In the course of 1999, East Timor was the scene of terrible political violence. Between early January and late October at least 1,200 civilians, and perhaps as many as 1,500, were killed. Some were shot dead, while others were decapitated, disemboweled, or hacked to death with machetes. Many were subjected to torture and ill-treatment. Women and girls suffered rape and other crimes of sexual violence. The systematic violence fueled the forcible displacement of the population on a massive scale. By the time the violence ended, an estimated 70% of the country’s infrastructure had been burned or destroyed and at least 400,000 people, or more than half of the population, had been displaced.

The violence took place against the backdrop of a UN-sponsored referendum on the political status of East Timor, a former Portuguese colony occupied by neighboring Indonesia since 1975.\(^1\) The vast majority of the victims were real or suspected supporters of independence, and the perpetrators were overwhelmingly members of East Timorese anti-independence militia groups, and Indonesian Army soldiers. Some supporters of continued Indonesian rule were targeted and killed by the pro-independence armed guerrilla force, Falintil (Forças Armada de Libertação Nacional de Timor Leste – Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor), though on a much smaller scale.

The worst of the violence followed the announcement, on September 4, 1999, that 78.6% of the population had voted for independence. Over the next few weeks the capital city, Dili, and other towns were burned to the ground. Warehouses, shops, and homes were looted, their contents loaded onto trucks and commercial ships and taken to West Timor. The UN compound in Dili came under siege for a period of ten days. Real or alleged

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\(^1\) From June to September 1999, I served as a Political Affairs Officer at the UN headquarters in Dili. I returned to Dili in November 1999 to assist in briefing international and domestic human rights investigations. This paper is based in part on observations made in the course of that work.
supporters of independence, including religious leaders, were shot or hacked to death. Then, almost as swiftly as it had begun, the violence stopped, shortly after a UN-sanctioned military force was deployed to East Timor in late September.

Indonesian authorities have claimed that the militias formed spontaneously in response to provocation by pro-independence activists in late 1998; that the violent ‘clashes’ of 1999 stemmed from irreconcilable differences among East Timorese; and that the Indonesian security forces did their utmost to contain the violence. Some officials have also argued that the violence was the result of timeless cultural patterns. In early 2000, for example, a senior Indonesian Army officer, Major General Zacky Anwar Makarim, told journalists that the violence had been part of an Indonesian cultural pattern of ‘running amok.’

There is a grain of truth in these explanations. East Timorese were deeply, though not evenly, divided on the question of independence, and their differences did have deep historical roots. At the same time, the official explanations are unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. For one thing, they obscure the fact that the events of 1999 were only the final act in a story of systematic political violence in East Timor that reached back to 1975, and which had already left some 200,000 people dead. They also take no account of the broader international political environment in which that the long history of violence played out, and which arguably both facilitated it and brought it to an end. Finally, they ignore substantial evidence that the militias were mobilized and controlled by the Indonesian Army.

Just as important as what they ignore, the various official explanations fail to account for significant patterns and variations in the political violence of 1999 – or what may be called its underlying dynamic. Most obviously, those explanations offer no convincing account of the deeper origins of the violence. Nor do they describe or explain the

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2 This case has been forcefully expressed by the military commander for East Timor until mid-August 1999, Brig.Gen. Tono Suratman, Merah Putih: Pengabdian & Tanggung Jawab di Timor Timur. Jakarta: Lembaga Pengkajian Kebudayaan Nusantara, 2000.

3 The General told journalists: “What happened there was part of the culture of people who ran amok, so that was an emotional outburst.” The Jakarta Post, January 5, 2000. He was also quoted as saying: “There
distinctive forms the violence took in 1999. Moreover, like most explanations of violence that are rooted in notions of a timeless culture, they have great difficulty explaining the significant temporal and geographical variations in the violence. Finally, they tell us nothing at all about the patterns of violence by the pro-independence side, and how those patterns affected the overall dynamic of violence in 1999.

This paper seeks to provide a more satisfactory account of these patterns and variations. It begins by placing the events of 1999 in historical and political context, briefly tracing the roots of conflict. It then examines the main patterns and variations of violence, looking first at the main strategies, repertoires and technologies, then at temporal variations in the violence and finally at its geographical distribution. The paper focuses on the pro-Indonesian militia groups and the Indonesian armed forces, because they were the main perpetrators of the violence. In the final section, however, the focus shifts to the violence perpetrated by the supporters of independence, especially the pro-independence guerrilla force, Falintil.

In its simplest form, my contention here is that the political violence in East Timor in 1999 was neither spontaneous, nor conditioned primarily by psychological urges, ancient hatreds, or cultural pre-dispositions, as Indonesian authorities have claimed. Rather, it was shaped by the long history of state-sponsored violence in Indonesia and East Timor; by structural conditions such as geography and the character of the Indonesian state; by the shifting interests of key foreign states and international institutions; and by the deliberate actions and strategic calculations of those in positions of political power, on both sides of the conflict.

A similar cluster of factors appears to offer the best explanation of the patterns and variations of political violence in other cases of ‘civil war’ in Indonesia, most notably the mass killings in 1965-66, and the chronic civil conflicts in Aceh and West Papua.4

were murders and arson by militias and soldiers as individuals. It’s part of the amok culture of Indonesian society. But it was not something done systematically’. South China Morning Post, January 5, 2000.

Without suggesting that East Timor’s experience is typical, then, I hope that this account may point the way toward some more general conclusions about the origins and dynamics of political violence in other contexts.

1. Origins of Violence

One of the defining features of the violence in 1999 was that both its perpetrators and its victims were overwhelmingly East Timorese. In that sense, the conflict might reasonably be called a civil war. Yet, for a number of reasons that characterization is somewhat misleading. Most importantly, it implies that the origins and dynamics of the violence were driven strictly by conflicts among East Timorese. The reality is that the conflict had its origin in a botched process of decolonization from Portugal, in a subsequent re-colonization by Indonesia that was marked by systematic state-sponsored violence, and in a pattern of acquiescence in that occupation by powerful international actors.

