and normative factors in explaining the longevity of poor democracies, emerges as a synthesis of the others.

Chapter One forces us to ponder what democracy is (and is not) and thus to ground our classification of Timor-Leste (and its success) in a carefully crafted definitional construct rather than in wishful thinking. Alongside a comprehensive and original overview of the term's roots and myriad meanings (covering terrain from Athens to Iceland to Gettysburg), Feijó argues persuasively for a concept of democracy based not so much on the delivery of goods but rather the mechanisms in place to deliver them. He goes on to insist on 'a concept that is generated by real people for the use of real people, not an aseptic one crafted for angels and saints', and ends at an abstract level defending a definition incorporating vertical and horizontal accountability. Democracy exists where elected rulers are vertically accountable to a sovereign and inclusive citizenry or 'people' but also subject to horizontal controls from 'different branches of government so that each one exerts some form of limitation on the powers of the others'.

Operationalizing his theoretical construct through practical indicators from the work of Schmitter and Karl (1991) on the one hand, Cheibub, Alvarez, Limongi and Przeworski (1996a) on the other, he illustrates conclusively that Timor-Leste is indeed a democracy. In fact, it exceeds the minimal standard in that it has witnessed not simply one alternation in power, but two. While larger and older post-conflict democracies such as Namibia and South Africa have not yet managed to change their ruling party even once, tiny Timor-Leste has developed a truly competitive political elite.

In the opening chapter and elsewhere, Feijó focuses on the extent to which Timor-Leste has become a polity where citizens are empowered to make important decisions and can exercise control over those temporarily given the right to rule. In doing so he suggests that the design of Timor-Leste's democratic institutions, particularly its electoral process and its semi-presidential system, have given citizens the power to shape their polity, most notably in establishing the president as a figure independent of party politics.

Feijó does not believe Timor-Leste's democracy is unshakeable. He believes, for example, that the country is in great need of institutions that merge traditional local power relationships with the standards of democratic governance, and of a reform of the judiciary to remove a debilitating presence of foreign citizens. In general, however, the picture he provides is of a state that has empowered its citizens through the creation of

accommodating and inclusive institutional structures which have enabled them to exercise control over their political destinies.

By attributing the functioning of Timor-Leste's democracy to the ability of its instruments of governance to incorporate a diversity of views, Feijó highlights how the design of specific institutions might best affect the likelihood democratic durability. The constitution is the first of these and in keeping with the realistic perspective that permeates the study as a whole, Feijó shows that the constitution-writing process was less than ideal.

The process of constitution-making in Timor-Leste began while the country was still under the control of the UN Transitional Authority. This was, understandably, a highly contentious state of affairs in a new nation born of an independence movement, with the UN officials being perceived by many as foreign and therefore illegitimate rulers. Feijó argues that the approach to constitution-making adopted by the UN officials 'alienated significant sectors of the elite and introduced a major gap between the ruling group and wider sectors of the population'. Though the Transitional Authority made efforts at what came to be known as 'timorization', it ultimately set aside long-standing demands for a longer and more widely consultative constitution-writing process and opted instead for 'the quickest and least expensive exit'. In this, it was fully supported by FRETILIN, the only widely established political party in the country, and thus the group that was bound to win legitimate majority support in a quick election. Elections for a Constitutional Assembly were held in August 2001 (less than a year after UN security forces were still trying to contain conflicting militias). Moreover, the Assembly was given only six months to produce the constitution itself. Predictably, the outcome of the Constitutional Assembly was controversial. Promises to include input from the consultative assemblies organized hastily throughout the country were never met, and important institutional structures were left ill-defined. Most controversially, the Assembly turned itself into a national parliament for five years, thus delaying the opportunity for broader participation. In the end though, the rushed process of constitution-making proved not to be a fatal flaw. On the one hand, the new nation's widely popular leaders, Xanana Gusmão and José Ramos-Horta, chose to live within the constitution's parameters. On the other hand, electoral and executive institutions played compensatory, positive roles.

Feijó's analysis of Timor-Leste's elections is much less critical than his analysis of constitution-making. He shows us how 'free and fair elections' became 'inscribed in the genetic code' of Timor-Leste and thus a major source of systemic legitimation. Voters go to the polls at levels consistently

higher than the norm in established democracies and 'have taken pride in doing so'. Through adopting proportional representation, an inclusive franchise and an independent electoral administration (which organized voter registration) Timor-Leste was able to create elections that served two purposes. First, they linked the Timorese people to democratic institutions providing a sense of ownership. Second, they were viewed by elites as acceptable means of dispute resolution. In addition to making these points, Feijó shows that the pattern of voting in Timor-Leste's two presidential elections (in 2007 and 2012) both reinforced and reflected a popular desire for presidents who did not belong to parties. Citizens thus enjoyed at least two links of inclusion; one based on party choice and another based on the often more important link to particular individual leaders.

