East Timor: When State Repression Makes Secession Easier (1975–2002)

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Abstract: Why does state violence sometimes fail to crush a secessionist movement and instead facilitate international support for the separatist cause? Based on the literature on the international recognition of secessionist entities and on the impact of state repression against social movements, this paper develops an argument according to which the timing of certain repressive events make them more likely to generate an international backlash and thus facilitate external support for secessionists. To backfire internationally, state violence must occur at the right time—that is, when the secessionists have gained sufficient media attention, put in place an appropriate organizational structure, and have abandoned violent tactics for a nonviolent campaign. Using the secession process of East Timor as a case study, this paper shows how the international moral outrage that followed the Dili massacre (1991),combined with a changing geopolitical context, have boosted the foreign support of the secessionist movement in East Timor and allowed it to obtain important concessions from Jakarta.

Keywords: State repression, Secession, East Timor, Political violence, International Relations.

Large-scale state violence is a common consequence of secessionist conflicts[1]. When confronted to a self-determination movement, governments often choose repression over negotiation to demonstrate strength and intractability (Toft, 2010).

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Because both belligerents claim exclusive control over the same territory, disputes of secession often reach an impasse and turn into violent conflicts (Walter, 2009). In fact, many states adopt the repressive approach in order to deter ulterior demands for secession (Walter, 2006; Griffiths, 2016). Similarly, when secessionist groups are fractionalized, central states face less pressure to make concessions and are thus more prone to violent reactions (Cunningham, 2011). States also use repression when they expect the secessionist movement to gain enough foreign support to pose a security threat in the future (Butt, 2017) or when they treat sovereignty as non-negotiable (Sorens, 2012).

Repressive tactics against a secessionist movement might however impose a reputational cost on the government that implements them. When widely mediatized, these acts of state brutality are likely to generate a 'moral outrage' and reinforce pro-independence sentiments (Wood, 2003). Anger toward the state violent behavior may stimulate popular mobilization (Sutton *et al.,* 2014), while exposure to violence may increase political participation (Gilligan *et al.,* 2014) and affect people's attitudes toward the perpetrator (Dell & Querubin, 2018, cited in Barceló, 2018). Excessive police or military violence directed at peaceful protesters may create strong symbols of collective suffering and thus lead to 'political jiu-jitsu' where repression generates dissension within the government's ranks and potentially encourages uncommitted third party to support the opposition (Sutton *et al.,* 2014). State-directed violence also sometimes backfires in such a way that a more or less marginal cause turns into a widely publicized mass movement (Hess & Martin, 2006). Such boomerang effects where state violence stimulates the opposition it strives to suppress are expected to sometimes occur in self-determination disputes since secessionist movements are built around strong national identities and collective perceptions of government abuses, both of which could be reinforced due to repeated experiences of state violence (Barceló, 2018, p. 2).

The use of repression by central states against self-determination movements is therefore a tricky game. In fact, state brutality against secessionists have heterogeneous effects, depending on the context in which it takes place. In some cases, state repression is counterproductive and ultimately serves the cause of the secessionists by strengthening the legitimacy of their claims in the eyes of the international community and by prompting foreign interventions in the conflict. For example, several observers highlighted how the Serbian exactions in Kosovo somehow triggered an intervention of the West and paved the way for the international recognition of Kosovo's independence (Marek, 2019). Bangladesh has been recognized, in part, due to serious human rights violations by Pakistani forces (Caspersen, 2013). In contrast, previous researches have pointed out how the Russian crackdown on Chechen secessionists did little to help them gain international support (Cornell, 1999; Pavkovic & Radan, 2011). Likewise, while Nigeria's atrocities in Biafra strengthened French support for the separatist cause, they however failed to convince the great powers to grant official recognition to the secessionist state (Brucker, 2019).

Why does state violence against secessionists only sometimes backfire? Under what conditions does state repression of secessionists turn out to be counterproductive and favor international support for secession?

