James Scambary, *Conflict, Identity, and State Formation in East Timor 2000–2017*.

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In *Conflict, Identity, and State Formation in East Timor 2000–2017*, James Scambary provides a detailed study of conflict in East Timor since the country's independence in 2002. Through a multidisciplinary approach that combines anthropology and political science, and drawing on a decade of field work, the author explores the dynamics and connections between local and national conflicts, the role of multiple actors in these conflicts and their various and fluid identities, and how informal relations drive decision-making in the contours of power. While the political crisis that in 2006–2007 shook the young nation forms the book's central backdrop, Scambary's analysis goes beyond this single episode to discuss the root causes of violence in the country.

The core argument of the book is that the main frameworks that have been used in the literature to study conflict in East Timor, and which are still being used by international organizations to design their programs and interventions, overlook its complexity. Scambary argues that post-independence scholarship has adopted a number of master narratives, mostly focused on simplified macro-level explanations, to describe and understand conflict. However, these master narratives oversimplify the different layers of the problem and result in a skewed perspective on it. For instance, the 2006–2007 crisis is routinely described as the result of a one-off, sudden explosion of violence, caused by poor state building, ethnic tensions, and elite rivalry, and carried out by quasi-criminal groups and disgruntled youth. Scambary argues that this is an oversimplified and inaccurate understanding of those events and of conflict in general in East Timor. He argues that the 2006–2007 crisis is part of a continuum of violence that pre-dates the country's independence and that continues up to this day. Violent events such as the 2006–2007 crisis are not the result of a single root cause or set of root causes that become visible at one single moment, but are instead the outcome of multiple, fluid, and ongoing conflicts at the local level that, for various reasons described by author, are present in Timorese society. Under the right circumstances these local conflicts can escalate, and local actors use this escalation to settle their private grievances and vendettas under the guise of a wider national conflict.

Therefore, Scambary argues that to adequately understand conflict in East Timor it is essential to consider an array of highly localized cultural, historical, social, and political factors that shape grievances at the local level (Chapter 2), and understand how these localized grievances interplay with national-level conflict. In this analysis, Scambary pays special attention to what

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he calls 'informal security groups', referring to the broad spectrum of organized groups that (claim to) provide security to their communities and yet are also a source of instability. Focusing specifically on veterans and martial arts groups (Chapter 4), as well as urban youth groups, clandestine groups, and gangs (Chapter 5), the author gives a detailed account of the origins, functioning, and membership of these groups. He shows how each group provides different identities to its members, and how group membership contributes to escalating localized and personal disputes into broader conflicts.

The second argument of the book is that the same highly localized cultural, historical, social, and political drivers of conflict mentioned above have also contributed to the emergence of vertical and horizontal networks of clientelist relations that continue to shape the access and use of power in the country. Through these clientelist relations, votes at the local level are mobilized by brokers such as war veterans and 'big-men' figures, in exchange for advantages such as highly lucrative construction contracts or employment. The connection between clientelism and violence is clear: the relations that mobilize votes are the same that can mobilize violence when needed. Scambary argues that the 2006–2007 violence can be seen as the initial emergence of these clientelist relations at national level, more than the result of a failed UN intervention.

Scambary's book is likely to appeal to various audiences. His breakaway from the more common analysis of conflict in East Timor brings a new and well-argued perspective that challenges past analyses and deserves to be considered by those studying conflict in the country. Those researching conflict elsewhere will find in this book a convincing argument regarding the role of local-level dynamics in national-level conflicts, and therefore new paths of inquiry into the explanations for conflict. Finally, this book should also interest anyone studying the politics of East Timor. Scambary's detailed description and analysis of the different Timorese informal security groups and their main actors is unique in the literature, and provides fresh insight into an element of Timorese society that remains mostly invisible to, and ignored by, outsiders. The claims made by Scambary regarding how informal structures influence power and social relations open new lines of inquiry for researchers studying many other fields, such as land rights, justice systems, corruption, and democratization. Even those who might disagree with some of Scambary's claims will at least be challenged by this well-argued and researched work.

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