

Timor Leste

Ethnicity in Timor Leste

Group selection

As ethnicity is deemed Irrelevant according to EPR coding rules, the **East Timorese** are considered as one group since the country became independent from Indonesia in 2002.

Power relations

At first sight, there are two main points on which this coding could potentially be questioned:

On the one hand, Timor Leste is, unlike the two Koreas, ethnically or racially heterogeneous. Indeed, many sources list different ethnic groups, such as the Tetun (majority), Mambae, Tukudede, Galoli, Kemak and the Baikeno, who are of Malayo-Polynesian descent and located mainly in the west of the country, and the Bunak, Fataluku and the Makasae, who are of Melanesian or Papuan descent and located mainly in the east. There is also a small Chinese minority. The majority (90%) practice Catholicism, while there are small Muslim, Protestant and Animist minorities. 16 different indigenous languages, as well as Portuguese and Bahasa Indonesian, are spoken (⁴⁵¹⁸; ⁴⁵¹⁹).

On the other hand, the longstanding rivalries between people living in the east and people from the west are often explained on the basis of “deep seated ethnic and regional differences” (⁴⁵²⁰; also mentioned in World Directory of Minorities (⁴⁵²¹)). While these tensions had somewhat subsided to being an “occasional aggravating factor” by the time of independence (⁴⁵²², 2004-2006), they flared up again during the 2006 national crisis. This was triggered by growing socioeconomic pressures as well as brutal clashes between government troops and disaffected former members of the security forces, who predominantly came from western regions, over perceived discrimination and ethnic favoritism within the government (⁴⁵²³; ⁴⁵²⁴; ⁴⁵²⁵, 2006).

However, on closer investigation, these aspects are either not relevant to EPR coding or not wholly accurate:

Although there are different ethnic groups, ethnicity is emphasized by the US Department of State (⁴⁵²⁶, 2001-2013) as largely irrelevant in East Timorese politics: the country’s small ethnic minority groups are well integrated into society, and citizens of minority ethnicity are not precluded from holding office. For some time,

⁴⁵¹⁸ [East Timor Government, 2012]

⁴⁵¹⁹ [Minority Rights Group International, 2007]

⁴⁵²⁰ [Mercer, 2006]

⁴⁵²¹ [Minority Rights Group International, 2007]

⁴⁵²² [US Department of State, 2001-2013]

⁴⁵²³ [Mercer, 2006]

⁴⁵²⁴ [Minority Rights Group International, 2007]

⁴⁵²⁶ [US Department of State, 2001-2013]

both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense were members of ethnic minority groups. However, the exact number of representatives of the different ethnic groups in parliament and other government positions is uncertain “because self-identification of ethnicity was not a common practice” (⁴⁵²⁷, 2008-2010).

Regarding the tensions between east and west, which have anyway gradually subsided since 2006 (⁴⁵²⁸, 2001-2013), the World Directory of Minorities (⁴⁵²⁹), for example, writes that while the use of the “ethnic” tag is convenient, it also does not seem to be completely accurate as those from the west and those from the east are of various, overlapping ethnic groups.

⁴⁵²⁷ [US Department of State, 2001-2013]

⁴⁵²⁸ [US Department of State, 2001-2013]

⁴⁵²⁹ [Minority Rights Group International, 2007]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Timor Leste

From 2002 until 2017

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
East Timorese	1.0	IRRELEVANT

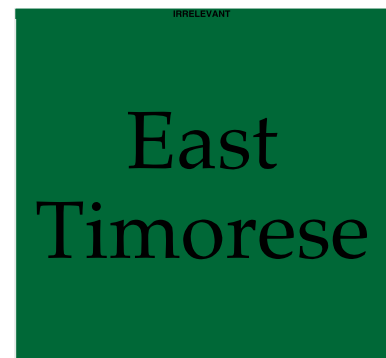


Figure 923: Political status of ethnic groups in Timor Leste during 2002-2017.