I argue that the timing of certain acts of state repression during a secessionist conflict is often more important than their magnitude. In order to backfire internationally, state repression must occur at the right time. More precisely, for state violence to internationally backfire and thus transform itself into external support for secession, self-determination movements must have previously adopted awell-organized and nonviolent campaign, and achieved some degree of publicity in international media. Under these circumstances, I expect a government's use of repression to be a tipping point in international support for the territorial integrity of the state. From that point on, outside powers are more likely to pressure the central state to make concessions or even initiate international interventions and sanctions against those guilty of human rights violations. By ripple effect, mediatisation and international arbitration often open windows for secessionists to organize a referendum on secession or obtain territorial concessions from the state. This is how mediatized state brutalities could pave the way for an internationally recognized secession.

Several researchers have underlined the crucial influence of state repression on the likelihood that secessionist entities obtain international recognition. However, the mechanisms through which state repression does affect international recognition are still unclear and debated. In fact, not all repressed minorities found strong support in the eyes of external actors and garnered sufficient international recognition to be allowed to separate (Sterio, 2013, p. 139). The varied international support for repressed secessionists therefore raises an interesting research puzzle and has multiple implications, the most notable being our understanding of the effectiveness of violent state repression as a political tool to maintain a state's territorial integrity.

Furthermore, although we know self-determination disputes are often violent, much remains to be discovered about the consequences of violence on the course of such conflicts. In the next section, I therefore discuss the nexus between violence, legitimacy and international recognition of secession before presenting my argument on the conditions of state repression to internationally backfire in secessionist conflicts. I finally dedicate the last two sections to a case study (East Timor) where I apply my argument and then conclude on future avenues for research.

Violence, legitimacy and international recognition

International recognition of a newly independent state is the ultimate goal of all secessionist projects. In order to achieve it, secessionists must secure external support as well as acquire international legitimacy. It is rarely an easy process, as the international system generally tends to favor norms of territorial integrity and non-intervention

over self-determination principles (Krasner, 1999). Moreover, states are usually reluctant to border changes and therefore show little interest in most separatist demands (Heraclides, 1990).

International politics, however, play a crucial role in the willingness of states to accept or promote secession (Brucker, 2019, p. 2). The evolution of international standards regardinggood governance, the protection of human rights and the right of peoples to self-determination constantly affects the positions of states towards secession (Fabry, 2010). The post-Cold War era for example introduced new set of moral norms such as the protection of minorities and democracy (Finnemore, 1996). These norms influenced the practices and strategies for recognition of *de facto states*, and encouraged secessionist entities to adopt democracy and the respect of human rights as fundamental values supposed to guide the subsequent development of their state (Ryngaert & Sobrie, 2011). The way seceding entities are treated is inconstant and largely depends on the evolution of "global normative consensus" (Fabry, 2012, p. 663). In fact, as observed by Griffiths (2018), international recognition should be somehow viewed as "a body of evolving norms, rules, and practices that determines which claimants can become independent states" (p.80). Accordingly, the 'invisible hand of the international system' tends to influence the number of new states that will be granted international recognition (Griffiths, 2014). Specific periods of world politics have thus been more prone to the emergence of new states, such as the era of decolonization during which self-determination was generally seen as legitimate for ex-colonies (Griffiths, 2016).

Since the normative environment and the distribution of power are constantly evolving in the international system, secessionists need to adapt their strategies in order to gain external support and enhance their international legitimacy. The perfect recipe for successful secession is therefore contextual. Self-determination movements strive to take advantage of changing normative contexts and integrate their demands into the moral economy in such a way as to make them legitimate (Seymour, 2017). Secessionists thus use the normative symbols that they deem the most likely to elicit external support or an intervention from the international community in their favor (Heraclides, 1992). These symbols include independence referenda (Crameri, 2016; Cortés Rivera, 2020), the provision of social services to the population (Stewart, 2018) and the use of para-diplomacy that imitates state diplomacy (Danilovich & Abdulrahman, 2017). So as to increase their internal and external legitimacy, secessionists also build solid institutions capable of maintaining good governance practices and demonstrate that the secessionist state is efficient enough to perform its core functions (Ghai & Regan, 2006; Palani *et al.*, 2019).

