

THE AMBIGUITY OF TIMOR-LESTE'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ASEAN: EXPLORING EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES AND MEMBERSHIP PROCESS CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The presence of Timor-Leste as an independent country but not fully integrated into ASEAN creates a complex relationship ambiguity. This article explores exclusionary practices that hinder Timor-Leste's membership process in ASEAN and the challenges faced in overcoming this ambiguity. Through an analysis of regional political dynamics, the article discusses how ASEAN manages the geopolitical complexities in Southeast Asia following Timor-Leste's independence in 2002. A descriptive analytical approach is used to understand the factors influencing the ASEAN membership process for Timor-Leste. The research highlights the role of ASEAN diplomacy in managing relations with Timor-Leste inclusively, in accordance with principles of sovereignty and regional security. The study concludes that Timor-Leste's membership process in ASEAN faces significant challenges, requiring a long-term strategy evaluation to integrate Timor-Leste effectively. Recommendations include deepening broader regional cooperation, strengthening ASEAN diplomacy, and building more open dialogue with Timor-Leste. These steps are expected to pave the way for resolving relationship ambiguities and enhancing regional stability in Southeast Asia. The parameters used in this research are Institutional Theory supported by a Historical-Comparative Approach.

Keywords: *Timor-Leste, ASEAN, Geopolitical complexities*



A. INTRODUCTION

The impact of the Cold War that haunted Southeast Asia during the 1950s-80s not only affected the Indochina region but also extended to the overseas Portuguese Province. This province borders directly with the Nusa Tenggara Timur Province in Indonesia, now known as the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (RDTL). The transformation of the Associação Social Democrática Timorese (ASDT) party into Fretilin (Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente) on September 11, 1974, led to the identification of the former Portuguese province as a region susceptible to the spread of communist ideology.

On November 28, 1975, Fretilin declared the independence of Timor-Leste. However, the political shift in Timor-Leste at that time had a significant impact on ASEAN's perception of the country. The former Portuguese colony was seen as a communist control zone in Southeast Asia. This was in stark contrast to ASEAN's strong anti-communist stance at the time (Ortuoste 2011).

Before the declaration of independence, Fretilin strongly sought support from ASEAN, a regional organization in Southeast Asia, to achieve Timor-Leste's independence. The fact that all ASEAN member countries at the time were former colonized nations that had recently gained independence made Fretilin believe that they could gain support. However, despite the fact that Fretilin's diplomatic program was built on the same principles of non-alignment, non-intervention, and international cooperation (Jill Jolliffe 1978; Ortuoste 2011), ASEAN countries did not warmly welcome Timor-Leste's aspirations, and on December 7, 1975, Indonesia officially invaded Timor-Leste.

The Indonesian government's decision to invade Portuguese Timor was a significant turning point in the annexation process, considering Portugal had previously pioneered the decolonization of all its colonies in Africa, including Portuguese Timor in late 1974 (Jones 2010a). However, Indonesia's invasion was not without concern for Jakarta over the economic condition of the area, which had minimal income, opening the possibility for Portuguese Timor to seek assistance from the Soviet Union or China, and turning the area into a communist pocket. There was also concern about the return of exiled Bolsheviks to Indonesia to assist separatist uprisings (Bilveer Singh 1996; Jones 2010a).

ASEAN's behavior in the 1970s was seen as deviating far from the principle of non-intervention. Considering the invasion of Dili, the Republic of Indonesia received support from most ASEAN countries, with Malaysia secretly supplying weapons to Jakarta (Inbaraj 1995; Jones 2010a; Rabbitt Roff, Sue 1992). The Philippines and Thailand also prohibited pro-independence fighters from holding meetings in their territories (Ramos-Horta 1987).

In the early stages of restoring independence, Timor-Leste sought to join ASEAN, but issues of poverty eradication and reconstruction of infrastructure damaged by conflict required Timor-Leste to prioritize these problems. This was echoed by Singapore's Foreign Minister Shunmugam Jayakumar in his message to Xanana and Ramos Horta after the restoration of independence in the UN Security Council, advising them to focus more on 'reconstruction and nation-building' rather than ASEAN membership (Ortuoste 2011).

ASEAN's perception of Timor-Leste's commitment to becoming a member of the Regional Organization became more apparent after Ramos Horta was elected President of Timor-Leste and Xanana Gusmão was appointed Prime Minister for the 2007-2012 period. The resolution of armed conflicts between the Police and the Armed Forces of Timor-Leste, as well as ethnic conflicts in 2006, economic reform, good governance, and human resource development became the main priorities of Xanana's government. However, these efforts were still viewed with skepticism by ASEAN, which had previously accommodated the new country in the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as initial steps to familiarize themselves with the dialogue conducted within the regional organization. By

extending Timor-Leste's provisional membership in ASEAN, it sparked curiosity about what ASEAN plans for the new country (ASEAN Secretariat News 2012).

