

**Identifying Determinants of Border Conflicts between Indonesia
and East Timor in Unresolved and Un-surveyed Segment, Timor
Tengah Utara District**

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify determinants of border conflicts between Indonesia and East Timor in unresolved and un-surveyed segment in Timor Tengah Utara district. One-on-one in-depth interviews were employed to collect the data from the participants. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling technique. Data were analysed thematically using a framework analysis. The results indicated that colonial-boundary making was one of the factors supportive of the border conflicts between Indonesia and East Timor or communities living around the borders. Indonesian government-boundary making was also reported to be another influencing factor that triggered the conflicts between the people or communities from the two countries. This was because after East Timor became a new province of Indonesia, the government of Indonesia made new border points that disadvantaged communities from West Timor. Another factor reported to escalate the conflicts between communities from the two countries, especially the ones living at the borders, was the lack of involvement of local people and traditional leaders in boundary-making process. The findings show the need to develop conflict resolution strategies that take into account socio-cultural values and norms and historical aspect of the land being disputed, and to involve communities and traditional leaders in boundary-making process. This could lead to great acceptance of the decision in the future as all parties with interests are involved in decision-making process about the borders between the two countries.

Key words: Determinants, border conflicts, unresolved and un-surveyed segment, Indonesia, East Timor

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INTRODUCTION

Territorial border conflict is an ongoing problem in the relations among States, especially the States whose territories are adjacent to one another (1). Indonesia and East Timor are two countries whose territories are directly bordered on several points. Therefore, conflicts between community groups from both countries living in border areas are often inevitable and continue to occur today (2). It has been previously indicated that territory is one of the sources of conflict that often leads to wars if it is not resolved peacefully (3). For Indonesia, border conflict with East Timor is a serious problem that has not been resolved yet.

Theoretically, there are nine factors that become the reasons for a state to claim on a territory (4). They include international agreements, natural or geographic boundaries, economic reasons, cultural reasons, effective controls, historical reasons, possidetical utility reasons (inherited colonial administrative boundaries), elitism claims and ideological claims (3, 5). Territory is also a source of conflict due to tangible and intangible factors. Tangible factors refer to territories as valuable natural resources such as rivers, lakes, fresh water, oil, mineral resources, and fertile land. While the intangible factors refer more to psychological approaches, perceptions of nationalism, national identity, historical closeness, prestige, cohesiveness of a State (3, 6).

The land boundary between Indonesia and East Timor is located in two places namely the eastern sector (main sector) and the west sector (Oecusse). Most of the land boundaries of both countries are natural boundaries of watershed and thalweg (the deepest part of the river). These boundaries are the legacy of the colonizers of the two countries embodied in the 1904 Treaty between the Netherlands and Portugal, as well as the arbitral Award of 1914 (PCA 1914) . The negotiations to resolve the border issues have been started since 2001 with the first meeting between the Technical Sub-Committee on Border Demarcation and Regulation (TSCBBDR) Indonesia and United Nations Transitional Administration for East Timor (UNTAET) in Jakarta. Furthermore, several negotiations have been conducted in various places between Indonesia and East Timor.

There are two segments being disputed by Indonesia and East Timor. The segments include: (1) Bijaelsunan / Oelnasi / Crus located in Manusasi village, Miomaffo Barat district.

This segment is "Unresolved Segment" because the status of the land in this area is still a sterile area and should not be managed by the parties of both countries (7). Local people still question this segment as it covers 489 plots with the length of 2.6 Km and the area of 142.7 ha (8). The Indonesian side wants the state boundary starting from *Tugu Bijaelsunan* following the ridge up to Oben, but the East Timor side wants that the state border should start from *Tugu Bijaelsunan* followed the valley and the Miomaffo river to Oben (7); (2) Tubu Banat / Oben located in Tubu Village and Nilulat Village, Bikomi Nilulat Sub-district; (3) Nefo Numpo located in Haumeni Ana Village, Bikomi Nilulat Sub-district; (4) Pistana located in Sunkaen Village, Bikomi Nilulat; (5) Subina located in Inbate and Nainaban villages, Bikomi Nilulat Sub-district. The segment from Oben to Subina covers an ± 14 km un-surveyed Segment which for Indonesia is a claim of the *ulayat* rights of Timor Tengah Utara (Indonesia) communities. The communities claim that there are gardens or cultivated land in 6 villages that have become the territory of East Timor if the state borders are implemented based on the 1904 Treaty between Dutch and Portuguese; and (6) Segu Bah Ob / Nelu located in Sunsea Village, District Naibenu. The small segment in Nelu, Sunsea Village is ± 1.5 km and has been deliberated in 2003 but the communities in this segment refuse to demarcate on the grounds that they do not want to lose their land (7). In this area there is a pillar of Ampu Panalak, but the people of East Timor damaged the pillar and shifted the territory's boundary ± 500 meters. This segment has triggered conflicts that need to be addressed seriously because on October 16, 2013 there had been a mutual attack between Nelu residents, Sunsea Village, Naibenu Sub-district, and Leolbatan residents, Kosta Village, Town district (7). This was triggered by the destruction of dozens of ancestral graves (tombs) of citizens of Nelu once East Timor did the job of opening a new highway.

