

BORDER DISPUTE BETWEEN INDONESIA AND EAST TIMOR AND ITS ASSOCIATED FACTORS: A CASE STUDY AT *MANUSASI* BORDER

Elpius Kalembang¹

ABSTRACT

The study aimed to identify factors that contributed to border dispute between communities or tribes from Indonesia and East Timor who lived at *Manusasi* border, *Timor Tengah Utara* district, Indonesia. One-to-one in-depth interviews were used to collect data from the study participants. They were recruited using snowball sampling technique. A qualitative data analysis framework was employed to guide the analysis of the collected data. The results indicated that perceptions of the people or communities living around the border about the land, and different interpretations of the borderline previously made, were significant supporting factors for the conflict among them. Stories and evidence on the land including graves of the ancestors, guilders, tray and trees with the stamps of kingdoms, were the historical factors used by the Indonesian tribes to defend the border, hence leading to prolonged dispute between them and other tribes from East Timor. Physical violence and political interests of parties involved in the border conflict were also reported as the factors that have escalated the tension of the parties in conflict. The findings of the current study indicate the needs for the development of new strategies that consider the supporting factors for the conflict and the notions of primary parties including the locals involved in the dispute, from both Indonesia and East Timor sides. The findings also call for active involvements of the governments of both countries to settle the prolonged dispute between tribes living at the *Manusasi* border.

Key words: Border dispute, factors, *Manusasi*, Indonesia, East Timor

¹ **Fakultas Ilmu Sosial and Ilmu Politik, Universitas Timor, Kefamenanu, Indonesia**

INTRODUCTION

Border conflict at *Manusasi* segment between Indonesia and East Timor started during the colonial period is a prolonged conflict that still continues to the current days. The conflict occurred in the interests of the colonizers (Dutch and Portuguese) as they were trying to occupy the lands (West Timor was conquered by the Dutch and East Timor was conquered by the Portuguese) and exploit the natural resources. Therefore, economic and political issues were brought up by the colonizers to escalate the tension among the locals and influence the local kings for the sake of their interests (1). Such tactic was employed to divide the power of the local kings which could make it easier for them – the colonizers – to take over the political power and conquer the territories and the natural resources (2).

As the consequence, the colonizers took a major role in determining the borderlines between West Timor and East Timor, which were somehow agreed upon by the locals from the two regions. The boundaries made during the colonial period were natural boundaries of watershed and thalweg (the deepest part of the river), which have been embodied in the 1904 Treaty between the Netherlands and Portugal, and in the arbitral Award of 1914 (PCA 1914) (2). However, the boundaries were shifted after the official integration of East Timor with Indonesia in 1976. For the sake of the interests of the East Timorese, the new borderline at *Manusasi* segment determined by the national government of Indonesia was switched for approximately 400 meters into the West Timor territory. The shift of the borderline has led to horizontal conflict between the locals from both sides as it disrupts the land ownership (3, 4).

Globally, studies and reports on territorial border conflicts have indicated various factors supportive of border conflicts (5). The claims on land ownership, competitions for natural resources including oil, mineral resources, fresh water and fertile land, and the perceptions of nationalism, national identity, historical closeness, prestige, cohesiveness of a state, have been reported as the underlying factors for border conflicts (6, 7). Other factors which have also been indicated to escalate the tension among people in conflict of territorial boundaries are economic, historical, and cultural factors. International agreements, natural or geographic boundaries, effective controls, possidetical utility reasons (inherited colonial administrative boundaries),

elitism claims and ideological claims, are also reported elsewhere as the supporting factors for border conflicts (4, 6).

