



Sovereignty and Food Politics in East Timor

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ABSTRACT. With the outbreak of the 2006 crisis, food security became intertwined with peacekeeping and the political struggle over state power in East Timor. Today, efforts to address food security have been hijacked by the political interests of the current government and the private interests of those in power. This article provides a brief historical overview of food (in)security in East Timor and then outlines the development of national agricultural and food security policy, arguing that in the face of weak state capacity, rice imports have come to serve the political and private interests of the current government.

KEYWORDS. East Timor · rice imports · food insecurity · state capacity · political elites

INTRODUCTION

At the time of independence in 2002, the new government of East Timor made food security a priority. The National Development Plan set targets for increasing the production of basic food crops—particularly rice, corn, cassava, and other tubers—and reducing the country's dependence on imported food. Despite these good intentions, little was done to increase planted area, improve yields, maintain irrigation systems, encourage the consumption of traditional staples, or support rural producers. With the outbreak of the 2006 crisis, food security became intertwined with peacekeeping and the political struggle over state power. Today, efforts to address food security have been hijacked by the political interests of the current government and the private interests of those in power. This article provides a brief historical overview of food (in)security in East Timor and an outline of the development of national agricultural and food security policy, arguing that in the face of weak state capacity, rice imports have come to serve the political and private interests of the current government.

INDIGENOUS CROPS, NEW WORLD CROPS, AND RICE

Little is known about Timor prior to the arrival of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century and the Dutch in the seventeenth century. What we do know with some certainty is that the combination of poor soils and low rainfall made food security an ever-present concern. Small amounts of rain-fed rice were grown in coastal areas, and dry rice was cultivated in pockets of the mountainous interior. The staple crops, however, consisted of a wide variety of tubers. This is best illustrated by the *talas* plant (Malay: *kaladi*; Latin: *Colocasia Schot*). For more than three hundred years the Kingdom of Sonba'I, located in the western part of the island, has used two crossed *talas* leaves as its royal symbol.¹ New World crops, of which corn and cassava were the most important, were introduced by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and spread rapidly. Sweet potatoes, *talas*/kaladi, cassava, and other traditional crops continued to serve as security crops, but rice and corn were invested with greatest ritual significance. Among the Atoni of West Timor, for example, the term *Liurai-Sonba'i* (ruler of Sonba'i) is used in ritual speech as a synonym and metaphor for rice and corn, neither of which may be named directly (Schulte Nordholt 1971, 55, 91).

Food security was a central concern for the early Portuguese settlements on the north coast. Documents from the eighteenth century make repeated reference to food shortages and include desperate pleas made by the governors of Timor and Solor to the city senate (*Leal Senado*) in Macau and the King of Portugal for provisions. Consumption patterns also came to define relations between the Portuguese settlements and the indigenous population in the interior. In 1720, for example, during a drawn-out dispute between the governor, the bishop, and the leaders of the Catholicized "Black Portuguese" community in Lifau, a group of leading residents sent a letter to the bishop, who had sailed to the island of Flores, threatening that if he attempted to return they would summon the *caladas* (i.e., kaladi, or tuber-eaters) from the mountains to help defend the settlement. Six years later, in 1726, during a major indigenous uprising in the central mountains against the white overlords, the Portuguese referred to the rebel kingdoms as *callades*, again in reference to their staple crop (Kammen 2010). The most desperate reference to rice appeared in 1768-1770 when the ongoing state of rebellion forced the Portuguese governor to abandon the settlement of Lifau and establish a new capital in Dili. Following the move, Governor Moniz de Macedo sent a letter to King João IV of Portugal begging him to order the city of Macao to send trade items to

Dutch Batavia (Jakarta) to be exchanged for 1,200 piculs (approximately 81 metric tons) of rice, which was then to be shipped to Dili to support the new settlement (Meneses 1974).

During the late nineteenth century, large quantities of rice were imported annually to feed the small number of Portuguese officials, the somewhat larger number of colonial troops (many from the crown's African possessions), to assist loyal indigenous "vassals", and for the rapidly expanding Hakka (Chinese) communities concentrated in coastal towns. Official statistics from the 1880s show that cloth, rice, alcohol, and gunpowder accounted for the vast majority of all imports, with rice averaging 20 percent of the total value of all imports (*Boletim Oficial Macau e Timor*). The picture that emerges is of a feeble colonial regime dependent on a combination of local produce obtained as "tribute" from indigenous vassals and imported food. The vast majority of the population in the interior subsisted on a combination of tubers, corn, and cassava, and the annual lean season was an ever-present threat.