The border issue in unresolved and un-surveyed segments in Timor Tengah Utara is a political conflict between two neighbouring countries. However, the resolution of this conflict should not only use a political approach but also a socio-cultural approach from the two conflicting groups. Basically, political conflict is caused by two things namely horizontal plurality and vertical plurality. Society including cultures, religions, races, languages and others are horizontal plurality, while vertical plurality includes a polarized society structure according to wealth, knowledge and power (Paul Conn in Conflict and Decision Making p.30-31). Therefore, this study aimed to identify socio-cultural approaches in solving border

issues between Indonesia and East Timor in unresolved and un-surveyed segments in Timor Tengah Utara district.

METHODS

Study design and recruitment

This qualitative study was conducted in Timor Tengah Utara district in 2017. In-depth interview method was employed to collect data from the participants (9). The use of qualitative study was useful since it enabled direct interaction between researcher and interviewees, and provided researcher with opportunities to observe the situation and setting where the respondents lived, worked and interacted (9, 10).

Prior to the interviews, each participant was informed that ethical approval for this study was obtained from Nusa Cendana University, Kupang, Indonesia. They were advised that their participation in this study was voluntary and that there would be no benefits and consequences if they decided not to continue their participation during the interview. Before each interview, they were told that the interview would take approximately 40 to 60 minutes and that data or information provided during the interview will be anonymous and confidential. Each of them was provided with a consent form and signed it prior to the interview.

Data analysis

The recorded data were transcribed into coding sheets and translated into English. Data were analysed using a thematic analysis framework where the transcriptions from each respondent was repeatedly read and commented (11). Open coding was made to produce a long list of themes, followed by close coding where all the similar themes were grouped under the same theme to reduce the list of themes to a manageable number of themes (11).

RESULTS

The border areas of Timor Tengah Utara (Indonesia) and Oecusse District (East Timor)

There are six points where Timor Tengah Utara district (Indonesia) and Oecusse district (East Timor) share the borders. Decision about the borders between the two countries in these six points has not yet been reached because each party has different versions about the borders. The six points are (1) Bijaelsunan, Manusasi Village, West Miomaffo sub-district; (2) Tubu Banat, Nilulat Village and Tubu Village, Bikomi Nilulat sub-district; (3) Nefo Nunpo, Haumeni Village Ana, Bikomi Nilulat sub-district; (4) Pistana, Nainaban Village and Sunkaen Village, Bikomi Nilulat sub-district; (5) Subina, Inbate Village, Bikomi Nilulat Sub-district; and (6) Bah Ob- Nellu, Sunsea Village, Nai'Benu Sub-district. This segment covers Pistana Segment (Nainaban Village and Sunkaen Village), Nefonunpo Segment (Haumen Ana Village), Tubu Banat Segment (Tubu Village and Nilulat Village), and BAH - OB NELLU Segment (Sunsea Village). While those included in the unresolved segment are Manusasi Segment.