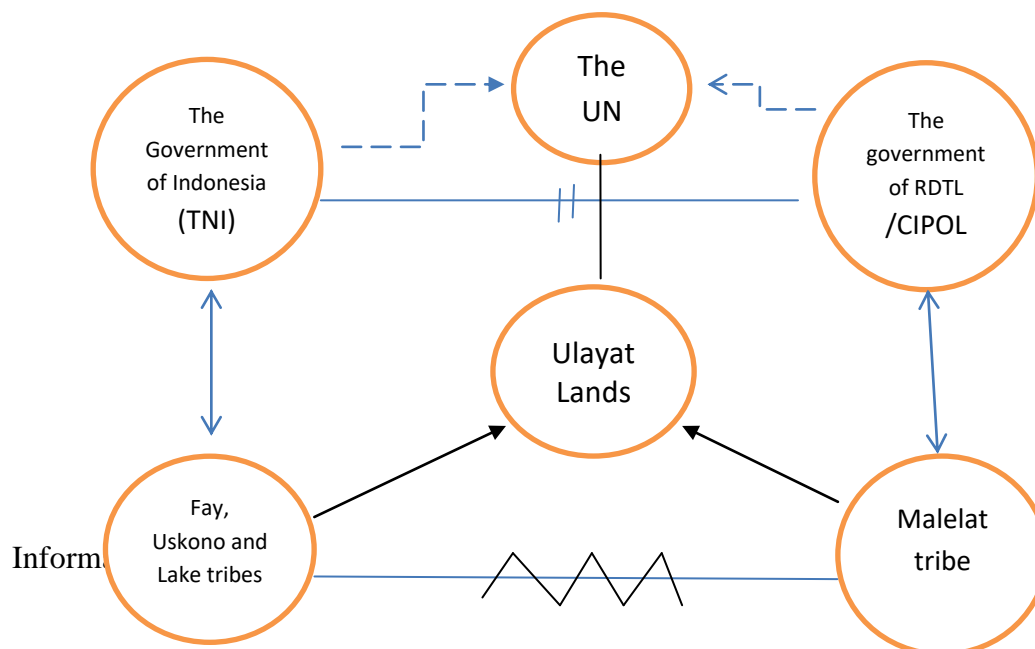
Despite the escalation of the tension between the locals from Indonesia and East Timor about the borderline at *Manusasi* segment, less effort seems to have been undertaken by the governments of the two countries at local, provincial and national level to settle the conflict. Likewise, evidence on the factors supportive of the horizontal conflict between the locals at *Manusasi* border is scarce. Therefore, the study aimed at identifying the underlying factors for the *Manusasi* border conflict between the locals from Indonesia and East Timor.

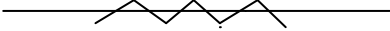
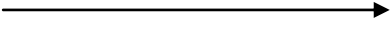


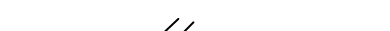

METHODS

Study Setting

Manusasi village was the place where the current study was carried out from 2015 to 2016. With the total population of 902 people including 451 female and 451 male, the village covers the area of 9km² (8). The main livelihood of the majority of the people in the village was farming and only a few worked as civil servants (8). The tribes living around the border area included *Fay*, *Uskono*, *Lake* (Indonesia), and *Malelat*, *Pasabe* (East Timor). Before the conflict, the border area being disputed which is 142.7 hectares was divided into 489 parcels of land and cultivated by 70 households (8).

Figure 1: The conflict area between Indonesia and East Timor at *Manusasi* Segment



	: Direct conflict
	: Claim on the border
	: Neutral (elements supporting conflict settlement)
	: Collaboration
	: Consultation
	: No violence relation

Study Design

This qualitative study was conducted at *Manusasi* village, Timor Tengah Utara district, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. The use of qualitative study was useful since it enabled direct interactions between researcher and interviewees, and provided researcher with opportunities to observe the situation and setting where the respondents lived, worked and interacted (9, 10).

Recruitment, Data Collection and Ethical Consideration

The participants involved in the study included the staff of the local government, woman and youth figures, traditional leaders and tribal leaders, community leaders and land owners. They were recruited using snowball sampling technique. One-to-one in-depth interview method was employed to collect data from the participants (9). Interviews were focused on identifying factors associated with horizontal conflicts among people from West Timor (Indonesia) and East Timor living at the *Manusasi* border. Twenty four participants were interviewed to collect enough data to explain the supporting factors for the border conflict. Interviews took place at time and places suggested by each participant.