Semi-presidential executive institutions are one of the major means through which national leadership links to the citizenry and this too helps explain Timor-Leste's democratic durability. At the most fundamental level, semi-presidentialism has the advantage of giving the citizenry two means of linking themselves to executive power: if their preferences are not directly reflected in one office they may be reflected in the other. But Feijó goes beyond this. Based on an extensive review of the literature on semi-presidentialism in general, Feijó categorizes Timor-Leste as an example of the presidential-parliamentarist version of semi-presidentialism and argues persuasively that this institutional arrangement has served as a 'conflict regulator' providing an arena to 'frame and contain' dangerous differences within established institutional boundaries. More specifically, he illustrates how Timor-Leste benefits from having what Robert Elgie calls an 'independent president' within its semi-presidential regime. An independent president is one that 'does not hold the current leadership of any political party' and 'whose role is defined in such a way as to make clear that his position is not of either rivalry or active support to any prime minister'. Moving from theory to concrete illustration, Feijó illustrates how, in 2006, Timor-Leste experienced a period of intense animosity between the president and the prime minister but that this was resolved without any rupture to the constitution. Feijó suggests this is because the president and prime minister both never acted as though the dismissal of the prime minister by the president was a viable option, and links this to the widespread beliefs, expressed both through election results and official appointments (made by the president), that the president should be a figure above politics. Of course, this positive outcome assumes a commitment to constitutionalism and compromise on the part of the 'independent president' as an individual. Feijó is explicit about not attributing too much causal

weight to institutional engineering alone and rightly ends his argument with a call for more research.

The final institutional discussion of the book focuses on Timor-Leste's abortive process of decentralization, meaning the creation of a middle level of governance between village-level authority and the formal central state. Despite being promised in the constitution and despite being sought to enhance public service delivery, popular participation and 'opportunities for the government to get closer to the people', all of Timor-Leste's governments have failed to even hold municipal elections much less establish mid-level units of the new state.

Feijó rejects arguments that this long delay is due to inadequate human or material resources. He attributes it instead to both the vested interests of bureaucratic actors who benefit from the status quo and to the difficulty of recognizing the legitimacy of autochthonous institutions while creating a broader and truly encompassing 'civic' community. Eschewing crude dichotomies here (as he does throughout the text), Feijó highlights the complex nature of legitimacy at the local level in Timor-Leste, where belief in the importance of electoral legitimacy coexists with an attachment to the customary authority of traditional elites. The conclusion drawn is that if Timor-Leste is to proceed with democratic reforms, it must create systems that make space for these customary authorities within a context that is still democratic.

Here then, as is the case throughout the book, Feijó argues that in making democracies, we must assess the value of the systems built by their inclusivity, i.e., by the extent to which they truly embrace 'the people' through the inclusion of multiple perspectives. Inclusiveness is key for only this will allow the society in question to adopt, not just the outer trappings of democracy, but also its essential *ethos*.

The blend of positive and negative assessments offered throughout Feijó's study makes the analysis ring true. Only some of the author's many themes have been covered in this brief introduction but when taken together, even these five themes yield a sixth set of insights on the very important and broad question of what enables poor democracies to survive. While it would be easy to attribute Timor-Leste's success to the role of pro-democratic international actors from the United Nations, Australia, Portugal and elsewhere, Feijó's focus is clearly on domestic institutions and domestic leaders. Two conclusions emerge from a synthesis of the chapters as a whole. The first is that mistakes can be made; promises can be left unmet and yet, democracies can endure anyway. The second is that individual leadership and the commitment to democracy and the rule of law on the part of charismatic elites

is key to compensating for institutional failures. The nature of Timor-Leste's electoral system and the nature of its divided executive gave the country advantages but the nature of the leadership emerging from the country's long and bloody struggle compensated for shortcomings and exploited the positive aspects of institutional structures. Whether the commitment to preserving democracy will continue as a new generation of leaders emerges remains to be seen. For now, the explanation for Timor-Leste's qualified success seems to derive from a blend of inclusive institutions and the democratic commitment of the leaders who have occupied them. Is this conclusion generalizable? This, of course, requires more research but the centrality of elite commitment born of political learning certainly resonates with recent research from Latin America. As Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán have recently shown, actors' 'normative preference for democracy or dictatorship' plays a central role in explaining regime outcomes. 'If actors are normatively committed to democracy, they are willing to tolerate disappointing policy outcomes [and] less likely to understand policy failures as a regime failure. [...] A normative preference for democracy "extends actors" time horizons' (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013: 272-274). We can only hope that the time horizons of Timor-Leste's leadership remain extended and that this carefully crafted book will be widely read.