For roughly three centuries, East Timor was a colony of Portugal. That arrangement started to unravel in 1974 as Portugal began to relinquish control of its colonies. Portuguese disengagement stimulated the growth of political parties in East Timor, the most important of which were: Fretilin (Frente Revolucionária de Timor Leste Independente – Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor), a social democratic party that sought immediate independence; UDT ( União Democrática Timorense – Timorese Democratic Union), a more conservative party that advocated eventual independence after a period of association with Portugal; and Apodeti (Associação Popular Democrática Timorense – Timorese Popular Democratic Association), a small party that supported integration with Indonesia.

Significantly, party loyalties were not rooted in ethnic or religious identities – East Timor was overwhelmingly Catholic – but essentially in ideological convictions and sociological differences. Whereas the Fretilin leadership was drawn primarily from a group of educated ex-seminarians inspired by liberation movements in other parts of the

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5 This section draws on my previously published article, ‘People’s War: Militias in East Timor and
world, UDT and Apodeti tended to be dominated by a relatively well-off class of mestizo land-owners and civil servants. And while Fretilin’s popularity was based on the appeal of its social and economic programs and its demand for immediate independence, UDT and Apodeti relied largely on existing networks of patronage and loyalty in areas where its leaders had long been local bosses.

In mid-1975, a short-lived pro-independence alliance between Fretilin and UDT began to fray, in large part due to Indonesian provocation, and in August the tension escalated into armed conflict. The ‘civil war’ between Fretilin and UDT lasted a little over two months, and resulted in roughly 2,000-3,000 deaths. That was a small fraction of the estimated 200,000 that eventually died during the Indonesian occupation, but the experience left a lasting bitterness between the followers of the two parties. That bitterness remained a potent factor in 1999, facilitating the mobilization of pro-Indonesian militias in former UDT and Apodeti base areas, and thereby influencing the geographical distribution of violence.

By October 1975, Fretilin had achieved a military victory over UDT, but was facing mounting cross-border incursions by Indonesian forces based in West Timor. Fearing an imminent invasion, on November 28 Fretilin declared East Timor’s independence. That declaration was the final straw for Indonesia’s President Suharto. An Army Major General, Suharto had come to power in the wake of a 1965 military coup and massacre in which as many as one million alleged communists were killed. Claiming that an independent East Timor posed a threat of communist insurrection and political instability on its border, and with the full support of the United States, Australia, and other allies, in early December 1975 Indonesia launched a combined land, air, and sea invasion of East Timor.

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Indonesia’, South East Asia Research, 9, 3, (November 2001), pp. 271-318.
7 A revealing collection of declassified documents pertaining to the U.S. role in the 1975 invasion can be viewed on the National Security Archive website: http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB62/. On the Australian role, see Wendy Way, ed. Documents on Australian Foreign Policy: Australia and the
The UN Security Council and General Assembly passed several resolutions condemning the invasion but Indonesian authorities, particularly the politically powerful Army, steadfastly rejected any suggestion that it should withdraw and continued to occupy the territory for the next 24 years. The period of occupation (1975-1999) was marked by systematic human rights violations by the Indonesian Armed Forces and by pro-Indonesian militias and paramilitary groups.

Throughout those years, East Timor’s political status remained in dispute, both internationally and within the territory. Though some states recognized Indonesian sovereignty in East Timor, the United Nations never did so. Indeed, the UN continued to regard Portugal as the ‘administering power.’ Inside East Timor resistance was spearheaded by Fretilin and its armed guerrilla force, Falintil. The resistance also had a non-violent element that focused on winning international sympathy for East Timor’s plight. Notwithstanding growing international criticism of Indonesia in the 1990s and the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Peace to two East Timorese in 1996, little concrete action was taken to address the question of East Timor’s political status.

That situation changed dramatically with the resignation of Indonesia’s President Suharto in May 1998. The new government of President Habibie sought to break the impasse over East Timor by proposing that it be granted ‘special autonomy’ under Indonesian rule. Then, in January 1999, the government announced its readiness to rescind its annexation of East Timor if the people there rejected the ‘special autonomy’ proposal. That surprising initiative paved the way for a set of accords between Indonesia, Portugal, and the UN, known as the May 5th Agreements. Those agreements spelled out the modalities through which the people of the territory would vote and security be maintained, and stipulated that the ballot would be organized and carried out by the UN. Significantly, responsibility for security during and after the referendum was entrusted entirely to the

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Indonesian security forces. Wholly unarmed, the UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) began its work later in May, and the ballot was conducted on August 30, 1999.

These developments had a profound impact in East Timor. In mid-1998, thousands of people took to the streets to demonstrate in favor of independence, and against the ‘special autonomy’ proposal. In the mountains, Falintil forces began to re-group in anticipation of a final showdown, and some guerrilla units attacked and killed individuals thought to be supporters of Indonesian rule. In October 1998, reports began to trickle out about the mobilization of militia groups dedicated to maintaining ties with Indonesia. In late January, when President Habibie announced that the East Timorese would be given a chance to vote for or against ‘special autonomy,’ the trickle became a flood. By April 1999, more than two dozen militia groups had formed – including Aitarak (Thorn), Besi Merah Putih (Red and White Iron), and Mahidi (Live or Die for Integration).

It was soon evident that these groups were involved in a concerted campaign of intimidation against supporters of independence. In February and March 1999, dozens were reported killed, some in a very gruesome way, and tens of thousands were forced to flee, after which their homes were burned to the ground. The worst manifestations of violence slowed significantly with the arrival of UNAMET and other observers in May and June 1999. Then, as described above, the violence reached a terrible crescendo in the days after the results of the vote were announced on September 4.

The pro-Indonesian militia groups that committed most of this violence were not acting alone. In many instances, they operated alongside Indonesian Army soldiers. There is now substantial evidence, moreover, that they were mobilized, trained, supplied, and financed by Indonesian authorities, and that the violence was coordinated, or at least condoned, at a very high level.8 The militias, it seems likely, received such support because they provided a cover for official efforts to disrupt, or affect the outcome of, the vote while perpetuating the illusion that the fighting was among East Timorese. In the

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8 This case is documented and analyzed in Robinson, East Timor 1999: Crimes Against Humanity – A Report Commissioned by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Geneva: UN
context of the unprecedented levels of international scrutiny that characterized the referendum process, these were invaluable political advantages.