Timor-Leste's efforts have taken a long process to become the 11th member of ASEAN. This new country in Southeast Asia applied for ASEAN membership on March 4, 2011. Until the 31st Summit in Manila, Philippines in November 2017, ASEAN had not yet decided to accept Timor-Leste's membership. In the Chairman's Statement, it was stated that Timor-Leste's membership application was still under review by senior ASEAN officials (Chairman's Statement of the 31st ASEAN Summit 2017). This poses a unique challenge for Timor-Leste in completing ASEAN regionalism (Seixas, Mendes, and Lobner 2019).

The complex relationship between Timor-Leste and ASEAN raises questions about how to define the geographic scope and political identity of a region (Ortuoste 2011). Despite Dili's efforts to join ASEAN, there is no clear indication from ASEAN leaders that they will fulfill the country's aspirations to become part of the highly valued ASEAN Community (Mangku 2017). Additionally, ASEAN's stringent membership procedures have led to direct intervention in Timor-Leste's internal affairs as the country strives to meet the requirements set by ASEAN member states. This process includes an assessment of Timor-Leste's readiness for ASEAN membership by the ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group (ACCWG) (Rifqi Mahardika Putra, Ramadhany, and Sofiyanti Salsabila 2022).

This article explores the ambiguous relationship between Timor-Leste and ASEAN from Timor-Leste's perspective. This relationship began in 1975 when ASEAN rejected Timor-Leste's declaration of independence and supported Indonesia's invasion and annexation of the country. The article also examines ASEAN's exclusivity practices towards Timor-Leste's membership process and compares them to the experiences of other countries in the Indo-China region that were accepted as ASEAN members more quickly. The author uses an Institutional Theory framework and a Historical-Comparative approach to analyze these relationships and dynamics in greater detail and to answer the underlying research question of why Timor-Leste has experienced a longer delay in the ASEAN membership process.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between Timor-Leste and ASEAN has been the focus of research by several scholars over the past decade. Various studies have been conducted to understand Timor-Leste's efforts to become a member of ASEAN.

Ramos Horta, in an interview with Metro TV (2022) stated that Timor-Leste's case in its ASEAN membership is a new phenomenon, considering that this country was already part of ASEAN under the Indonesian government. Long before, Jill Jolliffe (1978) and Ortueste (2011), in their works, described that the membership process of Timor-Leste had been discussed by the country's leaders several months before Indonesia's invasion of the former Portuguese colony. However Ortueste (2011)

added that the domino effect caused by the Cold War led ASEAN member countries to reject the declaration of independence made on November 28, 1975.

Mangku (2017) in his research, underscored that since submitting its official application on March 4, 2011, the country had to face the agreement in the ASEAN Charter, specifically in Article 6, point 3, which states that "the admission of new members shall be decided by consensus by the ASEAN Summit, upon the recommendation of the ASEAN Coordinating Council" (ASEAN 2008). As a result, Timor-Leste had to wait 12 years before being recognized in principle as an ASEAN member (Reuters 2022).

However, this admission process took a relatively long time compared to countries in the Indo-China region. Paribatra (1994) in his writing, stated that during the signing of the Bangkok Declaration in 1967, ASEAN leaders had envisioned a grand vision to make ASEAN a regional, not sub-regional, organization. Therefore, in Tung (2007), Suart-Fox (1998), dan Haacke (2006) it is reported that Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar took less than a year to obtain their membership, counted from the application for membership. Cambodia was the exception, which Jones (2007) revealed took nearly three years to become an ASEAN member due to the violent coup in 1997 by Hun Sen in an attempt to overthrow Norodom Ranariddh.

The initial process of creating One Southeast Asia Nation is explained in the writings of Acharya and Moo-Young (2006) that Vietnam was the gateway to uniting the entire Indochina region by leveraging the end of the Cold War. Acharya and Moo-Young (2006) added that by fostering regionalism, ASEAN has revived old relationships, both commercially, culturally, and politically, as stated by Church (2009) in the book "A Short History of South-East Asia," where most of Southeast Asia has significant influence from Indian and Chinese civilizations. The question now is how ASEAN will respond to Timor-Leste's membership efforts, which, historically, as written by Willam H. Fredrick (2018) is one of the countries within the Austronesian language family or Malayo-Polynesian descent and is geographically located in Southeast Asia.

C. METHOD

To better understand the problems of Timor-Leste's membership in this Southeast Asian regional organization, it is essential to first examine the intricacies of the institution from the perspective of institutionalism theory. According to Jonas Tallberg and Andreas Jönsson, institutionalism theory is an approach that focuses on the role of institutions in regulating the behavior and interactions of states. Tallberg dan Jönsson (2001) also distinguish three types of institutionalism theory commonly discussed in international relations literature; (1) Rational choice institutionalism: a variant of institutionalism theory that focuses on rational thinking in decision-making within institutions. In this theory, decision-making by actors within institutions is based on qualitative calculations of the benefits and costs of available policy options. However, rational choice institutionalism also emphasizes the importance of