Colonial-Boundary Making

Border conflict between Indonesia and East Timor was actually starting from the determination of the boundaries made by two colonial countries namely the Netherlands and Portugal. Both colonial powers during the colonial period set boundaries between Indonesia and East Timor based on their political and economic interests without considering the interests of the people or tribes living in the border regions. This is now causing conflict between communities or tribes of the two countries occupying border points. They fight because they feel disadvantaged by the imposition of boundaries by the colonizing countries. Communities or tribes in the border regions both from Indonesia and East Timor claim their rights to these lands, hence creating conflicts between them both verbally and physically:

"The boundaries between the two countries [Indonesia and East Timor] have been determined long ago by the Dutch and Portuguese. And we know that

these two colonial countries set these boundaries to meet their political and economic needs and did not accommodate the interests of local people, both from Indonesia and East Timor. Therefore, now the problems begin to arise among people at the community levels because we feel that we have the rights to these lands "(P1).

"The problem is that those who attempt to resolve border conflicts in some Indonesian areas directly adjacent to East Timor always refer to the boundaries established by the colonial nations. This certainly will not solve the problem because the Dutch and Portuguese when setting these boundaries did not care about the interests of the local communities. Therefore, if these boundaries remain in use then society will certainly not accept "(P2).

Indonesian Government Boundary-Making Errors

The boundaries previously established by the Indonesian government have also led to conflicts among communities or tribes occupying the border regions. Determination of borders between Indonesia and East Timor by the central government of Indonesia was done after the integration of East Timor with Indonesia. East Timor was then one of Indonesia's provinces and therefore the central government, when setting up regional boundaries, shifted the entry points into the West Nusa Tenggara area without seeking the consent of the people. This has now led to a prolonged conflict because East Timor has separated from Indonesia and become a separate country. In addition, communities or tribes around the border regions begin to claim these lands as their property:

"The pillars that mark the boundaries between the Indonesian and East Timor that have been installed by the Indonesian government are now causing problems because the setting of boundaries is not in accordance with the history of these lands. I and the traditional leaders, as well as the whole community members, continue to reject the prescribed boundaries forever. The central government establishes the boundaries without involving us living in the villages or border areas" (P3).

"The government sets the boundaries of the region based on its own will. We continue to refuse because the boundaries set by the central government harm us who live at the border areas "(P4).

In addition, Indonesians or tribes from Indonesia rejected boundaries that had been established by the Indonesian government after East Timor integrated with Indonesia in 1976 because the boundaries set out covered their *ulayat* lands. Another factor supporting their rejection to the prescribed boundaries was that East Timor now stands alone as a State and is no longer part of the of Indonesia. Therefore, their land which was previously processed by the people or tribes of East Timor in the border areas should be returned to them. The border points covering the lands that belong to them should be restored to their original position because now East Timor is another country:

"According to the 1904 treaty, the boundary of the state is set in Oelkita, West of the Indonesian National Army station and Nefonunpo. Once Usi Lake and Uskono from Timor (Indonesia) and the Old Amo Jose da Costa of Oecusse agreed and made Nefonunpo as a boundary between the two kingdoms during the Dutch and Portuguese period. After East Timor integrated with Indonesia in 1976, determination of the borderline of East Nusa Tenggara province and East Timor in 1988 did not follow the boundary agreement between the Netherlands and Portugal. Then, after independence in 2002, East Timor established a state border following the provincial boundary made in 1988. This is what makes people do not agree because their customary land becomes part of the territory of East Timor due to the 1988 boundary making. When the provincial boundaries were set up, the local people did not protest because they thought the East Timorese were relatives, and were part of Indonesia but now we have separated, we protest because this is about the sovereignty of our country. We and they are separated politically and administratively" (P 10).

Lack of Community Involvement

Lack of community involvement in the determination of territorial boundaries was reported as one of the factors causing conflicts among the people or tribes that occupy the

border areas. Participants revealed that the Indonesian government when setting the border points between West Timor and East Timor did not involve the communities and traditional leaders. Therefore, the determination of these borderlines did not consider the socio-cultural factors of the local communities. As a result the people of West Timor (Indonesia) do not accept the boundaries that have been set because they feel disadvantaged. The specified border points are seen not in accordance with what they know:

"The determination of the boundaries did not involve our traditional leaders or the local communities. Therefore, the people of Sunkaen do not accept and strongly reject the results of any decisions relating to territorial boundaries because we feel disadvantaged, our land is taken away "(P5).

"We who are the members of the local communities had never been actively involved in setting boundary points between West Timor and East Timor. We were not involved when the Dutch and Portuguese set boundaries during the colonial period, and we were not involved as the central government set boundary points between the two provinces. So now we do reject the set limits because we know the truth "(P6).

