Review Article

Nation-Building and the Language Tetralemma

Andre Borgerhoff's *Competitive Nation-Building in Timor-Leste*

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Abstract

In *Competitive Nation-Building in Timor-Leste* Andre Borgerhoff examines Timor-Leste in the period 2002–2007 during which political and social division brought the new state to near collapse. He argues that the crisis of this period was associated with the inherently contested nature of nation-building, and this was exemplified by what he identifies as the language tetralemma. His work builds upon literature which argues that nation building, language policy and national identity are fundamental factors which are closely associated with ongoing violence in post-conflict states. This review examines Borgerhoff's contribution to this literature. It commences with a historical and social overview of the crisis in Timor-Leste and the theoretical context in which it was played out. It then addresses Borgerhoff's critique of the cause of dissent in Timor-Leste and demonstrates how his work is a significant scholarly contribution to this field of research. The paper concludes by arguing that language policy is a core component of nation-building in post-conflict states and its implementation is a critical element in the establishment of a pluralist democracy.

Keywords
Borgerhoff, Timor-Leste, language, nation-building, identity

When Timor-Leste gained independence from Indonesia after years of struggle, the focus of nation-building was on establishing the political, social and legal structures of a state. The adoption of a number of languages seemed a secondary consideration and it was not anticipated that just this decision would have the negative implications for the building of the new nation that subsequent events proved.

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In his recent book *Competitive Nation-Building in Timor-Leste*,[1] Borgerhoff demonstrates comprehensively that an important aspect which hindered nation-building in Timor-Leste during the years 2002–2007 was the failure to agree on one national language.[2] He argues that the political and social division of this period was associated with the inherently contested nature of nation-building, and this was typified by what he identifies as the language tetralemma. He formulates this as the dilemma of establishing and governing a polity consisting of four constitutional languages – and particularly, the adoption of Portuguese and the Lusophone ideology with which it was associated, as one of the two official languages.[3] The specific focus of Borgerhoff's thesis is the "political discourse" of the language tetralemma – how it arose and why it contributed to social and political conflict in the new state. He argues that the implementation of a language policy which fed into the tetralemma was a core issue that underpinned the claims of the "young generation" that they had become disenfranchised, and that this contributed to the resentment and marginalization that led ultimately to the crisis in Timor-Leste which erupted in 2006.

These themes build upon the substantial literature that addresses the dilemma of ongoing violence in post-conflict states and particularly that which focuses on the situation of Timor-Leste. Borgerhoff's work adds to and reinforces this literature by cogently demonstrating that this phenomenon is closely related to fundamental issues of nation building, language and national identity which both inform and counteract each other, and that, in the absence of constructive dialogue between the competing parties, the mix of these sometimes inflammatory influences can be the catalyst for new and extended violence. This review examines Borgerhoff's contribution to this debate and the literature that informs it. It commences with a historical and social overview, the effect of which shows, as the literature argues, that nation-building and state-building are critical concepts that underpin approaches to the restoration and development of post-conflict states. Borgerhoff's work is placed within the context of this background and theory, demonstrating both how it builds upon these themes with respect to the situation of Timor-Leste and articulates a comprehensive critique of the underpinning causes of the

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[1]   See references for full title. The book represents the publication of the author's doctoral thesis.

[2]   See Borgerhoff (2012), pp. 31–37, 73–84.

[3]   Portuguese and Tetum are the two "official languages" of Timor-Leste as stipulated in s 13 of the Constitution. English and Indonesian are established as "working languages" (s 159 Constitution). See Borgerhoff (2012), p. xi, 39 and on the "hypothesis that language policy was a source of sociopolitical dispute …", pp. 2–9, 39.

dissent. The paper concludes by arguing that language policy is a core component of nation-building in post-conflict states and its implementation is an important element in the establishment of a stable democracy. Borgerhoff's thesis demonstrates convincingly that with careful and strategic management, language policy can contribute significantly to democratic pluralism, however if poorly managed it becomes a critical element that undermines the delicate balance of peace and stability in emerging states.