Interviews started with an explanation about the nature and aim of the study to each participant, and for what purpose the data would be used. They were informed that the study has obtained ethical approval from Diponegoro University, Semarang, Indonesia. The participants were advised about the voluntary nature of their participation and that there would be no consequences for withdrawal during the interview process. Prior to commencing interviews, each participant was informed that the interview would take approximately half an hour to one hour, and that the data would be made confidential and anonymous. The participants signed and returned a written inform consent on the interview day before starting interview.

Data Analysis

After the verbatim transcriptions of the recorded data into coding sheets, data were analysed which were guided by a qualitative data analysis framework (11). The framework introduces five steps of data analysis that can be used to manage qualitative data in a coherent and structured way (12, 13). The five analysis steps are reading, breaking down, and giving comments to the data (familiarisation); writing down recurrent key issues, concepts and themes and developing coding scheme for the data using a thematic framework or coding frame (identifying a thematic framework); creating open coding to reduce the list of codes to a smaller and manageable number, followed by closed coding where codes referring to the same theme were grouped together (indexing); arranging appropriate thematic references in a summary chart (data charting); and examining the ideas that made up the themes (data mapping and interpretation) (12).

RESULTS

Perceptions on the Land and the Border

Perceptions on the land seemed to be an important factor that influenced the behaviour of the people from Indonesian tribes living around the *Manusasi* border. Several study participants commented that they value the land as a symbol of the origin of life. It is the owner of life, the mother that has given birth to them, breastfed them and raised them up. The land has been the place where they have got food and water. Such perceptions seemed to have been translated into behaviours as they desperately defended their land from outsiders:

“The land is the symbol of life, the symbol of the origin of life. The place from where we get food and water. For us, the land is the second owner of life, it is God who is the first owner, and thus we have *Uis Afu* [the king of the land]. To our perceptions, the land is the mother who gave us birth, breastfeeds and raises up us” (Participant 1, 79 years old).

“We have different perceptions about the land. Prior to the independence, they [East Timorese] were our brothers and sisters of one nation and country, hence could cultivate the land. But after the separation from Indonesia they are no longer our brothers and sisters of the one nation and country. So, they are not allowed to till our land” (Participant 2: 75 years old).

Furthermore, different interpretations of the borderline previously made seemed to be influenced by several other supporting factors and lead to escalating the conflict. Several study participants expressed that the interests of both Indonesia and East Timor, and different interpretations towards the borderline, had been the added factors supportive of horizontal conflict between the communities or tribes from both countries:

“The concepts and interpretations of the borderline strongly held by the people from the two countries are different, they have different versions of borderline and these have become the obstacles that hamper the settlement process” (Participants 3, 50 years old).

“Border dispute between West Timor (Indonesia) and East Timor at *Manusasi* segment has started since long time ago but has not been settled. One of the reasons is different interpretations about the period when the borderline was made. Some people do not accept the borderline made during the colonial period in 1904 because they call it as the product of the colonizers and others do not agree with the borderline made by the Indonesian government because it was made when East Timor was a province of Indonesia” (Participants 4, 68 years old).

Historical Factors

Findings from the fieldwork indicated that historical aspects were important factors that contributed to the escalation of the border dispute among communities living around the *Manusasi* border. The participants interviewed put forward that the land at the *Manusasi* border belonged to them because it was bequeathed by their ancestors from generation to generation. This was the reason why they desperately fought to defend the land. Other reasons were that if the land is seized by other people then it would raise the anger of their ancestors and people who seize the land would experience misfortune in their life:

“The land has its own history, it has its owner, it belonged to our ancestors and has been passed down to us. Our ancestors will be angry if other people try to seize it from us and they will experience misfortune because they do not have rights over the land” (Participant 6, 68 years old).

“The land belonged to our ancestors. They bequeathed it to us from generation to generation. As the heirs of the land, we are obliged to keep and conserve the land. We feel that we have not fulfilled this obligation because the land is being occupied by the East Timorese and this makes us really angry because of the guilty feeling to our ancestors” (Participants 7, 75 years old).