In their effort to connect their local struggle to international politics, self-determination movements frequently refer to human rights abuses by the central state so as to engage foreign actors in the conflict (Brucker, 2019, p. 13). Repressed rights-based movements

are more likely to generate public outrage than similarly repressed social movements based on collective identity (Wisler & Giugni, 1999).Secessionists will therefore often amalgamatethe norms of self-determination and human rights, insisting that full independence is the only way to ensure the survival of an oppressed population (Sterio, 2013). Additionally, it has been observed that offering protection to civilians against a repressive state could enhance the internal legitimacy of a secessionist movement and reinforce its local support (Terpstra & Frerks, 2017).

There is thus a permanent interaction between the strategies of the central state and those of the secessionists. In reaction to self-determination claims, central states invoke their right for territorial integrity and non-inference in internal affairs (Heraclides, 1992; Butt, 2017). Government accused of violating international norms such as the protection of human rights often use specific rhetoric aimed at their domestic society in an attempt to counter threats to their legitimacy posed by international condemnations of their repressive behavior (Risse, 2000, p. 29). Once a secessionist movement declares its independence, it is still possible for the central state to hinder its recognition. In these cases, the parent state puts in place a strategy of 'counter secession' aiming at preventing the secessionist territory to become accepted on the international stage (Ker-Lindsay, 2012). Secession conflicts, therefore, become internationalized conflicts as the two belligerents seek external support and address the international community in a struggle over perceptions and legitimacy (Pavkovic & Radan, 2011; Seymour, 2017; Brucker, 2019).

In some instances, it is unclear, however, which side triggered the violence and who should be condemned for it. The Law of Coercive Responsiveness predicts that 'governments will respond with repression when challenged' (Pierskalla, 2010, p. 118). Violence may escalate as state repression leads to new levels of instability and prompts opposition groups to reciprocate government violence (Regan & Norton, 2005). In order to draw international attention to their cause and put pressure on their home state, secessionist groups may thus initiate a cycle of violence and use the resulting political instability as a lever for negotiation (Griffiths, 2016; Griffiths & Wasser, 2019). Paquin (2010) explained how the United States, as a stability-seeking power, often preferred secession to maintaining the status quo when the latter option created too much political instability. Secessionist movements would therefore have certain incentives to use force and drag the central state into violent conflict (Griffiths & Wasser, 2019).

The strategic use of violence by secessionists is nonetheless a double edged-sword. Violence is often necessary to secure the territory and draw international attention to the conflict. On the other hand, a secessionist group capable of limiting the victimization of civilians respects international expectations and norms of warfare, thereby increasing the perceived legitimacy of its organization and the goals its pursuing (Fazal, 2013; Lasley & Thyne, 2015, cited in Flynn & Stewart, 2018). If secessionists succeed

in exposing that the central state is using unilateral violence against them, their claims for self-determination could be viewed by foreign countries as intrinsically linked to human rights protection. Conversely, when secessionists use violence against civilians, they diminish their legitimacy and risk retaliation and losing local support (Fazal, 2013). Moreover, some evidence suggest that the use of violence can be counter-productive if it comes at the expense of the use of institutional methods (Griffiths & Wasser, 2019).

In sum, international politics largely shape the development of secessionist conflicts. Self-determination groups must prove to foreign actors that granting them international recognition is in their best interest. To do so, they appeal to norms that resonate in the moral economy, they demonstrate that they will behave as a good state, and they frequently invoke oppressive behaviors of the central state as a justification for secession and foreign intervention. Specifically, self-determination movements often attempt to involve the great powers in their conflict with the central state. As Milena Sterio (2013) puts it, 'because the great powers are essentially more sovereign than other states, they may engage in interventions and cross other states' borders, in the name of preserving some higher ideals [such as the protection of human rights]' (p. 51). An international denunciation following state violence can therefore lead to a reduction in the international support granted to the state grappling with a separatist conflict (Paquin, 2010). In the face of such a reaction, the state under pressure is more likely to make concessions to secessionists. A self-determination movement therefore has a lot to gain if it manages to prove to the international community that the central state is using political repression against it.