In addition to the horrific human rights abuses, the twenty-four-year Indonesian occupation of the territory set in motion fundamental changes in agricultural practices and consumption patterns. The invasion resulted in large-scale displacement of the population, first upward into the mountains and later downward into Indonesian-controlled resettlement camps. The disruption of traditional agricultural practices, in turn, caused widespread famine in 1979-1980; this was probably the single largest cause of loss of life during the entire occupation. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Indonesian government made a concerted effort to increase agricultural production in the territory. Extensive tracts of new paddy land were opened; irrigation systems were built; and new seed varieties, fertilizers, and some mechanization were introduced. Rice production increased steadily, reaching more than fifty thousand metric tons of rice per ton in the 1990s (*Timor Timur dalam Angka*). The shortfall in local production was easily made up for by the Indonesian state logistics agency (*Bulog*), which imported large quantities of rice from Indonesia and set market prices. During the occupation, per capita rice consumption increased dramatically, in part because of availability and in part because of the spread of the Indonesian attitude that one had not eaten properly unless one had consumed rice.

Across more than four centuries, therefore, food insecurity has been a constant concern of both subsistence producers and those laying claim to central authority. With the restoration of independence

in 2002, the unavoidable reality of poor soils, irregular rains, and low agricultural productivity was compounded by unrealistic expectations that with sovereignty would come an era of plenty.

FROM INDEPENDENCE TO FOOD DEPENDENCY

In May 2002, the new government released an ambitious National Development Plan that included calls for agricultural self-sufficiency (Komisi Perencanaan 2002). The Ministry of Agriculture determined that per capita food consumption was 90 kilograms of rice and 105 kilograms of maize per year.² Official documents in 2002 cited widely divergent means of calculating domestic rice production. The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries used an unrealistically high figure of 2.9 metric tons of rice produced per hectare but a low figure for total harvested land to estimate total national rice output at 38,340 metric tons. In contrast, the Timor Living Standard Survey used a far more realistic figure of 1.54 metric tons harvested per hectare but a far higher figure for total harvested land to estimate total annual rice production of 54,302 metric tons of paddy, or 35,296 metric tons of milled rice (Komisi Perencanaan 2002). Although rice production is reported to have increased, it was not sufficient to meet domestic need. As a result, between 2002 and 2005 the country relied on private sector imports of roughly forty thousand metric tons of rice per year. Despite the sustained deficit of staple food crops, a report written by a United Nations adviser to Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri optimistically noted that rice imports decreased between 2004 and 2006 (Risopatron, n.d.).

The 2006 political crisis—triggered by divisions within and between the army and the police, but also spilling over into communal fighting in the capital—resulted in the internal displacement of well over one hundred thousand people into makeshift camps. Looters raided shops throughout Dili and emptied the rice reserve in the National Logistics Center warehouses. With the disruption of cross-border trade with Indonesia and the temporary suspension of shipping, vital food imports were temporarily cut off.

Three key aspects of the crisis had an impact on food security. First, from the outset, this was defined as a political crisis, and hence would require a political solution. While the opposition to Fretilin was able to force Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri to resign and to quickly secure a UN commitment to establish a new mission, calls for the dissolution

of the parliament were scrapped in favor of waiting for a parliamentary resolution. This meant that internally displaced persons (IDPs) were to remain in the camps and remain dependent on humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, paralysis within the state meant that few if any serious efforts were made to address the country's food security.

The second issue concerns the handling of the huge number of IDPs. Under the coordination of the Ministry of Labor and Community Reinsertion, the World Food Programme (WFP), and international NGOs, a program was initiated to supply rice and other basic foods to the tens of thousands of IDPs. By August there were 168,000 IDPs, half of whom were in squalid camps in Dili while the other half had fled to their home areas. Charges soon surfaced that the number of IDPs was grossly inflated, in part because some IDPs had registered twice or thrice and some people who had not been displaced from their places of residence had also managed to register. Political leaders made periodic calls for IDPs to vacate the camps, but in each instance these were soon followed by statements that this was not in fact mandatory.