institutions in shaping the behavior and decisions of actors. Institutions are seen as enforcers or drivers of collective action that produce desired outcomes. Therefore, rational choice institutionalism views institutions as devices for coordination, control, and conflict resolution necessary to achieve desired results; (2) Historical institutionalism: historical institutionalism is a variant of institutionalism theory that considers history and historical context as crucial in understanding the formation and evolution of institutions. This theory emphasizes that institutions do not emerge suddenly or merely as a result of rational calculations, but are the result of historical journeys and the influence of interrelated institutional and non-institutional factors. In this theory, institutions are considered as outcomes of political struggles and the influence of continuous political forces. Institutions are also seen as places of interaction between different actors and conflicts of interest that must be resolved. Thus, institutional changes usually occur through long and difficult processes, sometimes requiring fundamental social and political changes; (3) Normative institutionalism: normative institutionalism is a variant of institutionalism theory that pays attention to the role of norms and values in shaping institutions and the behavior of actors within those institutions. This theory emphasizes that institutions not only function as places of interaction between different actors, but also as arenas that shape and reinforce mutually accepted norms and values in the international community. In this theory, institutions are seen as arenas where norms and values are formed and agreed upon by the actors involved. These norms and values then shape the behavior of actors within institutions and shape the relationships between countries in the international community (Jönsson and Tallberg 2001).

In the context of ASEAN, if interpreted with the three thoughts on institutionalism theory previously described, it can be understood as the result of the rational interests of its member countries in strengthening economic, political, and security relations in Southeast Asia. In addition, the countries in this region are believed to be actors who play a role in forming and maintaining institutions with the norms established at the beginning of ASEAN's formation, not forgetting that the shared historical factors as colonial states and internal conflicts of each ASEAN member country have an important role in the formation of this regional organization along with its prevailing norms. Therefore, it is a rational choice that every country joining ASEAN aims to achieve broader security, political, and economic goals in this region.

This article will thoroughly examine ASEAN's commitment as a regional institution in realizing One Southeast Asian Nation and views the efforts of Timor-Leste's membership process. To delve deeper into Dili's efforts to become an ASEAN member, the author will use the historical-comparative method (Neuman 2014, 52–53) to analyze ASEAN's perspective on Timor-Leste's efforts to become an ASEAN member by comparing the experiences and historical contexts of ASEAN member countries, particularly Vietnam and Cambodia, when they joined this organization. Therefore, this article begins by examining the reasons why ASEAN's founding actors

saw the significance of the conjuncture (Ortuoste 2011) that occurred in the Indochina region, which changed the understanding of ASEAN's political identity.

In the second step, the author will detail the exclusionary practices that arise from each ASEAN policy towards Timor-Leste's membership efforts by making comparisons with the memberships of Vietnam and Cambodia. This provides an opportunity to find discrepancies from a historical aspect, as well as the ASEAN requirements imposed on Timor-Leste as an obligation that must be fulfilled by the only new country in Southeast Asia that holds high hopes of becoming an ASEAN member for the better future of its country. This raises a major question about ASEAN's efforts in creating a comprehensive regional identity and cohesive attitude towards all countries in the region by adhering to the principle of One Southeast Asian Nation.

In the final part, we will examine the dynamic changes in the ASEAN regional organization with the addition of a new country in this region and its implications for ASEAN's future. Timor-Leste, which was previously an ASEAN member when it was still part of the Republic of Indonesia ([EXCLUSIVE] Timor Leste Anggota Ke 11 ASEAN 2022), after the 1999 referendum chose to separate from Indonesia, ASEAN eventually had to re-engage with Timor-Leste, which is no longer part of Indonesia. As a country with the most fragile political, security, and economic conditions, it will certainly be a challenge for ASEAN in defining ASEAN as a successful and progressive region.

This article will be based on historical records, news sources, reports obtained from ASEAN organizations or bilateral meetings discussing the issue of Timor-Leste and ASEAN, United Nations (UN) donor assistance, and diplomatic correspondence conducted among ASEAN members, Timor-Leste, and ASEAN as an institution.

D. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Long before the arrival of the Portuguese and the Dutch on the island of Timor, the region was already engaged in significant sandalwood trade with traders from East Java and Sulawesi. This network was linked to commercial relations between China and India. This depiction of trade is documented in records published during the Ming Dynasty in 1443. The island is described as having mountains covered with sandalwood trees (Groeneveldt 1960). The Portuguese sailor Daniel Barbosa, one of the first sailors to visit the island of Timor, wrote in 1518 that "there is a great abundance of white sandalwood, which is highly valued by the Moors in India and Persia" (Groeneveldt 1960).

The island of Timor was first visited by the Portuguese only twenty years after Columbus crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1492, specifically in 1515 (Gunn 2000). The initial presence of the Portuguese on the island of Timor is documented in a letter from Rui de Brito Patalim to King Manuel I of Portugal, dated January 6, 1514, informing about ships sailing to Timor (McIntyre 1977). It was only in the second half of the 19th century that the Portuguese began to establish organized colonization on the island of

Timor by setting up trading posts or even protectorates (John G. Taylor 1990). This situation continued until the Carnation Revolution in Portugal. The democratic transition that occurred in Portugal from 1974-1976, precisely during the Cold War, brought about a new regime with new foreign policies (Gorjão 2002). Eventually, Portugal enacted Law No. 7/74 on July 27, 1974, as an effort to grant self-determination rights to its colonies in Africa and Portuguese Timor in Southeast Asia (Almada, Santos, and Pereira 2022).