Argument

Not all repressive behaviors result in international backlash. Some states historically resorted to violent coercion and succeeded in crushing a secessionist movement. In fact, the international community sometimes ignores serious human rights abuses by governments and chooses not to intervene in secessionist conflicts. In other cases, however, state-led violence against secessionists engenders international condemnations, government-targeted sanctions, and even military interventions. External support to secessionists is frequently linked to repressive acts by the central state and the legitimacy of self-determination claims is often reinforced when there is evidence of state failure to protect basic human rights (Sterio, 2013).

The argument I present here thus aims to clarify the conditions under which state repression of a secessionist movement turns out to be counterproductive as it triggers foreign intervention in the conflict and increases the legitimacy of secession as a solution to end the violence and political instability. My argument focuses on the international backlash unleashed by state repression, and therefore leaves aside the way in which violence backfires at the domestic level. I argue that the timing of certain

acts of repression make them more likely to generate a reaction from the international community. At the initial stage of the conflict, secessionists are normally poorly organized, lacking campaign infrastructure and media coverage. Under these conditions, the political repression is unlikely to generate popular enthusiasm for secession, nor to make the international community react. State violence could have local effects on the mobilization against the government, but without organizational structure and media attention, the movement will probably not gain momentum and fail to spread information on government's abuses. In contrast, if the central state perpetuates acts of brutality against the secessionist movement at a later stage of the conflict in which the media and organizational structure are present, political repression is more likely to attract international attention and thus backfire.

Furthermore, I argue that the best moment for state repression to backfire is after the secessionists have abandoned violent strategies and instead adopted a nonviolent campaign. Following Griffiths & Fazal (2014) argument, I expect secessionists to initially attain international media attention 'for their cause via the use of violence [and then convert it] into international support once violence has been eschewed' (p. 98). Harsh regime repression against a nonviolent secessionist campaign is often effective in increasing international sympathy for separatist demands. On the one hand, it shifts ethno-nationalist claims towards claims of respect for human rights and, on the other hand, it confirms the separatist rhetoric according to which the central state is a threat to the survival of a population (Sterio, 2013). When hard-hitting images of state repression circulate in the international media, they have the potential to arouse moral outrage and pressure foreign governments to respond so as to avoid reputational damage caused by inaction (Binder, 2015). State repression against nonviolent self-determination movements often makes secessionist disputes more violent (Sambanis & Zinn, 2006). Secessionist groups that aspire to gain international support must therefore resist the urge to respond to state violence to be seen as nonviolent and oppressed (Arves *et al.,* 2019), while provoking a violent overreaction from the state that could backfire. In some cases, foreign states will even go so far as to intervene militarily in order to 'stop the killing' (Balch-Lindsay & Enterline, 2000). In addition, external interventions to end human suffering are more likely when the central state has weak capacities and when the violence generates negative spill over effects on neighboring regions such as flows of refuges to the borders (Binder, 2015).

State violence is however sometimes effective to damper protests (Olzak *et al.,* 2003) or discouraging further mobilization against an oppressive regime (Davenport, 2008). Some states choose to target the secessionist population in order to dissuade civilians from supporting independence (Balcells *et al.,* 2020). Attacks on non-combatants are expected to alter the behavior of the targeted group (Wood, 2010). The goal is to make dissent an expensive option and to maintain the government's grip on power as well

as to preserve the territorial integrity of the state (Davenport & Armstrong, 2004). The repressive tactics undertaken by states against secessionists vary according to their intensity. The likelihood that state repression will backfire internationally thus partially depends on its severity as well as the reputation and (un)democratic nature of the perpetrator state. Barceló (2018) found no evidence of boomerang effect on local mobilization following Madrid's non-lethal use of violence against Catalan secessionists. In addition, most states, including several democracies, have chosen not to condemn Madrid for its aggressive stance against the pro-secession protests in the wake of the 2017 referendum. The reactions of the international community would probably have been more severe if Madrid had shot to death the demonstrators. In fact, extreme acts of state repression such as the indiscriminate killing of civilians are expected to be more likely to spark international outrage than softer repression.