Background: Independence, the UN and the crisis

The background to Borgerhoff's thesis, which has been extensively covered in the literature and adopted in his work, is Timor-Leste's struggle for independence and the crisis which followed it.

In late August 1999 the people of East Timor voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia. The euphoria of the successful "popular consultation" and the imminent end of 24 years of often brutal occupation, however, was short-lived: Indonesia, true to its past, immediately unleashed a violent reprisal in which up to 1500 people were killed, thousands displaced and 90% of infrastructure was destroyed. The fragility of the newly-to-be-created nation caused by the violence endured beyond the commencement of sovereignty in 2002. The new state, Timor-Leste, lapsed into disunity and conflict, culminating in the crisis of 2006 and assassination attempts on the President, Ramos-Horta and Prime Minister Gusmao on 11 February 2008. In its assessment, the United Nations (UN) concluded that the infant nation had been plunged into a "political, humanitarian and security crisis of major dimensions".[4]

After its violent separation from Indonesia, Timor-Leste was administered by the UN as a plenary authority until the declaration of sovereignty and the commencement of its first government on 20 May 2002. The transitional administration authority, UNTAET, (UN Transitional Administration in East Timor) struggled with the task of reconciling its inherent bias toward western-internationalist, liberal state-building, and the establishment of international legal norms and practices upon which this was premised, with the demands of local and traditional practices, customs and law.[5] These difficulties were exacerbated by the reality of local conditions – historical, so-

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[4]   UN Security Council (2006), at (2).

[5]   See on this and the following, Borgerhoff (2012), p. 36, Cumes (2010), pp. 280–282; Kent (2012), pp. 27–30, 49, 69; Harper (2005), pp. 49–52; Piquard (2005), p. 80; Stahn (2005), pp. 159–160; Zaum (2009), pp. 187–188, 204.

cial and economic conditions and legacies meant that the population suffered considerable deprivation, whilst international institutions received, by comparison, relatively generous financial support and infrastructure. The UN's state-building agenda dealt inadequately with immediate needs and did not sufficiently emphasise nation building which required a process of consensus-building that gave the local population a stake in the re-building process. UNTAET's priorities should have been directed towards enhancing and fostering knowledge of the local social and political culture, economic relationships and legal norms of the communities in which it was acting. This required an anthropological approach which recognized that an understanding of the social and traditional structures and roles of local communities are a key element of empowerment of the local society. The failure to acknowledge and foster these elements disempowered and marginalised the communities UNTAET was supposedly reconstructing, and contributed to resentment and disbelief in the values of liberalism.

Despite, in relative terms, considerable progress, the new Timor-Leste government, for a host of reasons, was unable to deal with and resolve the legacy of dysfunctional institutions that it inherited from UNTAET. During the years 2002–07 divisions in the country festered and eventually spiralled out of control. The crisis of April and May 2006 resulted in 38 deaths, many more injured, extensive looting and burning of houses especially in Dili, the displacement of an estimated 150,000 people and arbitrary arrests and detention by the armed forces.[6] The civil unrest continued in abated form until September 2006 and the overall security situation remained volatile with episodes of violence leading up to the presidential election on 20 May 2007 and the parliamentary elections on 30 June 2007. Despite incidents of violence following the announcement of the election result arising from disagreement about the formation of the government which excluded the majority party, Fretilin, tension was eased with the ultimate acceptance of the results by all parties.

Nation building, language and Borgerhoff's critique

The history of the UN's nation-building role demonstrates that the concepts of nation-building and state-building are intimately associated with goals and strategies in the management and development of post-colonial and/or post-conflict states. Borgerhoff, like others, argues that they are different

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[6]   See Borgerhoff (2012), pp. 78–80; UN Security Council (2006), at (73); UN Security
        Council (2007), at (52); United Nations (2006), at (100–101).