The link between the militias and the Indonesian military is essential to any explanation of the violence of 1999. But it is not the whole story. Even a quick look at the historical record makes it clear that, in their tactics and choice of weapons, the militias drew upon antecedents dating from colonial, and even pre-colonial, times. That did not mean they were simply re-enacting an immutable tradition. On the contrary, the ostensibly ‘traditional’ model on which they seemed to draw was, in important respects, a product of long interaction with Portuguese and Indonesian authorities.

The model was most strongly rooted in modern Indonesian military doctrine and practice. The Indonesian doctrine of ‘total people’s defense,’ for example, laid the foundation upon which militia groups became part of the Army’s standard counter-insurgency strategy, and were mobilized to make war on their fellow citizens. Likewise, the habits and norms of extreme brutality that spread and became institutionalized after the massacres of 1965–66 shaped military and militia behavior everywhere. Finally, the militias in East Timor seem to have been modeled on the behavior of criminal gangs, and the military-dominated mafias with which they were often linked. In the dissemination of all these elements, the Indonesian armed forces served as crucial vectors.

Thus, the militias in East Timor were an amalgam of various influences and models forged over the course of at least three centuries, but especially during the 24 years of Indonesian rule. That history helps to explain how the militias were able to organize and mobilize so swiftly in 1999. It also helps to explain why they behaved as they did.

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2. Strategies, Repertoires, and Technologies of Violence

What forms did the violence take in 1999, and why? In answering these questions I have found it useful to think in terms of three dimensions of violence, which I call: strategies, repertoires, and technologies. Strategies of violence require no explanation. By repertoires of violence I mean the standard combination of violent methods consistently deployed by a given individual or group. Technologies of violence refer to the weapons or weapons systems typically used by a protagonist. Describing and analyzing violence along these three dimensions can, I think, highlight important aspects of the internal logic and dynamic of violence. It can also facilitate comparison with other cases.

The strategy of pro-Indonesian forces in East Timor was fairly clear. In essence it was a strategy of intimidation and deception. The principle aim was to use threats and violence to get the population to vote for continued Indonesian rule. The deployment of militia forces as the main agents of terror was also designed to deceive; to create the impression (and to some extent the reality) that the violence was a fight among East Timorese – a civil war. Deploying militias in this way also provided a convenient cover for Indonesian authorities who, under the May 5\textsuperscript{th} Agreements, had promised to maintain order.

The militias’ repertoire of violence in 1999 was well suited to this strategy. The most common elements of the repertoire included house-burning, rock-throwing, public beatings and death threats, the erection of roadblocks and checkpoints, the brandishing and firing of weapons, and in the case of women, sexual violence including rape.\textsuperscript{10} Public speech, in various forms, was also used to threaten and to terrorize. A t-shirt worn by one militia group, for example, bore the slogan: “With autonomy, blood will trickle. With independence, blood will flow . . .” On the pretext of explaining the autonomy option to the population, Indonesian authorities and militia leaders organized frequent public rallies at which similar threats of violence were issued.

\textsuperscript{10} TNI soldiers were also directly implicated in rape and sexual slavery. For further detail, see United Nations, “Situation of human rights in East Timor,” December 10, 1999, pp. 9-11; and Robinson, East Timor 1999: Crimes Against Humanity, Chapter 3.
Targeted killing and corpse display were also central elements of the militia repertoire. The bodies of victims were often mutilated in some way – decapitated, disemboweled, or hacked into small pieces – and then left in full public view. A report on the militias in the District of Viqueque, prepared by UNAMET Military Liaison Officers (MLOs) in August 1999, noted that: “The methods of killing, as reported, are gruesome. For example, one victim had an animal bone driven through his brain . . . There appears to be an intention to achieve psychological impact and use the manner of death to intimidate others.”

The militia’s manner of attacking its targets was evidently intended to produce similar effects. When militias staged an attack, they did not do so with the cool precision of professional hit men. Rather, they created the impression of men in a state of frenzy, shouting and slashing the air with their weapons. In other words, they behaved as one imagines a man ‘running amok.’

At first glance, then, the militias’ repertoire of violence may appear to lend credence to the official claim that the militias emerged and acted spontaneously, and that the violence was driven by local cultural patterns. A closer look, however, reveals a different story. For one thing, the militia repertoire was virtually identical across the territory. That marked similarity among more than two dozen widely dispersed groups tends to confirm that the militias were trained and their actions orchestrated. Even if all militia actions were not the result of direct coordination, it is abundantly clear that the militias could not have behaved as they did without the acquiescence and encouragement of the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) and, to a lesser extent, the Police.

Second, most elements of the militia repertoire were identical to the methods used by TNI forces in counter-insurgency and anti-crime operations conducted elsewhere in Indonesia over more than thirty years. The techniques of targeted killing, mutilation,

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12 For an account of such an attack see UNAMET, Political Affairs Office, “Report on the Liquica Incidents of 4 July,” July 12, 1999, p. 3. Reprinted in UNTAET, Political Affairs Office, Briefing Book,
decapitation, and corpse display, for example, followed standard TNI practice in counter-insurgency campaigns in 1965, in the mid-1980s, in Aceh, and in West Papua. In all of those settings, such practices were clearly intended to send a message of what would happen to those who did not heed the militias’ or the TNI’s warnings. Apart from raising doubt that the militias acted independently, such similarities highlight the important role of the military in the transmission of repertoires of violence.

Like their repertoires, militia technology was virtually the same everywhere in the territory. A few militiamen had access to advanced weapons of the sort used by the TNI and the Police but on the whole they carried an assortment of machetes, knives, spears, swords, rocks, and so-called ‘home made’ firearms (senjata rakitan). The latter, fashioned from two or more tubes of steel attached to a wooden grip, were fired by holding a match or cigarette lighter to a fuse on top of the weapon at the base of the steel tubes. To the untrained eye, they resembled 17th or 18th century flintlock firearms, and by all accounts they were just as unreliable. Nevertheless, they could inflict serious wounds and they had a terrifying effect. The same was true of the other ‘traditional’ weapons used by the militia groups.