# Preface

## Revisiting a success story with critical eyes

After good many years living mostly in obscurity and cut off from international public opinion, an isolation only briefly broken by echoes of such extraordinary events as the Santa Cruz massacre (whose film footage made by Max Stahl had a lasting impact after 1991) or the bestowing of the Nobel Peace Prize (1996) on two illustrious sons of the country – José Ramos-Horta and Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo – Timor-Leste caught the attention of the world in 1999 when its people voted in a UN-sponsored self-determination referendum to break away from the Republic of Indonesia, which was followed by widespread rampage carried out by integrationist militias backed by the Indonesian military. The UN moved in under the floodlights of international scrutiny for a transitional period that ended on 20 May 2002, with a proclamation of independence and the birth of a democratic nation – a story most often portrayed as a major success. In the following years, Timor-Leste faded away from the limelight, only to reappear at times mostly because of political upheaval that threatened the consolidation of democracy (such as the 2006 political crisis that required new forms of international intervention, or the failed attempt on the life of President Ramos-Horta in February 2008), neither of which signified the interruption of the constitutional rule of law.

At a time when similar experiments of democracy-building are being carried out elsewhere (an example that jumps to mind is South Sudan), to examine the political history of independent Timor-Leste can illuminate problems of democratic consolidation in young, poor and post-conflict countries without previous experience with democracy.

One of the innovations brought to the public arena by the case of Timor-Leste was the decision to embark simultaneously in a process of state-building and democracy-building (Tansey 2009). If in abstract, theoretical terms, there is no contradiction between those two processes, they are nevertheless interconnected and impinge one on the other (Linz and Stepan 1996: 24-28). Alas, in the real world not all good things always go together, and the promotion of democracy may, and often does, entail the establishment of conflicting objectives with other concurring projects. Timor-Leste could not escape this fate. Clashes of objectives can occur as an intrinsic feature of democracy-building, when two or more goals that fall under this header are in such a situation that the achievement

of one of them is impaired by the prosecution of the other. One example might be the tension between negotiating power-sharing solutions like the drafting of a constitution that stands to be inclusive, and the organization of free and fair elections that may hamper the emergence of consensus in favour of forcefully ascertaining individual partisan positions (as will be addressed in Chapter Three). Extrinsic conflicting objectives can surface when democracy promotion can be seen in opposition to other desired goals, like building the infrastructures of the state's administrative capacity (and this will be discussed in the framework of the decentralization process in Chapter Six) (see Grimm and Leininger 2012: 397-398). The process of democracy-building in Timor-Leste must therefore pay particular attention to the relationships it established over the years with other structuring political processes in operation. The complexity of the analysis is substantially increased by this circumstance.

A second important feature of the democratization process in Timor-Leste, as I have argued earlier (Feijó 2006), is that the classical route starting with a period of transition from authoritarian rule to be followed by a second stage designated by the term 'consolidation' was somehow distorted. The basic conflict over the quarter of a century of Indonesian occupation was about self-determination and independence. The Referendum of 30 August 1999 cast a decisive vote in favour of independence, and within a few weeks the political landscape had completely changed: the bedrock of the authoritarian regime had vanished with the withdrawal of the occupying military forces. Unlike other situations of a sudden demise of the authoritarian regime – as was the case in Portugal in 1974 when a military coup overthrew the previous regime – when political power ceases to be in the hand of the fading regime but fundamental structures remain in force as they were institutionalized and require fundamental reorganization, in Timor the public administration virtually collapsed with the withdrawal of the Indonesians, which was accompanied by the migration of a very sizeable part of those who supported integrationist policies. The task before the Timorese who were actively preparing for independent life was one of debating among several options within a broadly defined democratic camp, having only traditional forms of political legitimacy to circumvent their horizons. In fact, I have sustained that Timorese nationalism evolved over the occupation period from a rather monolithic revolutionary force into a pluralist nationalism accepting different organized currents of opinion, which was mirrored in the creation of the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT) in April 1998. In this framework, it is difficult to speak of a classical 'transitional period'