To backfire, state violence must also be known by a wide audience. Secessionist groups lacking local support and strong organizational structures will have difficulty to communicate state abuses and ensure the information is widespread. Francisco (2004), for example, showed the crucial role of 'dissident entrepreneurs' which mobilize supporters by transmitting information in the days following repressive events. Moreover, Hess and Martin (2006) have discussed how state violence is reinterpreted or concealed in order to prevent any backlash from the opposition. Secessionists, if they want the international community to sanction the central state, must convince foreign actors that their interpretation of the repressive event is reliable. One effective way to do so is to refer to credible witnesses such as international media (Gilboa, 2005) or human rights organizations (Franklin, 2008; Murdie & Davis, 2012). States guilty of human rights crimes will often suppress information to avoid international condemnation (Martin, 2007) or claim that 'violence was used in self-defence' (Sutton *et al.,* 2014, p. 561). The great powers decision to 'portray the secessionist group as the culprit in a civil war, or conversely, label the mother state as the oppressor' is crucial to the likelihood that state repression backfires internationally (Sterio, 2013, p.57). Whether or not certain major powers decide to support the central state will greatly affect its ability and willingness to fight secessionists. In order to avoid instability in the international system, great powers might adopt a convergent position towards the conflict, or, contrariwise, compete and fight over the legitimacy of secession (Coggins, 2014). Spheres of influence and regime type could potentially shapes recognition decisions, with western democracies often aligning with the US position in the last decades (Siroky *et al.,* 2020). Democratic states are expected to respect a 'democratic peace' *vis-à-vis* their counterparts, and would thus generally refrain from intervening in conflicts of secession taking place among democratic allies (Bélanger *et al.,* 2005).

The conditions for state violence to backfire internationally are therefore numerous and that explain why so many states have violently repressed secessionist movements

without suffering international repercussions. To backfire internationally, state violence must occur at the right time - that is, when the secessionists have gained sufficient media attention, put in place an appropriate organizational structure, and have abandoned violent tactics for a nonviolent campaign. If the repressive state controls information, or is a major power with a veto at the Security Council, there is little chance that international action will be taken against it (Sterio, 2013).

Empirical strategy

My argument emphasizes the timing of specific events of state repression which are more likely to generate negative international reactions and therefore promote support for secessionists. The case of the East Timorese process towards full independence (1975-2002) is well suited for the purpose of this study because we can observe shifts in the belligerent strategies as well as an evolution of foreign interference in the conflict. Drawing on secondary sources, I track how specific repressive events triggered international condemnations and resulted in a decrease of international support for Indonesia, thus easing the path to secession and international recognition of East Timor.

I consider state violence against secessionists to internationally backfire when there are clear indications of a decrease in international support granted to the central state, or conversely, an increased support for secessionists. The empirical evidence I am looking for includes official condemnations by foreign countries, economic sanctions, Security Council resolutions, military aid and the use of international arbitration. Following Huddleston (2020), I consider international recognition as a continuous process that also includes a large set of foreign policy decisions. This research method aims to unearth causal mechanisms at work that would demonstrate that state repression tipped the balance of legitimacy in the side of the secessionists and helped them gain international support. Moreover, this work will pay particular attention to the evolution of the norms invoked by the secessionists in parallel with the state repression by considering how the rebels instrumentalize certain norms in search of legitimacy and take advantage of the evolution of international normative contexts (Seymour, 2017).

Case study

The overthrow of the authoritarian state in Portugal by a military coup paved the way for a diffuse process of decolonization and left three possible options for East Timor: continued association with Portugal, independence or integration with Indonesia (Purnawanty, 2000). The two major political groups in East Timor quickly clashed over the issue. The Timorese Democratic Union (UDT) has drawn closer to Indonesia, while the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) has championed the cause of independence. After several months of violent confrontations between different factions, it was finally the pro-independence Fretilin party with communist affiliations

that took power, unilaterally announcing the independence of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on November 28, 1975 (Purnawanty, 2000).

