



East Timor — Va-PoReg Country Report

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[officially known as Timor-Leste]

08/18/1860 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Portugal]: The first Portuguese settlers arrived in Timor-Leste in the mid-1500s. The Spanish arrived soon after, in 1522. The Dutch took possession of the western portion of the island in 1613. The British governed the island in 1812–1815. The Dutch and the Portuguese fought for supremacy over Timor, and Portuguese sovereignty over the island’s eastern half was settled by the “Treaty of Demarcation and Exchange Some Portuguese Possessions and Dutch in the archipelago of Solor and Timor” that was ratified on 08/18/1860.¹ Timor became a Portuguese colony thereafter and remained under colonial rule until 1975 (Olsson 2009). Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Universal suffrage was absent (LIED). Both LIED and V-Dem’s PCLI indicate that political liberties were absent.

12/17/1941 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Portugal, Right-Wing Autocracy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [of Australia, Electoral Democracy]: During World War II Australia aimed to prevent Japanese expansion by deploying troops to the island and East Timor was occupied by Dutch and Australian forces in the Battle of Timor. UK negotiated a withdrawal of Australian and Dutch troops with the neutral government of Portugal, but the Japanese invasion occurred before the materialization of this agreement.²

05/09/1942 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Australia, Electoral Democracy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Japan, Constitutional Monarchy]: On this day, Portuguese Timor was invaded by Japanese forces (Olsson 2009). Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Moreover, political liberties remained absent by LIED and V-Dem’s PCLI. Universal suffrage was absent (LIED).

09/05/1945 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Japan, Constitutional Monarchy]/Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Portugal, Right-Wing Autocracy]: After World War II, Timor-Leste was returned to Portugal when on this date, the Japanese commanding officer entered into negotiations with Portuguese Governor Manuel Ferreira de Carvalho, leading to the restoration of power to the governor and placing the Japanese forces under Portuguese jurisdiction (Olsson 2009).³ Timor was subsequently annexed as an overseas province of Portugal, forcing it back under colonial rule.⁴ In 1953 universal suffrage was introduced (LIED). In 1960, Timor was recognized as a non-self-governing territory by the UN with the right to self-determination (Strating 2014: 476). Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Additionally, both LIED and V-Dem’s PCLI indicate political liberties as absent for this colonial period.

On 04/25/1974 the Estado Novo regime in Portugal was overthrown (see Portugal) and the new government had the goal of decolonization (Olsson 2009).⁵ Timorese political parties were legalized in April 1974 resulting in a dispute between major players, the Timor Democratic Union and Fretilin. A brief civil war emerged, in which members of the colonial police and Timorese soldiers of the Portuguese Army participated as well.⁶ Despite the brief civil war, the Portuguese colonial authority still existed, and thus this period is coded as colonial rule. Based on our observations, only multiparty legislative elections were held during this

period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Besides, political liberties were absent according to LIED and V-Dem's PCLI.

12/07/1975 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Portugal, Liberal Democracy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Indonesia, Military Autocracy]: Following the civil war, Fretilin unilaterally declared East Timor's independence on 11/28/1975. However, a few weeks after the proclamation, Indonesia invaded East Timor on 12/07/1975 (Strating, 2014: 477) against the will of the Portuguese authorities. Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Political liberties remained absent (LIED), while V-Dem's PCLI changed to not really present.

07/17/1976 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Indonesia, Military Autocracy]/Start Part of Other Country [of Indonesia, Military Autocracy]: On this date Timor was annexed by Indonesia as the Timor Timur province which was not recognized by the UN nor any other country, except for Australia (Olsson 2009). Instead, Portugal continued to be recognised as the legitimate administrative power. An estimated number of 180.000 deaths was reported for the 24-year period that Indonesia ruled East Timor.⁷ For this regime period both LIED and V-Dem's PCLI indicate the absence of political liberties. According to LIED no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held.