The claim and historical stories of the Indonesian tribes living around border were found to be supported by historical evidence that convinced them of their rights over the land. Several participants expressed that they still have historical evidence about the land, including two pieces of Guilder, Tray, ritual places, *Ampumalak* tree which has the stamps of their kingdoms. The historical stories and evidence seemed to be strong factors that supported their claim over land:

“We dispute about communal (*ulayat*) land. People from East Timor claim that the land belongs to them but it is actually ours and there are historical evidence and culture that can be traced: two pieces of Guilder, Tray, *Ampupmalak* tree with the stamps of two kingdoms. We still have the two pieces of Guilder but the Tray and tree are in their control. They are arbitrarily claiming that the land belongs to them because they are supported by parties from overseas” (Participant 8, 2 years old).

“I was asked by the staff from the United Nations and I explained that we have valid evidence, including the graves of our ancestors, tray, holy water and the trees in our farms. However, they seem to insist that the land at border is part of their land, which is opposite to the customary agreement previously made” (Participant 9, 79 years old).

Border Determination by the Government of Indonesia

The Indonesian government boundary-making was reported as another influential factor to the border dispute among the tribes from Indonesia and East Timor. The government of Indonesia who was represented by Rudini, the Ministry of Home Affairs, determined the borderline back in 1988. However, the participants commented that the boundary-making did not involve people such as traditional leaders and community leaders from the surrounding communities as the land owners:

“In 1988, the Ministry of Home Affairs determined the borderline between the East Nusa Tenggara Province and East Timor Province without involving us as the traditional leaders and community leaders. There is a very long history of the land and there have been bloods sacrificed for the land, hence the determination of the borderline should have involved us as the owners of the land. In addition, borderline made by the Ministry of Home Affairs violated the customary agreement between our tribes and *Malelat* tribe. Now the borderline is in zone one and zone two, and therefore, if the people from East Timor tribe cultivate the land in our area, there will be conflict, including physical violence and killings” (Participant 10, 79 years old).

“We are angry and do not agree with what had been done by the Ministry of Home Affairs because the borderline he made at that time causes conflicts up to now. The conflict that happens today is because of different perceptions among us about the borderline” (Participant 11, 75 years old).

Physical Violence

The interviews with the participants during the fieldwork identified physical violence between the people from two countries who live around the border as a crucial factor contributing to the escalation of the dispute. Several interviewees commented that there have been various acts of physical violence due to the border conflict such as shooting, threat of murder, declare of war and grave destruction. These acts of physical violence have been escalating the tension between the people from the Indonesian tribes and the East Timor tribes, and making the way to peaceful resolution looked extremely difficult:

“In 1999, when the East Timor separated from Indonesia, there was a helicopter which belonged to the INTERVET flied around the border area and at that time an Indonesian citizen raised the Indonesia flag and got shot” (Participant 12, 78 years old).

“In 2012, one of the Indonesian citizens got shot at the *Manusasi* border. This makes us angry and we will not let them take over our land” (Participant 14, 68 years old).

“There have also been acts of violence between the Indonesians and East Timorese, including throwing rocks to each other, and threat of war between the citizens of Indonesia and East Timor because the East Timorese built roadways along zone 2 which is a zone of dispute. At that time the National Indonesian Army (TNI) was on alert and there was a tension between the TNI and the East Timor police” (Participant 15, 60 years old).

"There have been destructions of the graves of our ancestors because of this prolonged conflict and no settlement agreement has been achieved. These destructions destroy our traditional organizational system. Formerly, we were united in custom but now there is a sense of anger, hatred, antipathy and a desire to attack them" (Participant 17, 45 years old).

However, the acts of physical violence seemed to have been very well handled by the governments of the two countries. A few participants commented that Xanana, the former East Timor President, cancelled the activities of East Timor side at the border and the Indonesian government built an army post nearby the border. The actions taken by the governments of the two countries helped reduced the tension and prevent further physical violence between the two conflicting parties:

"Because of the violent actions such as stoning, fights and threats of killing, Xanana as the East Timor president at the time met the conflicting communities and called on both sides to stop fighting as the border dispute is still in the process of settlement, and the East Timorese voided making street in Zone 2 until now "(Participant 18, 70 years old).

"... the presence of an army post at this border makes us feel quite safe and minimizes conflict and there is no suspicion between one another" (Participant 18, 78 years old).

"We carry out our duties every day, maintain order and security in this place, the tension occurs when there is a conflict between the people of Indonesia and East Timor in relation to border and land. Our principle is to maintain security and protect our country, Indonesia" (Participant 19, a 30 years old soldier).