Fretilin's victory was a major concern for Indonesia's staunchly anti-Communist military regime (Lutz & Lutz, 2013). The American quagmire in Vietnam convinced the Indonesian authorities that a Communist peril was at their doorstep (Simpson, 2005). In addition, a growing number of unrest in the country suggested that other unilateral declarations of independence could follow. The Indonesian government therefore feared that 'an independent East Timor would provide an example for the secessionist groups elsewhere in the country and generate subsequent instability' (Lutz & Lutz, 2013).

On December 7, Indonesia invaded East Timor (Simpson, 2005). Affirming that the political groups in East Timor have requested its intervention, Indonesia further justified its occupation as being crucial to maintain order and stability in the territory. Another justification for the invasion focused on the norms of decolonization, while Jakarta argued that the dispute in East Timor was a direct consequence of colonial oppression (Risse, 2000). It is widely believed that the invasion was launched with the blessing of the West, if not the support, particularly of the United States and Australia (Purnawanty, 2000). Two days before the invasion, US President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were in Jakarta to visit President Suharto (Wheeler & Dunne, 2001). Kissinger reported that Americans said they understood Indonesia's position on East Timor (Jardine, 1975). The United States and its main Western allies have even gone so far as to oppose the UN's position on the non-recognition of Indonesian sovereignty in East Timor (Jardine, 1975). Australia, for its part, signed oil contracts in East Timor and in turn defended Indonesia's position on the international stage (Leaver, 2001). The British, Australian and American governments have reportedly continued to sell arms and train Indonesian troops (Pilger, 1994; Simpson, 2005).

Indonesia's invasion of East Timor resulted in widespread state violence, including indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations (Lutz & Lutz, 2013). A systematic campaign of terror was waged against groups of the population suspected of sympathizing with Fretilin. Indonesian forces carried out executions, mass rapes and various forms of torture (Lutz & Lutz, 2013). The objective of the Indonesian state repression was to terrorize the civilian populations in order to demotivate them from joining the ranks of Fretilin and thus push the secessionist rebels to take refuge in the mountains. Walter (2009) argues that the Indonesian government quickly used violence in East Timor to discourage other minorities from seceding (p.145).

In the first years after the invasion and perpetuation of political violence, the international community remained virtually silent on Indonesian abuses (Wheeler & Dunne, 2001). International condemnations followed the Indonesian invasion and the UN continued to recognize Portugal as the *de jure* administrator of East Timor (Sterio, 2013). However, international action to end Indonesian human rights violations seemed

impossible, partly due to US and UK obstruction at the Security Council (Simpson, 2005). Moreover, it appears that the conflict was initially seen as a confrontation in which violence emanated as much from secessionist troops as from the Indonesian state. Jakarta has constructed a narrative according to which East Timorese society was a violent society in which political clans and factions constantly fight each other (Haseman, 2003). Hess and Martin (2006) report that although the Indonesian forces committed much greater atrocities and that there was an asymmetry of power between the two belligerents, the fact remains that the Fretilin also used violence and in return received little support from the international community (p. 256). In fact, the international community's criticism of the situation in East Timor focused on the illegality of the Indonesian occupation, but generally ignored the violent repression and human rights abuses (Purnawanty, 2000). It has also been highlighted that the secessionist movement initially struggled to gain international attention, as the Indonesian occupiers 'exercised effective control over information, thus preventing communications between Fretilin and the rest of the world' (Hess & Martin, 2006). The separatist organization was furthermore plagued by intern divisions, which prevented it from developing a solid organizational infrastructure (Hill, 2002).