Third, food security planning and the issuing of rice contracts were deeply flawed. In September, the Ministry of Agriculture announced a USD 14 million plan to purchase domestic staple crops as part of a national food reserve. Because of conflicts between different ministries, the original plan was scrapped, and in early October a new program was announced under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Development. Although the possibility of government-to-government agreements was explored, this was found to be unfeasible. The new plan involved the establishment of a Food Security Logistics Center with a total budget of USD 7.59 million, of which USD 1.02 million was allocated for the purchase of domestic crops; the remainder was to be spent in three tranches on the purchase of imported food (*Suara Timor Lorosae* 2006a; *Timor Post* 2007b). The final program design called for the government to sign contracts with private sector companies in Dili for the import of rice. These contracts, granted without an open tender, were plagued by accusations of nepotism and corruption.

In November 2006, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry published a document titled "National Food Security Policy for Timor-Leste." The opening sentence reads: "Food insecurity in Timor-Leste has been one of the main concerns of the first government after gaining independence because a high share of the population suffers from lack of food, in quantitative and qualitative terms" (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 2006, 1). The report

notes that Timor-Leste only produces two-thirds of its national requirement for the three major staple crops (rice, corn, and cassava), but it fails to provide any data on total production and consumption. Remarkably, this document does not even mention the establishment of the Food Security Logistics Center under the Ministry of Development. Subsequent statements by ministers suggest that the transfer of this program created friction within the government.

While the government food security program was being set up, the food supply remained dependent on humanitarian assistance provided to IDPs and on private sector imports of white rice. In early October, a number of Dili businessmen made shocking public statements that commercial rice warehouses in East Timor had been empty for the previous two weeks (*Suara Timor Lorosae* 2006c, 2006d). Various reasons were cited. Violence in Dili discouraged shippers from agreeing to enter Dili, and fears increased after IDPs from the camp facing the port looted rice from the wharf. The reduction of working hours at the port, which had previously operated twenty-four hours a day, to a single eight-hour shift, meant that unloading could take three times as long, with fees to be paid for more than three days of docking.

Despite these problems, rice imports were remarkably robust in late 2006. In October, Timor Food Trading Company imported shipments of 2,050 and 3,600 metric tons of rice from Vietnam (*Suara Timor Lorosae* 2006b), and between November 1, 2006 and January 31, 2007 three companies imported a total of 10,406 metric tons of rice (*Suara Timor Lorosae* 2007a).³ In addition, the World Food Programme continued to import rice to meet humanitarian needs, and the government of Japan donated 1,200 metric tons of rice to be distributed by WFP (*Suara Timor Lorosae* 2006e).⁴ But by early February 2008, rice had become scarce throughout East Timor and prices had risen to USD 30 and higher for a 38-kilogram sack. Prime Minister Ramos-Horta held a highly publicized meeting with the Chinese ambassador in East Timor to discuss the purchase of five thousand metric tons of rice to provide for “the hungry population” (see *Timor Post* 2007c). Other government officials rushed to assure the public that rice imports were on their way.

While the people of East Timor waited for answers, if not rice, the Minister of Labor announced that a government program to sell rice (borrowed from WFP) at USD 0.40 per kilogram would begin on February 22, 2008 (*Timor Post* 2007a). But still with no rice to be found, violence erupted. Angry Dili residents attempted to break into

government warehouses—in one case looting seven hundred sacks of rice. International peacekeeping forces, which were sent to Timor in May 2006 in response to the onset of the political crisis, took to the streets to restore order. Over the course of three days, fifty UN vehicles were stoned, as too were countless more government vehicles. Even the start of the government's "market intervention" (a euphemism for subsidized sales by the government) drew an angry response. In Dili's Villa Verde neighborhood, a crowd attacked the village head, Andre Fernandes. "They threw a spear at me, though I was not injured, and then they destroyed my house. They said the rice belongs to the people." He added: "They said that if [government] rice arrives in our neighborhood [to be sold], they will kill me or burn the village office" (quoted in *Suara Timor Lorosae* 2007b).