The militia’s reliance on such basic low-tech weapons may not seem to accord with the claim that they were officially backed by the powerful TNI, or that the violence was carefully planned. If they had been serious about using the militias to intimidate the opposition and to create mayhem, surely the TNI would simply have given them all access to sophisticated weapons and let them loose.

On closer analysis, however, it is clear that the use of such basic weapons technology was not inconsistent with the claim of TNI co-ordination of militia violence. Indeed, from the point of view of TNI strategists, home made guns, machetes, spears, and knives had at least three advantages. First, they made it easier to sustain the illusion that the militias

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14 A small number were seen with M-16s, SKSs, S-1s and hand grenades, while a somewhat larger number
had grown spontaneously from the community. Second, there was much less danger that such weapons would be turned against the well-armed TNI or Police in the event of a mutiny, or of the weapons’ loss or sale to the other side. Finally, as just noted, these simple weapons were extremely effective in spreading terror by creating the impression of uncontrolled mayhem. In short, the use of low-tech weapons was entirely consistent with the claim of official backing and co-ordination of militia violence.

3. Temporal Variation

The pattern of violence in 1999 varied significantly over time. Broadly speaking, the violence was most grave before May, and after the ballot on August 30th. Some kinds of violence persisted in the intervening months – including beatings, house burning, and threats – but killings dropped very substantially. Notably, all serious violence had stopped by the end of October 1999, within weeks of the deployment of an international armed force in late September.

How is this pattern to be explained? One part of the answer surely lies in the impact of international observers. The broad temporal variation in the violence coincided precisely with their presence and absence in East Timor. From late May to the end of August, hundreds of UNAMET staff were posted across the country, down to the village level. In addition, the territory was teeming with international journalists, official election observers, representatives of non-governmental organizations, trade unions, churches, and so on. This was the period of least violence.

By contrast, the worst of the violence occurred before there was a significant international presence on the ground in East Timor, and after that presence was removed or rendered ineffective. In the period before late May, for example, there were virtually

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16 They included Civilian Police (Civpol), Military Liaison Officers (MLOs), Political Affairs Officers (PAOs), Electoral Affairs Officers (EAOs), and UN Volunteers (UNVs). The best account of the UNAMET operation is Ian Martin, *Self-Determination in East Timor: The United Nations, the Ballot and International Intervention*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001.
no international observers whatsoever. Similarly, the international presence faded very dramatically in the days immediately after the August 30th vote. Signs of mounting violence, and the apparent unwillingness of Police and the TNI to stop it, convinced most journalists and observers to leave the territory quickly, and forced hundreds of UNAMET staff out of the countryside and back to the main UN compound in Dili. There they stayed for roughly two weeks, unable to observe or report on what was happening, before being evacuated to Australia together with some 1,500 East Timorese refugees on September 14.

Why might the international presence have had such a marked influence on the pattern of violence? The most plausible explanation is that it did so by affecting the strategic and tactical calculations of those who organized the violence – TNI commanders and Indonesian political leaders. Indonesian authorities, it seems clear, sought to control the violence in accordance with the strategic objective of defeating the vote for independence. To achieve that objective, however, they needed above all to convince key international actors, including governments and the media, that Indonesian authorities were not involved in the violence. Indonesia’s responsibility to maintain security, as stipulated in the May 5th Agreements, and its repeated insistence that it would do so, made this all the more imperative. Thus, it was not at all surprising that the worst of the violence should have occurred when there was only a minimal international presence in East Timor, and that it ebbed during the period of strong international scrutiny.

A similar pattern of strategic control over violence is revealed by micro-variations in the pattern of violence within each of these three broad periods.\textsuperscript{17} A close examination shows that the violence ebbed and flowed rather precisely in accordance with the international political interests of Indonesian authorities. Secret Indonesian Army documents from 1999 leave no room for doubt, moreover, that TNI commanders in East Timor sought to exercise direct tactical control over the violent actions of the militias,

\textsuperscript{17} For details of the documents and evidence cited in this section see Robinson, \textit{East Timor 1999: Crimes Against Humanity}, Chapter 4.
effectively turning the violence on and off in accordance with broader political objectives.

This pattern began to come into focus in early 1999, at the height of the first wave of militia violence and shortly before a planned visit to East Timor by a United Nations delegation on February 9. In anticipation of that visit, Indonesian military authorities – and in particular the East Timor military commander, Colonel Tono Suratman – took deliberate steps to ensure that the militia violence would either stop, or would be invisible to the delegation.

The pattern of official manipulation of violence came into focus again in mid-July 1999, in the week before UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was scheduled to determine whether the vote should proceed. Serious international concern had been expressed about the poor security situation and there was a real possibility that Annan might issue a negative determination, and blame it on Indonesia’s failure to establish the necessary security conditions. That outcome would have been extremely damaging to the Indonesian government’s international prestige and to its strategy in East Timor.

It was significant, therefore, that as the day of reckoning approached, there was a marked decline in militia activity. While there were some instances of violence, the many threats of major, coordinated militia attacks on local people and UNAMET staff simply did not materialize. More general indicators of militia activity – roadblocks, shooting incidents, house-burning, and beatings – also appeared to decline during this period.

UNAMET’s Political Affairs Office saw the lull as evidence that the violence was being coordinated at a fairly high level – from TNI headquarters, under pressure from the Foreign Ministry and the President – and that it could resume as quickly as it had ended. The metaphor they began to use was that of a water faucet, which could be turned on and off at will. What was happening in mid-July, they believed, was an example of the violence being turned off, in a carefully calibrated official effort to avoid a negative
determination at the halfway point of the registration. If the violence could be turned off, they reasoned, it could just as easily be turned back on. 

Events in August provided additional support for that interpretation. As the end of the voter registration process neared in early August, there were serious militia attacks on UNAMET staff in the districts of Bobonaro and Ainaro and then a sudden spasm of violence in Dili on the final day of campaigning in which at least eight people were killed. Significantly, the surge of violence in August was followed by an almost complete cessation of militia activity on the day of the vote, August 30, and during the ballot count in the following days.