The lack of involvement of the community and traditional leaders in the determination of the boundaries between the province of East Nusa Tenggara and East Timor resulted in the shift of the boundary points to the East Nusa Tenggara region. This was done by the Indonesian government as a strategy to persuade the East Timorese who have just become part of Indonesia. But now these border points are causing conflicts between the people or members of the tribes that occupy the border regions. Indonesians or tribes from Indonesia feel disadvantaged because their lands are claimed by the people of East Timor:

"The Indonesian government shifted those boundaries because the government wanted to win the hearts of the East Timorese, and besides, we did not really mind because we were relatives or families. But now we do not agree anymore because we have separated" (P7).

"When the boundaries were set by the Indonesian government, indigenous figures who knew about the history of these lands were not involved and the

government shifted the boundaries according to its will. I knew at that time, the government wanted the East Timorese to feel as part of Indonesian citizens, and be accepted by fellow Indonesian citizens. But now it is the trigger of conflict between us" (P8).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to identify determinants of border conflicts between Indonesia and East Timor in unresolved and un-surveyed segment in Timor Tengah Utara district. Studies and reports in different settings and countries have reported several factors that lay the foundation for border conflicts, including involvement of external forces, the characteristics of the regional demographics, the media and general public perception, economics and government policies (4, 12, 13). Factors including the lack of a regulatory authority, socio-legal aspects, psychological aspects, and technical factors have also been reported in other studies as the underlying causes of border conflicts (14, 15). Continuing economic development and demographic expansion leading to increasing competition over scarce natural resources, the need for more energy, and the need for water for agricultural use, and environmental degradation due to fast industrialization and aggravated by climate change that will exasperate the scarcity of resources, have also been indicated as the supporting factors intensifying border disputes among several countries in Asia (16-18).

Supporting the results of previous studies (19, 20), the current study suggests that colonial-boundary making had triggered the conflict between the people from tribes living around the borders, both from Indonesia and East Timor. This was due to the fact that the colonizers once deciding on the borders between West Timor (Indonesia) and East Timor (Now East Timor) did not consider socio-cultural and historical aspect of the land, but their own political and economic interests (14, 20). The findings of the present study also report that the border points made by the national government of Indonesia after the integration of East Timor into Indonesia have also been the source of the conflict between the people or tribes from Indonesia and East Timor. The participants articulated that the government of Indonesia made new border points which covered parts of their land and gave it the people from East Timor. The main reason underlying this decision was that East Timor was a part or province of Indonesia, and they also had the rights to work on the Indonesian territory (19).

However, after the separation from Indonesia, people from East Timor continue to claim their rights over the land given by the government of Indonesia. This triggers horizontal conflicts between members of the tribes living around the borders because each of them insists on their rights over the land.

The findings of the current study also report that lack of involvement of communities and traditional leaders especially from the Indonesian side in the boundary making process held by the Indonesian government was the factor supportive of the conflicts between the people from Indonesia and East Timor. The Indonesian communities and traditional leaders living at the borders claimed to have the rights over the land being disputed but were involved in the boundary-making process, hence rejecting the border points that have been decided upon. The influence of external factors, economic development and demographic expansion that have previously been reported to trigger border conflicts between countries were not the case in the current study (21, 22). Likewise, environmental degradation and scarcity of resources that often increase the tension and lead to conflicts between countries sharing the borders were not diagnosed in this study (23, 24).

CONCLUSIONS

The present study reports several factors supportive of border conflicts between Indonesia and East Timor in unresolved and un-surveyed segment, Timor Tengah Utara district. They include colonial-boundary making, Indonesian government-boundary making errors, and lack of involvement of communities and traditional leaders in boundary-making process. Findings of the current study indicate that borderlines made by the colonizers and the Indonesian government was influenced by their political and economic interests, and therefore, they have neglected socio-cultural and historical aspect of the land, leading to rejection by the locals living around the borders. The findings show the need to develop conflict resolution strategies that take into account socio-cultural values and norms and historical aspect of the land being disputed, and to involve the communities and traditional leaders in boundary-making process. This could lead to great acceptance of the decision in the future as all parties with interests are involved in taking decision on the borders between the two countries.

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