The secessionists' difficulty in gaining outside support and exposing Indonesian violence to the world prompted a shift in Fretilin's strategy (Fukuda, 2000). In the early 1980s, secessionist rebels thus gradually abandoned guerrilla tactics in mountainous terrain, and instead focused on non-violent resistance in urban context, specifically during visits by foreign dignitaries (Hess & Martin, 2006). This new strategy aimed to generate a disavowal of the international community *vis-à-vis* the Indonesian government if the latter committed acts of violence during peaceful protests. This new tactic bore fruit in the Dili massacre on November 12, 1991, when Indonesian troops opened fire on civilians during the burial of a secessionist activist (Kohen, 1999). Some Western journalists were present at the scene and brutalized by the Indonesian army (Hess & Martin, 2006). The event caught the world's attention and 'the global opinion turned against Indonesia and in favor of East Timorese independence' (Sterio, 2013). In response to the moral outrage, the Indonesian government claimed that secessionist rebels had infiltrated the group of civilians and initiated the violence. In addition, Jakarta set up a national inquiry in order to 'give the appearance of justice to the international community' (Hess & Martin, 2006). The National Commission of Inquiry concluded that the actions of the Indonesian soldiers exceeded 'acceptable standards' (Sherlock, 1996, p. 847).

The massacre therefore marked a turning point in the balance of legitimacy in East Timor. First, the massacre was a major setback for the Indonesian government's efforts to convince the international community that most Timorese had accepted integration into Indonesia (Hess & Martin, 2006). Second, the media coverage of the murder of innocent civilians on television screens around the world has transformed the attitudes

of many influential actors in Western civil society. For example, a member of the US Congress decided to support demands to end aid to Indonesia after seeing the famous images of the massacre (Sherlock, 1996). In fact, larger exactions took place before the Dili massacre and obtained little international attention (Dunn, 2003). That day, the presence of international journalists, the publicization of secessionist demands and the movement's nonviolence all played in favor of the secessionists. If the movement had not previously made its cause widely known and had not developed an appropriate organizational structure, it would hardly have been able to carry out subsequent resistance and benefit from state repression as it did. The international reaction therefore convinced the secessionist rebels of Fretilin to engage even further in a strategy of peaceful urban protests as to make Indonesia repression backfire internationally (Sherlock. 1996; Fukuda, 2000).

This specific event of repression has cost Indonesia dearly. Long-time allies of Indonesia, such as Malaysia, have criticized it for its actions (Traub, 2000; Dunn, 2003). The controversy also undermined Jakarta's efforts in the 1980s to secure the headquarters of the Non-Aligned Movement, and international condemnation of Indonesia continued in the following years (Schwarz, 1994). Affected by the international turmoil, the Indonesian government has sought to increase its legitimacy by injecting investments into the government structure of East Timor, particularly in education and health (Sherlock, 1996).

As the Cold War drew to a close, the United States no more needed to support the government in Jakarta to contain communism (Kohen, 1999). American military assistance to Indonesia was progressively cut off, a clear indication of the decline in foreign support given to the regime in Jakarta. In 1996, a Nobel Prize was awarded to a politician and a bishop of East Timor for their efforts towards a just and peaceful solution to the conflict (Traub, 2000). The announcement of the prize tarnished Indonesia's reputation, and the Nobel Committee statement advanced the 'right to self-determination of the people of East Timor' (Kohen, 2000).In addition, the Asian financial crisis of 1997 left Indonesia in need of international financial assistance, which increased the capacity of the international community to put pressure on Jakarta (Sterio, 2013).

In May 1998, after weeks of protests in the streets of Jakarta, Suharto's government lost power. His successor, Habibie, inherited 'a complex situation in which Indonesia was diplomatically suffering the heavy burden' of its abuses in East Timor (Purnawanty, 2000). It is under these conditions that the negotiations between Portugal, Indonesia and the United Nations concerning the future of East Timor were set up. Agreements authorizing the people of East Timor to decide between autonomy within Indonesia and independence were signed by the different parties (Downer, 2000). The main rationale for the independence option was that East Timor cost Indonesia dearly by 'weakening its international prestige' (Purnawanty, 2000). In response to this demand, the United Nations Security Council created the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET)

on June 11, 1999. UNAMET organized and conducted the referendum on the independence of East Timor (Maley, 2000). The United Nations Secretary General announced that 78.5% of the East Timorese people voted against autonomy within Indonesia. This meant that the people of East Timor expressed their desire to begin a process of transition to independence (Purnawanty, 2000). Following the vote, government-funded armed militias initiated a new wave of violence in order to terrorize and intimidate supporters of independence (Robinson, 2001). These latter actions gave a 'push of legitimacy' to the secessionist movement and became front-page news in every Australian newspaper (Wheeler & Dunne, 2001). On September 15, 1999, the United Nations Security Council, concerned about the deteriorating situation in East Timor, issued United Nations Security Council Resolution 1264 calling for a multinational force to restore peace and security in the country (Traub, 2000). After 'considerable pressure from the international community', the parliament of Indonesia finally recognized the outcome of the referendum (Qvortrup, 2020). Following a period of transition administered by the United Nations and after meeting specific benchmarks, East Timor was internationally recognized as an independent nation on May 20, 2002.