Both of these occasions – the vote and the ballot count – offered ample opportunity for pro-Indonesian militias to completely derail the process, but they did not do so. The only plausible explanation for the sudden lull in violence at such critical moments was that the militias and their Indonesian patrons still believed their side was likely to win. Indeed, in comments to the media after the vote, key Indonesian officials – including the Foreign Minister Ali Alatas and the highest ranking Army officer in East Timor, Major General Zacky Anwar Makarim – indicated that they had expected the vote to be won or lost by a narrow margin. If they had believed otherwise, the days of the vote and of the ballot count would have been the ideal times to step up the intimidation and violence, rather than stopping it. The fact that the same pattern occurred across the territory would seem to indicate that the decision not to attack on these days must have been made at a high level.

Finally, it was notable that militia activity, which Police and TNI authorities had consistently claimed was uncontrollable, suddenly stopped on almost every occasion that important high-level delegations visited the territory. As already noted, this had happened in February, and near the mid-point of registration in July. However, the most

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18 Documentary evidence discovered since that time provides strong support for those conclusions. For details see Robinson, East Timor 1999: Crimes Against Humanity, Chapter 4.
conspicuous instance came on September 11, 1999 when a UN Security Council delegation, and the Indonesian Minister of Defense, General Wiranto, visited Dili to investigate reports of militia and TNI violence. Sandwiched between several days of relentless shooting and burning, the day of the visit was almost completely without incident. For those who had been in East Timor for some time, this came as no surprise. It was further evidence that the violence could be turned on and off like a tap, in accordance with the political interests or needs of senior TNI and government officials.

In response to mounting public outrage and press coverage, on September 10 the United States and other key governments finally took steps to reign in the Indonesian Army and their militia proxies. For the first time in 24 years, these parties placed serious pressure on the Indonesian government by cutting military ties and threatening to cut economic aid. Under this unprecedented pressure, the Indonesian authorities agreed to permit the deployment of an international armed force. That force landed about one week later and within a few weeks of its deployment, the worst of the violence had stopped.

The patterns in the timing of the violence in 1999 leave little question that the violence was systematic and that it was coordinated in some measure by the TNI and government authorities. Just as importantly, the temporal variations in the violence highlight the ways in which the presence of international observers directly influenced the pattern of violence, even at the micro level. Finally, the fact that the violence ended within a few weeks of the deployment of a multinational force is a reminder that, at least in certain circumstances, armed intervention can bring a decisive end to political violence.

4. Geographical Variation

Notwithstanding the very small size of the territory, there were important geographical variations in the intensity of the violence, and the strength of the militias, in 1999. The

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19 Speaking to journalists in January 2000, Maj. Gen. Zacky Anwar Makarim said: “In our prediction, we would either lose or win by a slight margin . . . But only 21 per cent voted in favour of Indonesia's continued rule in East Timor . . . It was really disappointing.” South China Morning Post, January 5, 2000.

20 This discussion of geographical variation draws on Robinson, East Timor 1999: Crimes Against...
worst areas were the western-most districts of Bobonaro, Covalima, Liquica, and the enclave of Oecussi, with the central districts of Dili, Ermera, and Ainaro occasionally reaching similar levels of insecurity. Likewise, the most feared and violent of the militia groups – BMP, Aitarak, Mahidi, Laksaur, Darah Integrasi, Dadurus Merah Putih, and Halilintar – were all concentrated in the western districts. By contrast the six eastern-most districts of Aileu, Manufahi, Manatuto, Baucau, Lautem, and Viqueque were relatively calm, and their militias somewhat smaller and less effective. (See Table 1)

How can this geographical variation be explained? A close examination and comparison of the pattern of violence in East Timor’s 13 districts suggests that three principal factors were at work. Briefly, militias tended to be stronger and the violence more serious in those areas: (i) that shared a border with Indonesia; (ii) where individual military and civilian authorities played an aggressive role in supporting them; and (iii) where there was a well-established network of pro-Indonesian bosses and networks long before 1999.

The first, and arguably the most important, factor explaining the concentration of violence in the western districts was their geographical proximity to Indonesia. The most violent districts – Bobonaro, Covalima, Liquica, and Oecussi – all shared a border with the Indonesian territory of West Timor (within the province of Nusa Tenggara Timur, NTT). The shared border offered a number of advantages, logistical, military, and political, that facilitated and encouraged the use of violence in the western-most districts.

For one thing, the common border meant that young men could easily be recruited in West Timor and transported across the border to serve as ‘East Timorese’ militias. Geographical proximity likewise made it easy to infiltrate TNI soldiers into East Timor to undertake covert operations. An investigation conducted by an Indonesian NGO in early August 1999 revealed substantial evidence of such recruitment and cross-border movement by militias, including BMP, Laksaur, Mahidi, and Ablai. One militia member

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21 Well over half (772) of all killings in 1999 occurred in the four westernmost districts – 229 in Bobonaro, 190 in Covalima, 183 in Liquica, and 170 in Oecussi. See ibid, Chapter 9.
22 Fewer than one fifth (213) of all killings in 1999 occurred in the six easternmost districts – 27 in
told the investigators that approximately 250 militiamen in Suai were in fact from Belu, NTT. The same report revealed that the supreme militia commander, João Tavares, had rented a house on the West Timor side of the border, in Atambua, which he used as a militia headquarters.23

The shared border also facilitated the disposal of the evidence of violence, including the bodies of victims. In early September 1999, for example, TNI and militia forces transported the bodies of at least 27 victims of a massacre at the Suai Church across the border to NTT, and there was anecdotal evidence that other victims were disposed of in the same way.24

Geographical proximity also facilitated the massive forcible deportation of the population in the post-ballot period. The vast majority of the roughly 250,000 people forcibly displaced to NTT were from the western districts of East Timor that bordered Indonesia (c.150, 000 others were internally displaced). The deportation of those populations could not have happened on such a scale had Indonesian territory not been easily accessible by land. Support for that claim lies in the fact that most of those forcibly deported lived in towns and villages that lay along the main roads leading to the border.