THE AMP GOVERNMENT AND THE POLITICIZATION OF FOOD

Coming to power in August 2007, the Parliamentary Majority Alliance (AMP) government headed by Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão had campaigned on a platform of resolving the armed conflict, emptying the IDP camps, and stabilizing the economy. The provision of food was central to these objectives. State budget allocations for rice procurement soared: USD 56 million in 2008, USD 38 million in 2009, and, following midyear budget revisions, USD 42 million in 2010. Eager to stimulate the private sector, the AMP government granted contracts to Timorese businesses to import rice, primarily from Vietnam, on behalf of the government. These contracts were granted to political cronies, including the wife of the minister of Economic Development and a company in which the prime minister's daughter owned shares. Profits from these contracts have ranged from 20 percent to 25 percent of the total value of the contract. This has enabled members of the elite to enrich themselves and provided convenient means of buying off key constituencies and even members of the political opposition. The most recent round of contracts in August 2010, for example, was granted to sixty-eight veterans of the armed struggle for independence.⁵

Rice imports have also come to serve populist political needs. The government has subsidized the price of imported rice sold to the public. But distribution mechanisms have been fraught with problems, and there has been extensive profiteering. The rice subsidy mostly benefits urban dwellers and has done the least for those living in rural areas. For example, in the capital, rice is sold at 25 percent above the specified price of USD 9.50 per thirty-five kilograms, while in the

southern districts it sells at 50 percent above the government price. More worrying still, subsidized white rice from Vietnam is being sold at half the price of domestically produced rice, undermining efforts to increase domestic production. Furthermore, figures on domestic production vary widely. The Ministry of Agriculture has reported huge increases in production (seventy-nine thousand metric tons in 2009), and calculated that this year the country only needs to import thirty-one thousand metric tons. These figures are contradicted, however, by the large government contracts (totaling eighty thousand metric tons for 2010) and purchases made by the Ministry of Tourism, Commerce and Industry (La'o Hamutuk 2010, 5).

The political uses of rice and rice contracts have come under increasing scrutiny. In 2010, a parliamentary commission investigated accusations, leveled by the opposition and independent researchers, of nepotism in the granting of contracts, the failure of contractors to meet the full quantity specified in government contracts, and corruption. The commission's report, however, has not been discussed in the parliament and the AMP-dominated parliament claims that the time within which the report can be discussed has elapsed. Without full transparency concerning domestic food production and government contracts and without proper mechanisms for the distribution of subsidized rice, food security will remain a focus of political debate.

Food security in Timor-Leste, as well as elsewhere in the region, is particularly serious at present given meteorological and market predictions for the coming year. Meteorologists are predicting that the 2010-2011 rainy season will be the worst in recorded history. In Timor-Leste, massive floods on the south coast destroyed crops in mid-2010, and the unusually wet weather on the north coast is threatening the current harvest. Meanwhile, the massive fires in Russia and severe floods in Pakistan and south China are driving up global grain prices, and some analysts are predicting that rice prices in mid-2011 may exceed the USD 1,100 per ton reached during the 2008 food crisis. Reduced domestic production in Timor-Leste and soaring global grain prices will put new pressures on the state budget and necessitate new mechanisms to ensure that the population has access to food.

CONCLUSION

If the political uses of imported rice are now clear, it remains to reflect on the fate of domestic producers and the population more generally. The rural population in East Timor engages in subsistence agriculture—

divided between staple crops, vegetable gardens, and animal husbandry—In sum, East Timorese peasants have, in the course of a decade, shifted from being producers to consumers. This, sadly, would not come as a great surprise to the Portuguese governors of the early eighteenth century. ❀

NOTES

1. VOC 1209, folio 186-187, in Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, number toegang 1.04.02, showing a Dutch treaty with Sonba'i signed in 1655.
2. No figures are given for per capita cassava consumption. A 2003 FAO/WFP report estimates per capita food consumption at 90 kilograms of maize, 75 kilograms of rice, and 15 kilograms of cassava. Curiously, subsequent WFP reports use the Ministry of Agriculture figures.
3. Information about the three importers was provided by a confidential source in Dili, February 21, 2007.
4. Note that humanitarian assistance provided by the World Food Programme was distributed to registered IDPs, not the entire population.
5. It is rumored that Gil Alves, minister of Tourism, Commerce and Industry, has sought to pay a flat fee to each of the veterans for their import rights, and thereby stands to pocket an estimated USD 2 million in personal profits.

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