10/25/1999 End Part of Other Country [of Indonesia, Military Autocracy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [as International Mandate]: On this date, Timor came under UN administration (Olsson 2009). The Australian-led military intervention, called 'International Forces in East Timor' (INTERFET), was deployed on 09/20, after consultations of conflict parties including Indonesia. Indonesian civilian administration and military troops were withdrawn from the island with the last troops leaving on 10/31 (Olsson 2009). The UNTAET mission's scale surpassed previous UN peacekeeping endeavors. UNTAET wielded considerable authority during this time. Tensions arose between the objectives of establishing effective governance and rapidly preparing the territory for democratic self-rule. Governance was highly centralized, with limited focus on enhancing local capacity.⁸ Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Per FH's evaluation for this regime period, the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. Additionally, political liberties are coded as absent (LIED) and as somewhat present in 2000 and 2001 according to V-Dem's PCLI.

08/30[-31]/2001 End [de-facto] Direct Rule Occupation Regime [under International Mandate]/Start Electoral Democracy [under International Mandate]: On this date, pre-independence elections to the constituent assembly were held in East Timor on 08/30-31/2001 under UN administration. The result was a victory for Fretilin, which won 55 of the 88 seats. Following the election, the Constituent Assembly nominated a transitional Council of Minister.⁹ A new constitution was promulgated in March 2002 and Presidential elections were held in April 2002, again under UN administration, which were won by Gusmão who became the first President of East Timor.¹⁰ With the 2002 constitution, universal suffrage was established.¹¹ On 05/20/2002, the Democratic Republic of East Timor became formally independent. On 06/30/2007 the first post-independence parliamentary elections were held. Fourteen parties contested in the election which were conducted based on proportional representation with party lists.¹² The 2022 elections were, according to the BTI and FH, fair and free with a strong intuitional basis,¹³ however legal and procedural transparency is still undermined by ambiguities and would benefit from reforms.¹⁴ Over the past years since independence, Timor-Leste has held free and fair elections and undergone several peaceful transfers of power. Therefore, this period is coded as democracy. According to FH, however, several weaknesses remain concerning the stability of democratic institutions and disputes among the major personalities from the independence struggle still exist in the political domain.¹⁵ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Since 2001, LIED categorizes elections in the country as competitive. From 2001 to 2016, V-Dem's EF&FI scored elections as somewhat free and fair, after 2016 as free and fair. V-Dem's CEI scored their electoral cleanliness as ambiguous between 2002

and 2006, as somewhat afterwards. V-Dem's CEI scored the elections as clean. As per FH, for 2001, the country receives a score of 8, which we interpret as falling into the rather not free category. Between 2002 and 2016 a score of 6 to 7 designates the country as partly free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather free. From 2017 onward it receives a score of 5 as free, which we categorize as rather free. In addition to that, political liberties were absent for the entire time according to LIED, while V-Dem's PCLI scores them as somewhat present in 2001 and from 2015 to 2017 and in the remaining years even full political liberties are indicated. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority.

Electoral Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Lisbon_\(1859\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Lisbon_(1859))

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Timor-Leste#Portuguese_rule

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Timor

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portuguese_Timor

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portuguese_Timor;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1973_Portuguese_Timorese_Legislative_Assembly_election

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portuguese_Timor

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Timor_independence

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_East_Timor#:~:text=East%20Timor%20became%20formally%20independent,UN%20on%2027%20September%202002.

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001_East_Timorese_parliamentary_election

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001_East_Timorese_parliamentary_election

¹¹ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/East_Timor_2002

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007_East_Timorese_parliamentary_election

¹³ <https://bti-project.org/de/reports/country-dashboard/TLS>

¹⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/timor-leste/freedom-world/2023>

¹⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/timor-leste/freedom-world/2022>

References

Olsson, Louise (2009): Gender Equality and United Nations Peace Operations in Timor Leste. Leiden: Brill.

Strating, R. (2014): Contested Self-determination: Indonesia and East Timor's Battle over Borders, International Law and Ethnic Identity, in: The Journal of Pacific History 49, 469–494.