One and a half weeks after the Proclamation of Independence of Timor-Leste by Fretilin, on December 7, 1974, Indonesia officially invaded Portuguese Timor at that time (John G. Taylor 1990). More than one division of the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) was present in Timor-Leste, supported by Russian-made warships purchased during the Sukarno era, American-made fighter planes and helicopters (Ramos-Horta 1987), as well as military aid from ASEAN member countries such as Malaysia (Jones 2010b; Roff 1992; Sonny Inbaraj 1995). Malaysia's support illustrates how the principle of non-intervention was no longer a magic mantra to explain ASEAN's success as an organization that at the time was still a sub-regional organization (Jones 2012; Paribatra 1994).

The Conjuncture in the IndoChina Region

The formation of ASEAN in 1967 by its five founding countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, took place amidst a highly complex geopolitical conjuncture in Southeast Asia (Syofyan et al. 2024). At that time, the region was facing the growing threat of communism, particularly with the increasing influence of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC). This forced Southeast Asian countries to seek ways to create regional stability and closer economic cooperation. The decision to form ASEAN was not only based on the need to protect their respective national interests but also to anticipate dynamic changes in global politics (Dosch and Kliem 2023).

The Vietnam War, which lasted from 1955 to 1975, was one of the main factors influencing the conjuncture in the IndoChina region (Tung 2007). This conflict involved not only local forces but also global powers such as the United States and the Soviet Union, each supporting different sides (Wah 1997). The impact of this war was immense, not only in terms of physical destruction and casualties but also in terms of political and economic instability in the region. ASEAN saw the importance of expanding its membership to include IndoChina countries as a strategic step to create broader stability (Emmers and Le Thu 2021).

After the end of the Cold War, significant changes occurred in the global political landscape. The disintegration of the Soviet Union eventually led to the emergence of new countries in Eastern Europe and had a significant impact on Southeast Asia, as there was no longer political direction and guidance from Moscow to its allies (Schellhorn 1992). As a result of the changing global panorama in the early 1990s, ASEAN realized the need for extensive transformation and adjustments.

Consequently, ASEAN sought to shift its organizational paradigm from a sub-regional entity to a fully regional one (Buszynski 1992).

In the early 1990s, ASEAN took significant steps in fully normalizing relations with China and Southeast Asian countries, particularly Vietnam (Tung 2007). This step had a major impact on the region, especially in achieving peace, which was difficult to attain after World War II (Tuan 1994). However, Vietnam faced an identity crisis following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc, of which Vietnam had been a part for four decades. This raised concerns about potential political isolation on the global stage, prompting Vietnam to seek new economic partners and assistance to replace the Soviet bloc (Tung 2007).

Long before the collapse of the Soviet Union, precisely at the end of 1978 or early 1979, ASEAN had already taken a firm stance against Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia. This firmness was exemplified by Indonesian Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja's statement on January 9, 1979, condemning Vietnam's actions and calling on the UN Security Council to take immediate action (Kurus 1993). This conflict also forced Thailand to increase its vigilance, as Thailand became ASEAN's frontline in facing Vietnam's military forces in Cambodia at that time (Wah 1997).

Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia fostered new diplomatic solidarity among ASEAN member countries (Wah 1997). s explained by Singapore's Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam: "When we feel that another member country is in trouble, we must speak out. Sometimes it is easier to speak louder when you are far from the contending parties because their hands cannot reach that far. Those who are closer may have to speak softly" (quoted from Kurus 1993).

Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia was a test of ASEAN's commitment to regional order (Buszynski 1992), and ASEAN proved its capability by facilitating the reconciliation of these two neighboring countries through the signing of the Paris Agreement on October 22, 1991 (Narine* 2008).

Vietnam's withdrawal of troops from Cambodia in 1989 was an important step that not only recognized the regional status quo but also demonstrated its commitment to maintaining stability in the region (Tuan 1993). This decision effectively eased tensions between Vietnam and ASEAN, paving the way for improved relations characterized by cooperation rather than suspicion and hostility among all parties (Tung 2007). Alongside efforts to resolve the Cambodian conflict, international relations normalization was clearly seen through the doi moi policy at the sixth National Party Congress in 1986 (Emmers and Le Thu 2021). This policy enhanced economic liberalization and required closer relations with capitalist countries, including ASEAN, although this economic policy was hampered by the Cambodian conflict (Singh 1997).

In the same year, ASEAN also opened its doors to Laos and Myanmar, both of which were accepted as members in 1997 (Paribatra 1994). The acceptance process was not easy, given the challenging domestic political situations in both countries. Laos, with its closed political system and weak economy, faced significant challenges in the

regional integration process (Stuart-Fox 1998). Myanmar, with a long history of political instability and human rights violations, also encountered many obstacles in this process (Cuyvers 2019). However, ASEAN remained committed to promoting the integration of these two countries as part of efforts to create broader regional stability (Paribatra 1994).

Cambodia faced delays in its acceptance process as an ASEAN member due to its unstable domestic political situation. It was not until 1999, after Cambodia's domestic political situation began to stabilize, that the country was finally accepted as an ASEAN member (Haas 1991). Cambodia's acceptance marked the completion of ASEAN's expansion to include IndoChina countries and demonstrated ASEAN's commitment to creating political and economic cohesion in the region (ASEAN and the question of Cambodia 1997).