The greater intensity of violence in the western districts was also clearly related to the attitudes (and service backgrounds) of individual military and civilian officials serving in these areas. The posture of district and local authorities affected the way in which TNI and Police were deployed, and also the strength and level of activity of the militia groups in the area.

The attitudes of the country’s 13 District Military Commanders were particularly important. The District Military Commander of Bobonaro, Lt. Col. Burhanuddin Siagian, and his Chief of Intelligence, Lt. Sutrisno, were unusually energetic in their support for

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Manufahi, 28 in Aileu, 30 in Viqueque, 32 in Manatuto, 43 in Baucau, and 53 in Lautem. See ibid.
the militias, and this was the district with the most pronounced violence. Indeed, these and a handful of other officers were considered to be so much a part of the problem that UNAMET made formal representations to the Indonesian authorities for their removal less than two weeks before the ballot.\(^2\) Apparently as a result of those representations, the District Military Commanders of Bobonaro and Covalima were replaced shortly before the ballot.

The special importance of District Military Commanders also helps to explain the relatively low levels of violence in certain districts. In Aileu, for example, the District Military Commander seems to have played a rather minor role in mobilizing and supporting the militias. That may have been because he was only a Major, outranked by the nominally civilian District Head (a retired Colonel) and by various other officers in the area, or because others in the district took the lead. Whatever the reason, it is notable that Aileu suffered significantly lower levels of militia violence in 1999 than many other districts. A similar pattern was evident in the District of Viqueque, which suffered only two killings in the entire post-ballot period, by far the lowest level of violence in the country.\(^2\)

It was not only military officers, however, whose attitudes seem to have affected the geographical distribution of violence. The attitude of the 13 District Heads (and to a lesser extent, the 62 Sub-District Heads and 442 Village Heads) also made a difference. On the whole, the violence tended to be worst where District Heads lent their full personal and professional support to the militias. This was most notably the case in Bobonaro, Covalima, and Liquica where the District Heads were directly and aggressively involved in organizing militias.

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\(^2\) UNAMET Head of Mission, Ian Martin, has written that he called for the officers’ removal because they were “contributing to rather than addressing the impunity of the militias, some of whom were serving members of the TNI.” Ian Martin, *Self-Determination in East Timor*, pp. 76-77.

\(^2\) Total killings in Aileu and Viqueque in 1999 were 28 and 30 respectively, out of a total of 1,200-1,500. For details of the patterns of violence in each of East Timor’s 13 districts, see Robinson, *East Timor 1999: Crimes Against Humanity*, Chapter 9.
The importance of the District Head, as a potentially independent power, was also highlighted by the situation in Baucau, where militias remained relatively quiet, even after the August 30 ballot. There, in spite of strong pressure from the District Military Chief of Staff, the District Head actively opposed the formation of new militias. His reasons for doing so remain unclear. There was some speculation that the older militia groups – such as Saka and Sera – were controlled by forces close to him, and that he saw the creation of new militias as a challenge to his own authority. Others have suggested that he was influenced by the Bishop of Baucau, Monsignor Nascimento, a staunch opponent of the militias. Whatever the reasons, the fact is that he managed to impede the mobilization of new militias, at least for a time. The District Head of Manufahi appears to have had a similarly moderating effect on militia violence in his district.  

A third, and related, explanation for the uneven geographical distribution of violence in 1999 is that the western districts had a reliable network of pro-Indonesian power brokers in place long before 1999. The concentration of pro-Indonesian bosses in the western districts had historical roots. In the latter half of the 19th century, the Portuguese regarded the kingdoms in the border region as unruly, and made them the focus of repeated pacification campaigns. As Portuguese power began to crumble in 1974-75, some of the powerful local families in the area saw an opportunity to get rid of them, and opted to support the pro-Indonesian party, Apodeti. Other prominent land-owning families, most of them in the western-most districts, opted to support the UDT mainly because it promised to maintain the social and economic status quo. By early 1975, then, many of the most prominent families in the western districts had lent their support to either Apodeti and or UDT. Before long, both were on a collision course with Fretilin, and both therefore welcomed the military and political backing of Indonesia.

The long established pro-Indonesian network – and the long history of enmity between Fretilin and the other two parties – was relied upon in 1999 to mobilize substantial militia

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27 Total killings in Baucau and Manufahi in 1999 were 43 and 27 respectively. For details, see ibid.
forces at relatively short notice. A case in point was João Tavares, the man designated in 1999 as the Supreme Commander of the Pro-Integration Forces (PPI), as the militias were formally known. Tavares had earned his stripes by fighting on the Indonesian side as early as 1975. He was rewarded for his loyalty by being appointed for two terms as District Head of Bobonaro.\(^2\) He was also able to amass substantial land-holdings, making him one of the largest landlords in the territory, after President Suharto and a number of his cronies. By 1999, then, Tavares had long been a very powerful local boss, and he was only one among several in the western districts who could be relied upon to organize pro-autonomy militias and activities.

By contrast, with the exception of Dili, the central and eastern districts had a much less solid network of local pro-Indonesian bosses. In part this was because these districts were generally poorer than those in the west, and therefore arguably less conducive to the emergence of wealthy and powerful local power brokers. Just as importantly, the central and eastern districts had historically been important base areas for the Fretilin and Falintil resistance. Some Village Heads in these districts, and even some District Heads, were sympathetic, or at least not hostile to Fretilin, even if they did not show this outwardly. That situation seriously limited the cohort of people likely to join a militia, or to lead one.

In short, the uneven geographical pattern of militia violence in 1999 does not support the claim that the violence was spontaneous or random. Rather, it reinforces other evidence that the violence was systematic, and that it rested in some measure on the relationship between militia forces and Indonesian authorities. More precisely, the concentration of violence in the western districts appears to have been related to three main factors: geographical proximity to Indonesia; the attitude and background of individual military and civilian authorities at the local level; and the historically conditioned location of pro-Indonesian bosses and networks.