Discussion

East Timor's process towards independence is a good illustration of how distinct acts of political repression by the central state can generate an international reaction and ultimately backfire. The years following the Indonesian invasion gave rise to terrible abuses against the East Timorese population. It was, however, the media coverage of a specific repressive event during which state violence was used against a nonviolent movement that stimulated an international backlash large enough for the central state to compromise and allow a referendum on secession.

The argument I presented above emphasizes on the timing of certain repressive events in a conflict. When state violence is exercised at the initial stage of the conflict in which the secessionists are not sufficiently organized to transmit information about the abuses of the central state, have not yet managed to publicize their claims for independence, and have not adopted a nonviolent strategy, the state repression is unlikely to attract international attention and thus backfire. It takes time and a lot of resources to organize a nonviolent movement (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). It is therefore expected that state violence is more likely to backfire internationally in protracted conflicts. Moreover, why some central states successfully manage to repress violently a secessionist movement without suffering international consequences could be explained by the violent and nascent nature of the secessionist movement. If, on the contrary, the secessionist movement survives the initial repressive acts (as in the case of Fretilin) and improves its nonviolent strategy, publicity and organization, it will be more likely to succeed in gaining international support in the aftermath of state repression.

On the other hand, the analysis shows that the effect of state repression on the balance of legitimacy between the secessionists and the central state is influenced by changing international normative contexts. Since the end of the Cold War, the norms of intervention abroad to protect human rights have become increasingly important, therefore influencing the behavior of the international community *vis-à-vis* states that commit violence against their own population (Finnemore, 1996). At the same time, the evolution of international orders and their 'structural characteristics' have important implications for civil conflicts (Kalyvas & Balcells, 2010). In the case of East Timor, this is highlighted by the strategic support of the United States to the invasion of Indonesia in order to contain communism (Kohen, 1999) and the subsequent reduction of that support when the Cold War ended (Wheeler & Dunne, 2001). In fact, the post-Cold War realignment influenced several separatists conflicts (Olusesan & Basiru, 2018). The international recognition of the secession of East Timor is therefore not only the result of increased legitimacy of secessionist demands, but also of a change in the geopolitical interests of powerful states. The fight for independence in East Timor thus illustrates perfectly how the support, or lack thereof, of the great powers influences the outcome of a struggle for self-determination (Coggins, 2011; Sterio, 2013).

Ulterior research could further examine the influence of international backlashes on domestic backfire effects, as external support following repressive events seems to strengthen local mobilization for secession and generate a momentum for the separatist cause (Brucker, 2019). In the case of East Timor, there appears to be a link between the moral outrage of the international community over the Dili massacre and the subsequent protests against the government in Jakarta. Pressed by the international community to recognize human rights abuses, the Indonesian government changed its rhetoric, which in turn reinforced opposition against Suharto's regime and ultimately forced it to resign (Risse, 2000).

Future research could deepen the links between the strategies adopted by secessionists, the international support they receive, and the likelihood the central state will resort to political repression. States have a wide range of possible responses to dissent activities (Carey, 2010), and the response they choose is undoubtedly influenced by the secessionists strategy as well as the external support these latter obtain (Butt, 2017; Griffiths & Muro, 2020).

In the end, central state repression is rarely a sufficient condition for a secessionist movement to obtain international recognition, but it is most of the time a necessary one. This paper has shown how the international community forced Jakarta to make concessions in the wake of a specific repressive event. From this, we can draw important policy lessons regarding the influence of foreign countries to prevent future outbreaks of state terror and human rights abuses.

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