The process of expanding ASEAN membership also reflected changes in global dynamics at the end of the 20th century (Cuyvers, Chen, and Lombaerde 2019). With the end of the Cold War, ASEAN saw opportunities to strengthen regional cooperation as a way to address emerging challenges such as economic globalization and the threat of terrorism. In this context, the acceptance of IndoChina countries as ASEAN members was a strategic step to strengthen Southeast Asia's position on the global geopolitical map (Broinowski 1990).

Unfortunately, the integration process into this regional organization was not always smooth. There was always some ambiguity in defining a region, including Southeast Asia (Hurrell 1995; Ortuoste 2011). Moreover, political and economic issues became a focal point in the caution exercised by ASEAN leaders in evaluating each new member country. Cambodia became one example (ASEAN and the question of Cambodia 1997), and now Timor-Leste is the second case, although this occurred due to the change in legality principles enshrined in the ASEAN Charter (Rifqi Mahardika Putra, Ramadhany, and Sofiyanti Salsabila 2022).

Therefore, in facing the complex dynamics in the Indo-China region, ASEAN's expansion to IndoChina countries has been a significant milestone in efforts to create political and economic stability. Despite the challenges in the integration process, ASEAN has successfully established itself as a regional entity playing a crucial role in conflict resolution and promoting cooperation. This step not only reflects adaptation to global geopolitical changes but also affirms ASEAN's commitment to building political and economic cohesion in Southeast Asia. Thus, ASEAN's membership expansion not only marks the organization's history but also reflects a strong vision for creating a more stable and harmonious future in the region.

Exclusion Practices Against Timor-Leste

After gaining independence on May 20, 2002, Timor-Leste established four basic principles in international relations, as outlined in the Constitution of Timor-Leste (Parlamento Nasional Timor-Leste 2002), including: (1) upholding national independence, the right to self-determination, the sovereignty of the people over natural resources, the protection of human rights, respect for the sovereignty and

territorial integrity of other countries, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries; (2) building friendly relations and cooperation with all countries, aiming for peaceful conflict resolution, disarmament, the creation of a joint security system, and establishing a new international economic order that guarantees peace and justice; (3) fostering special ties with Portuguese-speaking countries; and (4) establishing friendly and special cooperative relationships with neighboring countries and countries in the surrounding region

These four basic principles serve as a guide for this new country in building its international relations. The first basic principle clearly shows that this new country shares the same basic principles that have long been a legacy of ASEAN, namely the principle of non-intervention. The fourth principle emphasizes that relations with neighboring countries and countries in the region are a priority that Timor-Leste will continue to pursue. However, becoming a part of ASEAN membership is not as easy as Timor-Leste envisioned, and this is very different from what Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam faced at the time. Therefore, in this context, the ambiguity of Timor-Leste's membership in ASEAN becomes a relevant topic to discuss.

In 2011, Timor-Leste consistently applied for ASEAN membership, but this hope has always met with failure. Support for Timor-Leste's membership came from various parties, including scholars, NGO networks, friendly countries, and international organizations such as the ADB. Nonetheless, ASEAN seems to continue to ignore this issue as it prioritizes its main goal of one vision, one identity, one community. Additionally, unclear bureaucratic obstacles, lack of consensus among member countries, and a lack of sense of urgency further complicate this process. As a result, despite Timor-Leste's demonstrated capacity improvements, the country's ASEAN membership remains in prolonged uncertainty (Ortuoste 2019).

The delay in Timor-Leste's membership adds to the long list of efforts by this country to become part of the ASEAN regional organization. Before the Indonesian invasion, Ramos Horta and other diplomats openly sought ASEAN's support for Timor-Leste's independence (Smith 1975). However, ASEAN did not support Timor-Leste's independence and did not welcome its membership idea in 1975 (John G. Taylor 1990). This presents a different picture compared to the membership efforts of IndoChina countries and also shows that ASEAN was still caught in the circle of competition between the two major powers at the time. It is undeniable that Indonesia's invasion of Portuguese Timor at that time was a form of ASEAN's loyalty to the West (Ortuoste 2011). By betraying the principle of non-intervention and firmly not recognizing what had been established by the Special Committee on Decolonization regarding Timor-Leste's status in 1960 as a non-self-governing territory administered by Portugal. Indonesia officially invaded Timor-Leste on December 7, 1975, with the full support (except for Singapore) of other ASEAN member countries (Department of Public Information UNTAET 2002; Special Committee on Decolonization 1961; J.G. Taylor 1999).

During the 1990s, ASEAN managed to avoid criticism from European countries and human rights activist groups (in many countries, including Southeast Asian countries) regarding Indonesia's invasion of Timor-Leste (Ortuoste 2019). During that time, Timor-Leste had been an ASEAN member under Indonesia, which Ramos Horta considered a rare case in the region ([EXCLUSIVE] Timor Leste Anggota Ke 11 ASEAN 2022), because Indonesia eventually had to fight for its former province to become one of the members of the regional organization that Indonesia was a key actor in founding. On the other hand, Singapore, which always abstained from Indonesia's invasion of Timor-Leste, turned to reject Timor-Leste's efforts to become an ASEAN member (PONG 2022).