during which authoritarianism gives way to the emergence over time of new forms of democratic political organization. A better understanding of the process might be derived from Leonardo Morlino's suggestion of a possible 'democratic installation' in which external factors played a significant role in accordance with an important segment of the local elites (Morlino 2011). The fact that the UN presence was itself non-democratic – as will be discussed in Chapter Three – does not change the picture, as it was 'benevolent' towards the emergence of democracy, indeed one of its own stated goals. For this reason, the short period of elaboration of the democratic rules of the game and the necessary negotiations among the Timorese elite and popular masses implies that the period inaugurated with the proclamation of independence, generally regarded as one of 'consolidation' of the regime that had been designed on paper, would necessitate a protracted time frame to fully develop – one in which some of the tasks normally performed in the transition phase would have to be addressed. Moreover, as Capoccia and Ziblatt have argued, one is better advised to conceptualize democratization 'not as a process that was achieved in single moments of wholesale regime transition, but rather as a protracted and punctuated "one-institution-at-a-time" process in which the building blocks of democracy emerged asynchronously' (2010: 14). The approval of a democratic constitution, important as it was for the positive impact on the country's democratization insofar as it condensates the intentions of the democratic reformers – and intentions do matter – is a clear example of a step that requires a protracted period of translation from the realm of ideas to that of practical institutions, all with a tempo of their own (see Elkins 2010: 971-974).

The central argument of the book is that the instruments to maintain a balance of power and thus create an inclusive consensus beyond the majority/minorities divide, often downplayed in face of procedural features that make political competition visible and offer easy ways of establishing international patterns of democracy, are critical in the Timorese process of democratic consolidation, and that they were not derived ('top-down') solely from constitutional determinations through the unequally developed state administration, but rather required that political actors find ways of actually accommodating political dissent in a system of checks and balances. The process involves not only a discussion of institutional design but also that historical and actual political factors be duly considered. As such, this book should not squarely be framed within rigid disciplinary boundaries, but rather considered as one in which the doors of interdisciplinary dialogue within the social sciences and the humanities are wide open.

For the purpose of this book, a variety of methodological devices are used that embody my assertion. They range from standard practices in political analysis (e.g., electoral behaviour, institutional performance, interviews) to other tools imported from different disciplinary fields in the social and behavioural sciences (case studies, Aron's 'engaged observation', SWOT analysis). Flexible methodologies go hand in hand with the theoretical argument in favour of a complex approach bringing together history, politics and institutional design. For this reason, the book does not claim to be squarely designed according to a strict disciplinary boundary, but rather to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue, being open to the vast field of the social sciences and the humanities.

The book opens with a chapter in which an attempt is made to demarcate the contours of a concept of democracy apt to render the complexities of politics at the outset of the 21st century. This effort is necessary both to set guidelines for the analysis of the empirical reality that is developed in the subsequent five chapters, and to offer a comfortable basis for the establishment of fruitful comparisons. In this sense, I have shied away from proposing yet another 'definition' of democracy, and reverted to the use of some of the most standardized ones found in the academic marketplace. On the one hand, for the sake of simplicity, but also grounded on theoretical assumptions, I propose to use a concept of minimal democracy. On the other, however, I sustain that democracy in the beginning of the 21st century requires a robust concept that is thick and rich, involving procedural instruments in a context dominated by its own ethos.

Contrary to a detective novel, in which the final resolution of the crime is left to the very last paragraph, I assume at the onset of my analysis that the application of the array of definitions at hand converges on the conclusion that Timor-Leste's political system, at the end of its second electoral cycle (2012), qualified as a democracy. This was not a foregone conclusion. Rather, as the 20th century was drawing to a close, the prospects for successful democratization in Timor-Leste were far from even the most optimistic predictions of the vast majority of observers. In spite of the 'third wave of democratization' that is supposed to be a hallmark of the last quarter of the century and to offer a globally favourable setting, Southeast Asia could only show one case of a Free country (according to Freedom House ratings) – the Philippines – and two instances of political improvements in Indonesia (to Partly Free in 1998 and later to Free status in 2006) and Thailand (which became Free in 1998 only to succumb a few years later). Two other countries – Malaysia and Singapore – were considered Partly Free, and five remained Not Free throughout the period. In several circles, the thesis was sustained

that the region was not fit for the exercise of internationally accepted forms of democracy, given the nature of prevalent, underscoring 'Asian values'.