\(^2\) Tavares was appointed District Head of Bobonaro in 1978 and held the post for the next ten years. Dunn writes that, after the formal ‘integration’ of East Timor in 1976, “. . . trusted Timorese, such as João Tavares and Tomás Gonçalves were appointed Bupatis [District Heads].” Dunn, *Timor: A Nation Betrayed*, p. 266.
5. Pro-independence Violence

What about violence by the pro-independence side and, in particular, the armed guerilla force, Falintil? Did Falintil’s strategy, repertoire and technology differ from those of the militias? Were there distinctive temporal and geographical variations in its use of violence? And what significance did these patterns have in the overall dynamic of the violence in 1999?

There were important differences between Falintil’s strategy and that of the pro-Indonesian forces. Most importantly, Falintil committed far fewer acts of serious violence in the course of 1999 than did its opponents. Of the estimated 1,200-1,500 political killings during the year, no more than 30 were credibly attributed to Falintil. In part that pattern reflected Falintil’s relative military weakness in 1999. Almost uniquely among guerrilla forces, it received virtually no outside military or financial support.

But the low levels of Falintil violence in 1999 were also the result of a strategic decision taken by the resistance, and especially by Xanana Gusmão who remained as leader even after his capture and imprisonment in 1992. As discussed below, Gusmão calculated that a policy of restraint in 1999 would win the independence movement crucial international support, and that violence would lead to the loss of such support. In short, the pro-independence strategy could not have been more different than that of the pro-Indonesian side.

Nevertheless, there were some intriguing similarities in the repertoires and technologies of the two groups. Like the militias, Falintil forces sought to intimidate their opponents through threats and public beatings, extracted information from their captives under duress, appeared to accept the notion of collective guilt and punishment, and sometimes mutilated their victims to send a message to others. The technologies of the two sides

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30 This discussion of pro-independence strategy and patterns of violence and is based largely on observations made by UNAMET’s Political Affairs Officers in East Timor in 1999. Many of those observations are summarized in a variety of internal reports that were later compiled in: UNTAET, Political Affairs Office, Briefing Book on Human Rights and Political Affairs, Dili, November 1999
were also similar. While some Falintil members, like some militia members, carried modern, high-powered weapons like M-16s, most were armed with machetes, spears, and knives, or with aging WWII era Mausers and G-3s.

While not altering the fact that Falintil violence in 1999 was limited, these similarities serve to highlight the complex ways in which repertoires and technologies of violence may have been transmitted. It seems likely that common repertoires were adopted as members of opposing forces fought, and in some cases switched sides, over the course of the long conflict. Likewise, the technologies of violence were likely shared, first as Portuguese soldiers handed over their weapons to Falintil in 1975, and thereafter as cash-hungry or demoralized Indonesian soldiers sold or bartered their weapons and ammunition to Falintil fighters.

There were also distinctive patterns in the timing of the violence committed by pro-independence forces in 1999, and these patterns shed additional light on the overall dynamics of the violence in East Timor. Violence by pro-independence forces fell into two main phases. The first phase, from late 1998 to April 1999, was marked by the detention and ill-treatment of alleged supporters of Indonesian rule and a number of targeted killings. The second phase, from mid-April to the end of 1999, was notable for the almost complete absence of acts of violence by pro-independence forces in spite of continued provocation by pro-Indonesian forces. Perhaps most remarkably, Falintil abstained almost completely from acts of violence in the immediate aftermath of the August 30th ballot, even as the militias and the TNI waged a systematic campaign of killing and destruction.

How can this pattern be explained, and what was its significance for the dynamic of violence generally? As already noted, the generally low level of Falintil violence in 1999 was arguably a byproduct of the relative military strength of the opposing forces on the ground. In an open fight, Falintil was no match for the Indonesian armed forces, and its strategy of defensive guerrilla war had long reflected that fact. That explanation,

31 Robinson, East Timor 1999: Crimes Against Humanity, Chapter 3.
however, does not account for the marked shift toward restraint by Falintil after April 1999. Nor does it satisfactorily explain the near absence of retaliation by Falintil in the post-ballot period. The most plausible explanation for that pattern, as suggested above, is that it was the result of a strategic decision by the resistance leadership and, in particular, Xanana Gusmão.

That critical decision seems to have been taken in the first week of April 1999, in the aftermath of the massacre of some 50 people at the Catholic Church in Liquica. Responding to reports that TNI and police forces had participated in the attack, or at a minimum had done nothing to stop it, Gusmão at first lashed out angrily, calling on pro-independence forces to protect the population. Indonesian officials immediately portrayed his call as an act of provocation, and said that it proved the need for continued Indonesian rule to prevent further ‘clashes’ among East Timorese. Fearing that a Falintil mobilization at that delicate stage would provide Indonesia with a pretext for a crackdown, and for the cancellation of the referendum, Gusmão’s closest advisers (who included some UN officials and key Ambassadors in Jakarta) urged him to retract his statement. He did.

More importantly, from that point onward Gusmão adopted a conscious policy of restraint, and made it stick. His calculation in doing so was based on the following assessments. First, the TNI wished to make the conflict in East Timor look like a civil war because that would simultaneously deflect attention away from the TNI’s role, and justify its continued presence as a ‘neutral’ arbiter. Second, armed conflict among East Timorese, even if it might seem justified, would undermine the international sympathy that was deemed essential to an independence victory. Finally, armed conflict between the two sides would very likely derail the vote, which the CNRT believed was their best and perhaps last chance to gain independence. It followed from this analysis that the resistance must do everything possible to avoid being drawn into a cycle of violence.

Two decisions, both taken in August 1999, revealed just how serious Gusmão was in maintaining this policy. In mid-August, he announced that Falintil had begun unilaterally
to withdraw its armed fighters to four ‘cantonment’ sites in different parts of the country. UN Military Liaison Officers were invited to inspect the sites, and they returned convinced that this was a genuine withdrawal signifying an intention not to deploy. They were also impressed with the discipline of the Falintil forces, and some officers concluded that those forces were significantly more professional than the TNI.