Singapore's strict assessment of Timor-Leste's ability to become an ASEAN member is surprising, considering similar obstacles were posed by Singapore against Cambodia in 1997, after ASEAN countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, and including Japan had lobbied Cambodia to join (CNN 1998). However, Cambodia needed only two years to be accepted as a member, precisely on April 30, 1999 (Jones 2007). This contrasts sharply with Timor-Leste, which required more than 12 years to be accepted only in principle by the ASEAN family in Phnom Penh in November 2022 (Reuters 2022).

Additionally, Vietnam became the first invader and communist country to join ASEAN after the Cold War, breaking the long-standing theory of International Relations used by Liberals that democracies do not go to war with each other. However, Tung (2002) observed another aspect of this anomaly, noting that China's presence was a greater threat to Vietnam than to its Southeast Asian neighbors. Thus, this new alliance was expected to influence the tensions between China and Vietnam. Moreover, ASEAN warmly welcomed Vietnam's efforts to update its foreign policy by prioritizing harmonious relations with neighboring countries in the region (Tuan 1993).

This reality is in stark contrast to Timor-Leste's membership process in this regional organization. Essentially, Timor-Leste's foreign relations rules reflect all the principles that have been ASEAN's identity all along. Moreover, it is clear that Timor-Leste has fulfilled three of the four requirements outlined in Article 6 of the ASEAN Charter. However, Article 6, Point 2 of the ASEAN Charter regarding "receiving consensus recognition at the ASEAN Summit with recommendations from the Coordinating Council" (ASEAN 2008) poses its own challenge for Timor-Leste to fully secure approval from ASEAN member countries, particularly Singapore as the Coordinator of the Economic Pillar. On the other hand, the obligation stated in Article 5, Point 2 of the ASEAN Charter also must be adhered to by Timor-Leste as a prospective new permanent member, which is to take all necessary steps, including enacting appropriate domestic legislation, to effectively implement the provisions of this Charter and to comply with all membership obligations (ASEAN 2008).

In addition to the obligations stated in Articles 5 and 6, following the ratification of the ASEAN Charter, the institutional assessment process has become

one of the important requirements that must be met by new member countries like Timor-Leste. In this context, the institutional assessment process involves a working group of senior officials evaluating a country's national capacity by examining its political, economic, and socio-cultural implications. For Timor-Leste's membership, ASEAN, through the ASEAN Coordinating Council, established the ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group (ACCWG) to evaluate Timor-Leste's membership application process until it is deemed ready to be endorsed by consensus as an official ASEAN member (ASEAN 2008; Windraskinasih and Afriansyah 2018).

In 2006, João Camara, the Director of Multilateral and Regional Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Timor-Leste, expressed hope that ASEAN would ease the requirements for new countries to join the regional organization. At that time, Timor-Leste had embassies in only two ASEAN member countries, namely Indonesia and Malaysia (Ravichandran 2006). However, after the inauguration of Ramos Horta as President and Xanana Gusmão as Prime Minister, Timor-Leste managed to establish embassies in all ASEAN countries and address security issues in Timor-Leste following the 2006 armed crisis with the support of the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNMIT) (Uesugi 2014). Additionally, human resource development and infrastructure development, including roads, bridges, irrigation, health centers, and schools, became priorities for the sixth constitutional government (Timor-Leste Government 2011).

Three years before Timor-Leste officially applied for ASEAN membership, the country began by establishing an ASEAN secretariat and started cooperating with countries in the region. By using the principle of zero enemies and more friends, Timor-Leste built good relations with countries in the ASEAN region (Rifqi Mahardika Putra, Ramadhany, and Sofiyanti Salsabila 2022). However, in practice, Timor-Leste tended to adopt a more creative pragmatism approach, opening up, seeking solutions, and accepting every requirement given by ASEAN, even though sometimes these requirements were beyond Timor-Leste's capacity as a new country.

A simple example was published by Cardoso (2024) in an article in *The Diplomat* where Cardoso presented the seven ASEAN Road Map requirements for Timor-Leste, which include: first, demonstrating the ability and readiness to implement and comply with the ASEAN Charter, and fulfill ASEAN membership obligations, including institutional capacity to implement and adhere to the ASEAN Community Vision, ASEAN Community Blueprints, and relevant documents; having the ability to implement and comply with all ASEAN agreements, conventions, accords, and instruments based on the three ASEAN Community pillars; establishing a dedicated diplomatic mission to ASEAN in Jakarta; appointing national implementing bodies, focal points, and representatives for ASEAN sectoral meetings and working groups, and ensuring the availability of sufficient English-speaking personnel in all relevant ministries and agencies; establishing bilateral agreements on mutual recognition of official and diplomatic passports with ASEAN member countries, as well as agreements in line with the ASEAN Framework Agreement on

Visa Exemption; preparing financial schemes to meet all financial obligations as an ASEAN member; and ensuring the necessary physical infrastructure and logistical readiness to host ASEAN meetings and accommodate delegations during the rotational chairmanship. It should be noted that this Road Map serves as a guideline for ASEAN to annually evaluate Timor-Leste.