Political Factors

Political factors seemed to also play significant in the dispute between the communities living around *Manusasi* border. Several participants put forward that the political interests of East Timor, Indonesia and the United Nations made the resolution of the conflict difficult to achieve because the parties tried to get their interests accommodated:

“There are political interests regarding the *Manusasi* border, the tribes that do not have lands at the border were arranged and sent by the government of East Timor to occupy the land. They know nothing about the history of the land and area being disputed. I think this is also a hindering factor to the peaceful conventional conflict settlement” (Participant 20, 68 years old).

“At the beginning we had agreements with *Tua Amu* tribe regarding the borderline but now *Pasabe* tribe is the one occupying the land and people from this tribe are aware of the customary agreements that have been made. This seems to worsen the conflict” (Participant 21, 64 years old).

“The United Nations, East Timor and Indonesia have their own interests, so I think they need to sit together to come to a peaceful resolution” (participant 22, 75 years old).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to identify factors that supported the conflict between the Indonesians and the East Timorese at the *Manusasi* border. Various factors underlying border disputes have been well documented in previous studies and reports (5, 14, 15). Findings of the current study suggest that perceptions of the land as a symbol of life, a symbol of the origin of life, a mother that gave birth to them, breastfeeds and raises them and the place to get food and water, were the factors strongly associated with the border dispute between the tribes living at this border. Similarly, the perceptions about the East Timorese as outsiders and different points of view about the borderlines previously made by the colonizers during the colonial period and by the Indonesian government, were found to also support the conflict at *Manusasi* border. The latter is in line with the results of previous studies (4, 6) reporting that border disputes have often happened due to conflicting points of view about borderlines previously made. Supporting the previous findings reported elsewhere (4, 6), the present study confirms that historical stories and

evidence about the land often become the underlying reasons for disputes between people, communities and countries. These may be due to different historical stories and evidence passed down by the older generation who had passed away are different and used by the present generation as the bases for claiming their rights over lands.

The current study findings also show that the acts of physical violence including shooting, stoning, graves destruction, and fighting between parties involved in border dispute contributed to escalating the tension and made the conflict difficult to solve. This is plausible as the parties that experienced damages or losses due to the physical violence are highly unlikely to develop constructive communication with other parties to find peaceful and win-win solution to the conflict. These findings corroborate previous results reported elsewhere (2, 16), indicating that physical violence could be seen as both the impacts of and the supporting factor for border conflict. This is because people involved in border dispute tend to defend the land they think belongs to them, and will not accept the damages and losses caused by their opponents. Confirming the previous findings (2, 17), this study suggests that political interests of parties or countries involved had significant contributions to border dispute as each of them tends to pursue its own interests. The political interests are mainly based on the needs for natural resources, energy, and water for agricultural use which are available on the area being disputed (18-20). As the consequence, conflict of interests often occurs during settlement process and becomes obstacles to peaceful resolution.

This study has several limitations that need to be considered in interpreting its results. First of all, this study involved a small number of participants and all of them were from the Indonesian side. This may have led to underestimating the views of other people from East Timor side. Therefore, the results of the current study are less likely to be transferable to other border disputes in different settings and countries. Despite the limitations, the results may still be useful to inform the decision makers and policy makers to consider the identified factors in the development of strategies to settle the problem. Further studies covering a wide range of participants from parties involved in border conflicts are recommended as the results could be transferable to border conflicts in other settings or countries.

CONCLUSION

The present study reports several factors that supported border dispute at *Manusasi* section. They included different perceptions on the land and borderline previously made by the colonizers and the government of Indonesia, historical factors such as stories and evidence including graves, trees, tray, and guild. Acts of physical violence such as shooting, stoning, killing and fighting, and political interests of parties involved in the conflict were also the factors supportive of the dispute. The findings of the current study indicate the needs for the establishment of new strategies that consider the supporting factors for the conflict and take into account the notions of primary parties including communities from both Indonesia and East Timor sides involved in the dispute. The findings also call for active involvement of the governments of both countries to settle the prolonged border dispute between tribes living at the *Manusasi* border.

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