Chapter Two aims at assessing the odds for democratic success of the novel polity. It is well known that the will to develop a democratic regime (which was present both in the minds of critical internal actors as well as in the conditionalities of foreign aid) is not a sufficient condition for success, which requires a combination of different enabling factors. My approach is based on the application of a methodological device commonly used in the business world to analyze the prospects of strategic decisions – SWOT analysis. This method considers both positive and negative factors, as well as internal and external conditions. This exercise enables us to draw a comprehensive picture of the situation against which the tailored design of the democratizing process can better be understood in its relation to the characteristics of Timor-Leste rather than in a 'one-size-fits-all' kind of approach.

A critical part of the democratic nation-building process in Timor-Leste consists of the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) that effectively ruled the country between November 1999 and May 2002, which is covered in Chapter Three. This was a time when key decisions were taken that were to have the most significant implications upon the new country after it became independent. The chapter is devoted to analyzing critical aspects of the 'UN Kingdom of East Timor' (Chopra 2000), namely the model adopted under the influence of the United Nations Department of Peace Keeping Operations (UNDPKO) that reduced the Timorese contribution to the role of advising the UN staff, and the key issue of establishing the procedures for drafting a new constitution for the country (which were subject to a very lively debate). Important debates inside the Constituent Assembly will also be considered, namely those that centred around the choice of a government system. Constitutional and para-constitutional provisions had significant impacts on the ensuing process of democratic consolidation – some positive, some less so. An assessment of those impacts constitutes the last section of this chapter.

Elections are inscribed in the genetic code of the new nation, as the whole process leading to its independence was started with an internationally supervised Referendum, and followed by two massively participated elections: for the Constituent Assembly (2001) and the President of the Republic (2002). They were followed by two rounds of national elections both for parliament and the presidency (2007, 2012), all having met basic criteria of freedom and fairness according to international standards. The fourth chapter will review those elections in order to offer a broad view

over the whole electoral process, arguing that elections have established themselves as the critical element through which the evolution of the political landscape has evolved. This implies that key elements pertaining to the framework under which they are staged (from definitions regarding the electoral administration and the registration of voters, to the system of converting votes into mandates) be duly analyzed. In brief, this chapter aims to address the central issue of the relationship between elections and the consolidation of democracy.

Timor-Leste's constitution has adopted as its governing system what is commonly designated as 'semi-presidentialism' – a solution that is increasingly popular in democratizing countries of the 'third wave' but scarcely represented in this area of the world. Academics still debate the most appropriate classification of the Timor-Leste regime – among others, Kingsbury (2014a), Reilly (2011), Shoemith (2007), Vasconcelos and Cunha (2009) – but it remains true that a popularly elected President of the Republic coexists with a prime minister who is responsible before a parliament that is also elected by popular vote. This is quite singular in the region, as no other ASEAN country has opted for this model. In line with what I have been suggesting, Chapter Five will argue that this form of government system was generally well adapted to the Timorese circumstances (although the precise definition of presidential powers and the balance between those and the prime minister's could have been better drafted). The emergence of 'independent presidents' above party competition in a context characterized by low levels of institutionalization of most constitutional organs of power contributed significantly both to foster an inclusive approach that transcended the parliamentary dichotomy of government and opposition and to add a new layer to the mechanisms of checks and balances that are at the core of democratic polities.

Success at building a democratic regime at central, national level has not yet been extended to the construction of the lower levels of the state administration. Right now, a process is underway that is supposed to lead to the establishment of elected administrations at the level of the 13 districts into which the country is divided. This will also have important reflexes on the organization of power at grassroots level (*sukus* and *aldeias*). Both paradigms of political legitimacy – one related to historically rooted principles of social organization, the other pertaining to the modern conceptions based on universal suffrage – will be called to the fore in the negotiation of practical solutions in order to secure that democracy can be read as an instrument of empowering the people to control political power. These issues are dealt with in Chapter Six.

The book will close with an Epilogue containing some considerations on the challenges that face Timor-Leste in its quest to root democracy: the generational turnover, the capacity to build transparent mechanisms of wealth distribution, the ability to extend the success of central administration to lower levels of governance closer to the daily lives and expectations of the people, and the Herculean task of establishing a decent judicial system in order to sustain the rule of law.