Cardoso (2024) added that some criteria in the ASEAN Road Map, such as criteria 3, 5, and 6, are relatively easy to achieve, while criteria 1, 2, 4, and 7 require more intensive preparation from Timor-Leste and take longer to fulfill. Despite the challenging implementation details, the main conclusion of the Road Map and recommendations given by Sayakane Sisouvong, former deputy secretary-general of ASEAN, is that Timor-Leste must lead its own development. Additionally, efforts to prepare for ASEAN membership must be driven by inter-governmental, inter-business, and inter-community relationships.

It is not impossible for Timor-Leste to create progress for its own country, but this case is different from ASEAN's efforts to address issues in the region. Cambodia has demonstrated how ASEAN is concerned about external intervention in Cambodia's conflict that could disrupt regional order (ASEAN and the question of Cambodia 1997). However, ASEAN seems to ignore Timor-Leste's strategic location, which is sandwiched between two large continents, that could potentially follow the global competition trends of superpower countries, posing new challenges for ASEAN in the future.

In 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Pacific countries, including Timor-Leste. During the visit, several key points were discussed, including free trade agreements, security policies, fishing rights, and "cyber management in the region." This may be common in ASEAN member countries, considering most ASEAN countries are tied to cooperation with China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, the potential issues regarding cybersecurity should be noted, as this issue is part of China's offer to small Pacific countries and Timor-Leste (Ortuoste 2023).

With all the challenges Timor-Leste faces in its efforts to become an ASEAN member, the ambiguity surrounding its membership reflects the complex dynamics in regional diplomacy. Despite fulfilling most of the formal requirements, as outlined in the ASEAN Road Map, the country still faces a lengthy process and enduring complexities. Timor-Leste's experience highlights the importance of adaptation and patience in building regional relationships in Southeast Asia while dealing with increasingly complicated geopolitical dynamics in the region.

Dynamics Changes in ASEAN Post Timor-Leste Independence

The presence of Timor-Leste as a new ASEAN member poses significant challenges in regional integration efforts. Previously, there was no assumption that new countries would emerge in Southeast Asia, ultimately impacting the dynamics of the region. As a newly independent country in 2002, Timor-Leste entered ASEAN with an economy and infrastructure far behind that of other members. This necessitates ASEAN to develop new mechanisms that can support Timor-Leste's

economic growth and integration into the established regional economic framework. Timor-Leste's integration also raises questions about ASEAN's readiness to accommodate countries with varying levels of development. The main challenge is how ASEAN can ensure that this integration process not only focuses on economic policy harmonization but also addresses the institutional and infrastructural capacities needed to ensure equal participation in regional dynamics..

In 2011, Timor-Leste officially applied to become the 11th member of ASEAN, with full assistance and support from its neighbor, Indonesia (Reuters 2022; Rifqi Mahardika Putra, Ramadhany, and Sofiyanti Salsabila 2022). This application is reasonable considering Timor-Leste's cultural and historical ties with Southeast Asia and its geographic location in the region. However, despite strong support, the membership process is not without challenges. This relates to the shift in ASEAN's commitment to accepting new members, transitioning from pre-ASEAN Charter to the adoption of the ASEAN Charter (Windraskinasih and Afriansyah 2018). This is a new condition applied to Timor-Leste for the first time, differing from the membership process of CLMV countries.

The presence of Timor-Leste as a new ASEAN member highlights the complexity of regional integration in Southeast Asia. The country joined with an economy and infrastructure far behind other members, raising questions about ASEAN's readiness to accommodate countries with diverse development levels. While ASEAN has adopted the ASEAN Charter to guide more structured integration, the real challenge lies in the harmonization of economic policies as well as the development of institutional and infrastructural capacities that support Timor-Leste's equal participation in increasingly complex regional dynamics. In this context, ASEAN needs to develop inclusive strategies that not only promote Timor-Leste's economic growth but also strengthen solidarity and cohesion within the ever-evolving ASEAN community (Rifqi Mahardika Putra, Ramadhany, and Sofiyanti Salsabila 2022).

Furthermore, the presence of Timor-Leste as a new ASEAN member also poses significant challenges in regional integration efforts. Ortuoste, in his publication in *Asialink*, stated that the presence of Timor-Leste would add difficulty in realizing the ASEAN Economic Community, which is expected to be highly integrated and cohesive, competitive, but also strong and people-focused. This opinion is supported by several experts, highlighting that Timor-Leste will face difficulties in bearing ASEAN membership costs, which will automatically delay its membership process. This condition clearly affects Timor-Leste's economic growth.

To address these challenges, ASEAN needs to consider more inclusive strategies. Ortuoste (2023) added that ASEAN should be open to being a source for Timor-Leste to access intra-regional trade and other economic cooperation to maintain stable economic growth. This is crucial given the declining oil production expected to run out in the coming decades. With strong support and close cooperation, Timor-

Leste can more easily integrate into ASEAN and contribute to the regional economic community.