The second decision came late at night on August 29, just hours before the polls were set to open. Earlier in the day, a group of pro-independence youths had attacked and killed a militiaman in Dili. The militia leader, Eurico Guterres, threatened that his men would go on a violent rampage and disrupt the ballot unless the alleged perpetrator was immediately handed over to the police. Notwithstanding serious concern for the man’s safety, Gusmão finally told him via satellite telephone to give himself up to Police, to avoid jeopardizing the vote. The incident revealed how easily the violence could have spiraled out of control and how the policy of restraint helped to prevent it from doing so.

Limited though it was, the violence by the pro-independence side, like the militia violence, did vary geographically. In the period before April 1999, there were sporadic Falintil attacks, including some killings, in the districts of Manufahi and Ermera. And in the post-ballot period, Falintil forces in Baucau engaged in retaliatory strikes against the militias and the TNI, killing several people. Among the most serious acts of Falintil violence was an attack in the vicinity of Alas, Manufahi, in October 1998. The attack, which left two men dead, revealed just how easily violence could escalate. Within hours of the attack, TNI troops and militia forces began a major crackdown in the area, in the course of which dozens of people were killed, and several villages were burned to the ground.

Although it is difficult to draw firm conclusions based on this evidence, violence from the pro-independence camp seems also to have been concentrated where local Falintil commanders did not unquestioningly accept Xanana Gusmão’s leadership, and decided to take matters into their own hands. This appears to have been the case in Manufahi, Ermera, and later in Baucau. Falintil violence also seems to have happened where Falintil
and militia forces were more evenly matched. Where Falintil was in effective control of an area, as in the eastern district of Viqueque, or where it was completely outgunned, as in the western district of Bobonaro, there was little Falintil violence.

**Conclusions**

This examination of the patterns and variations of violence in East Timor in 1999 suggests a number of general conclusions, some of which may be applicable in other settings.

**First,** the violence in East Timor was significantly shaped by historical experiences and models, most notably those arising from Indonesia’s 24-year occupation of East Timor. Historical experience was important, for example, in establishing and reinforcing basic lines of enmity between the different parties and their followers. The ‘civil war’ of 1975, while short-lived, created deep bitterness between the followers of UDT and Fretilin, and thereby influenced patterns of political mobilization and the geographical distribution of violence 24 years later.

Historical experience and models were also important in shaping the repertoires and technologies of violence used in 1999. The repertoire and technology of East Timor’s modern militias were not created overnight, but had deep historical roots. Those roots arguably extended back to the period of Portuguese rule. More than anything else, however, they reflected the norms, tactics, and standard operating procedures of the Indonesian military as these had developed since the military coup and massacre of 1965.

**Second,** the violence in East Timor was shaped by certain structural conditions that were beyond the capacity of individuals to control. The most important of these was the character of the Indonesian state itself. Through its institutions, practices, and doctrines, the state structured the behavior, including the violent behavior, of those within its purview. Of special importance in this regard were: the military doctrine that called for the mobilization of militias; the routine use of terror in counter-insurgency campaigns;
the acceptance of the idea of collective guilt and punishment; and the problem of impunity.

The pattern of violence in East Timor was also influenced in important ways by the country’s geography. Historically and in 1999, East Timor’s shared border with West Timor provided Indonesian strategists with an ideal staging point for the mobilization of their forces, and for the disposal or deportation of the victims of their violence. In that way, it virtually guaranteed that pro-Indonesian violence would be concentrated in the westernmost districts of East Timor.

Third, significant patterns and variations in the violence were inextricably linked to the interests and actions of powerful foreign states and international institutions; and to the strength and coherence of non-governmental and media voices. Had key powers, such as the United States, insisted on proper security arrangements before the ballot, for example, the rampant violence of 1999 might well have been prevented. Equally, had those powers not finally approved military intervention in September 1999, the violence of the post-ballot period would likely have been very much worse than it was.

The international context was not mere background effect, or significant only at the macro level. On the contrary, it influenced the dynamic of violence right down to the local level. It affected the timing of the violence, for example, in very precise ways. Political pressure from key states and UN officials in the referendum process pushed Indonesian authorities to stop the violence at critical moments in order to achieve their broader political objectives. International diplomatic pressure also led to the removal of some individual military officers who had been integrally involved in orchestrating the militia violence.

Critical to this dynamic was the presence of hundreds of international observers, from the UN, the media, and NGOs, who placed Indonesian authorities under unprecedented scrutiny. That scrutiny made it virtually impossible for Indonesian authorities and militias to operate with the freedom to which they had long been accustomed. The presence of so
may people on the ground, bearing witness, and the broadcast of shocking images of violence throughout the world, also had the effect of galvanizing public outrage abroad, and effectively shaming powerful governments into taking action against their erstwhile ally, Indonesia.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the violence of 1999 was shaped by the deliberate acts and strategic calculations of powerful political actors on both sides of the conflict. The violence was neither spontaneous, nor the result of ancient cultural proclivities, as Indonesian officials have claimed. More than anything else, it was the consequence of an intentional policy of intimidation and deceit by Indonesian authorities. Without the backing and support of those authorities, it is unlikely that East Timor’s militias would have existed, or that they would have engaged in the sort of violence they did in 1999. Indonesian military backing also appeared to be pivotal in shaping the repertoire and technology of the militias, and in influencing the timing and the geographical distribution of their activities.

The strategic calculations and decisions of other powerful political actors, and their capacity to implement those decisions, were no less important. The policy of restraint adopted by Xanana Gusmão in April 1999 critically affected the character, timing, and geographical distribution of Falintil violence, and it was arguably fundamental in bringing a final end to the violence by both sides. Indeed, had the Falintil leadership not adopted and successfully implemented that approach, and had it instead responded in kind to acts of provocation by pro-Indonesian forces, the international intervention that finally ended the conflict might never have happened, and East Timor might still be at war.
Table 1: Number of Killings by District, East Timor 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts (13)</th>
<th>Numbers killed (1,293)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Western Districts (4)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobonaro</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liquica</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covalima</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oecussi</td>
<td>170</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
<td><strong>772</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Central Districts (3)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ainaro</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dili</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ermera</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
<td><strong>308</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eastern Districts (6)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufahi</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aileu</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Viqueque</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manatuto</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baucau</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lautem</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
<td><strong>213</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>