As a regional institution, ASEAN has its considerations, faced with increasingly complex global developments. Currently, ASEAN has reformed by adopting the ASEAN Charter and transforming into a multidimensional organization (Mulia 2023). This new development distinguishes current ASEAN from the ASEAN of 40 years ago. Therefore, we can assume that membership expansion is a natural occurrence, but the process is not as simple as when ASEAN last embraced Cambodia. Thus, Timor-Leste will find its challenges in this process, especially as ASEAN focuses on strengthening community building to achieve the three pillars: ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community, and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, requiring Timor-Leste to make improvements in every sector to meet the seven key points outlined in the ASEAN Road Map (Cardoso 2024; Pitakdumrongkit 2022).

Moreover, ASEAN seeks to project an image as a region managed by competent countries, but Timor-Leste's instability worries its neighbors. Additionally, although Timor-Leste receives strong support from Jakarta, the necessary consensus among member countries has not been achieved, reportedly due to Singapore's objections to admitting a poor and institutionally weak country like Timor-Leste while ASEAN's economic integration process is still ongoing. Some also believe that Timor-Leste's close relationship with China is a strong reason for Indonesia's firm support for Timor-Leste's membership process (CHONGKITTAVORN 2011).

At the 2006 Shangri-La Dialogue, Australian Defense Minister Brendan Nelson stated that the region could not allow Timor-Leste to become a failed state that could become a haven for transnational crime, terrorism, and cause humanitarian disasters and injustice (Ortuoste 2011). Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister, Najib Tun Razak, also expressed concern about the potential disintegration of Timor-Leste's political structure and emphasized that ASEAN should play a role in the peace process in Timor-Leste in line with the ASEAN Security Community vision (Dobell 2006). ASEAN is also hesitant to admit new members as it already faces difficulties in integrating its new members, and some policymakers do not want Papua New Guinea to reapply for membership (Ortuoste 2011).

Timor-Leste's new approach to regional integration reflects significant changes in its foreign policy. One crucial aspect of this approach is recognizing ASEAN's important role in the international economic and political context. Additionally, building friendly relations with neighboring countries is seen as a strategy to create a stable and conducive external environment for economic development and strengthen relations with major powers (Tuan 1994).

Therefore, with Timor-Leste's arrival as a new ASEAN member, the regional dynamics of Southeast Asia face a significant test in integration efforts. This newly independent country joins with economic and infrastructural challenges that demand ASEAN to develop new mechanisms to ensure sustainable integration. While ASEAN

has adopted the ASEAN Charter to support more structured integration, the real challenge lies in the harmonization of economic policies and the development of institutional capacities that support Timor-Leste's equal participation in increasingly complex regional dynamics. In addressing this, ASEAN needs to continue its inclusive strategy that not only promotes Timor-Leste's economic growth but also strengthens solidarity within the ever-growing ASEAN community.

E. CONCLUSION

The ambiguity surrounding the relationship between Timor-Leste and ASEAN highlights the complex dynamics in Southeast Asian geopolitics. Since gaining independence in 2002, Timor-Leste has actively sought full membership in ASEAN as a crucial component of its foreign policy strategy aimed at enhancing regional stability and promoting integration. However, Timor-Leste's accession process has faced various challenges rooted primarily in ASEAN's internal prerequisites, which emphasize consensus and internal cohesion. Although Timor-Leste has met most of the technical criteria, such as commitments to democratic principles and human rights, the outcome of its membership efforts is often determined more by political negotiations within ASEAN than by legal or technical considerations alone.

A study of the exclusionary practices that Timor-Leste may have experienced reveals the intricate political calculations inherent in ASEAN's membership procedures. ASEAN policies tend to prioritize internal stability and collective unity over the aspirations of newcomers, highlighting that Timor-Leste's journey toward full ASEAN membership requires adept political negotiation to secure consensus among member countries with differing interests and priorities.

This ambiguity underscores the ongoing challenges ASEAN faces in navigating an evolving geopolitical landscape. Timor-Leste's accession process tests ASEAN's regional solidarity and institutional resilience. Despite Timor-Leste's steadfast adherence to ASEAN's core values of peace, stability, and cooperation, there remain differing views among ASEAN members regarding the timing and extent of Timor-Leste's accession.

In conclusion, ASEAN must continuously reassess its membership framework and decision-making mechanisms to accommodate the ever-changing geopolitical dynamics while upholding the principles of cohesion and consensus that underpin its collective strength. Timor-Leste's efforts to become a member highlight the importance for ASEAN to adopt inclusive strategies that foster dialogue, consensus-building, and adaptability to global geopolitical shifts impacting Southeast Asia. Through these measures, ASEAN can effectively promote regional peace, stability, and inclusive economic progress across its member countries and beyond.

Overall, the ambiguity in the relationship between Timor-Leste and ASEAN reflects the complex political dynamics in Southeast Asia. For Timor-Leste, the main challenge is how to navigate these dynamics by strengthening diplomacy and political negotiations to build consensus within ASEAN. Therefore, Timor-Leste's journey toward full ASEAN membership is not only a technical process but also a test of

ASEAN's ability to integrate a new country with diverse political dynamics in the region.

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