processes: nation-building is the primary task which consists of "ideas, interests and strategies" that "blueprints secondary state-building", and permeates it from above in a "top-down" process.[7] This idea is reflected in the literature which argues that the goal of nation-building is to create a social and political environment for the development of local institutions, policies and practices.[8] It requires that people transfer their loyalty from villages, ethnic groups or religious bodies to a representative political system, with a view to reconciling social rivalries and creating political consolidation. It includes decisions about language and religion that are aimed at promoting and consolidating ethnic cohesion. Success is linked to generating a sense of national identity, protection of cultural and traditional norms, and the creation of a responsible administration that has the support and confidence of the local and traditional community. It requires the creation of a nationalist political culture that supports democracy, builds representative institutions and establishes the rule of law. The detail of how this is done is captured in the concept of state-building: it is concerned with establishing effective and autonomous structures of state governance by constructing the institutional and administrative framework of a self-governing political entity. It is essentially an administrative exercise involving the (re)construction of state physical structures – schools, courts, medical and social services – and institutions – government, parliament, police and armed forces. Success is linked to the efficiency and efficacy of public infrastructure and the creation of an economic and financial system upon which it can be sustained. Language is one of the vehicles to achieving this.

Montville and Hicks have shown that language is a core characteristic of nationalism; together with religion, a common history, social institutions and customs it defines members of a specific group who aspire to the creation of a sovereign identity.[9] Nationalist identification lies in people's need to feel they belong somewhere. Human beings construct a shared understanding, learning and expectation about the world and their place in it and, as individuals and communities, this creates an inner coherence and stability which allows them to deal with the anxiety producing effects of uncertainty. Specific personal, ethnic, religious, linguistic, kinship and cultural inheritances shape who we are and who others perceive us to be. In particular, language comprises a fundamental aspect of a person's personal, and importantly, social identity. National identity however is a core factor of mar-

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[7]   Borgerhoff (2012), pp. 2, 14

[8]   See on this and the following, Quénivet (2005), pp. 14–18, Caplan (2005), p. 3.

[9]   Montville (2002), pp. 99–101, Hicks (2002), pp. 131–142.

ginalisation and has a significant role in fostering and perpetuating difference. It is a major root of conflict: conflicts based on identity occur when a
community perceives feelings of threat which, whether real or not, is mobilised by groups and ethnic-leaders. Threats experienced by parties in conflict are experienced as threats to identity, and more broadly to one's collection of beliefs – of who we are and how we maintain our sense of coherence,
certainty and stability. They become threats to one's integrity, of our understanding of ourselves and our world.

Borgerhoff's work builds upon these themes and adapts them to the
specific case of Timor-Leste. He argues that nation-building is not a consensual task based on mutual agreement or a united purpose.[10] Rather it is inherently competitive: it is constructed on emergent, different interests of the
post-conflict community and is therefore imbued by an undercurrent of rivalry. In Timor-Leste he argues, dissent "was linked directly to the intrinsically political quality of nation-building" in which "protagonists from diverse generational, educational and political backgrounds" pursued competing political strategies. He posits that, language policy, characterized as
the language tetralemma, constituted a "vertical" or "competitive multilingualism" between Portuguese, Tetum and the other two externally-
incorporated languages. It became a "discordant political manifestation of
sovereignty" and in this form contributed to competition and dissent in the
nation-building process.

This explanation of the cause of dissent in Timor-Leste adds an important theoretical dimension to the literature. The events of April-May
2006 and their aftermath reflected deep-seated problems of a complex crisis
which contained political, institutional, historical, social and economic dimensions.[11] The violence had historical and cultural roots. It was a continuum of Portuguese decolonization and Indonesian occupation and represented a resurfacing of divisions that pre-dated 1999. The legacy of the Indonesian occupation included a "gulf of understanding" separating people depending on how they dealt with it, as collaborators, resistance fighters, or in
exile. Timor-Leste was a divided nation; cleavages at all levels of society reflected deep divisions and resentment, and were exacerbated by differences
among its political leaders. Ideological and political disputes stemming from

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[10]   See Borgerhoff (2012), pp. (xi), 2–3, 39, 63, 94, 167.

[11]   See on this and the following, Borgerhoff (2012), pp. 80–84; UN Security Council (2006),
        at (22, 26, 29–35); UN Security Council (2007), at (30–31); United Nations (2006), at
        (18–19, 31–32); Grenfell (2008), pp. 91, 95–96; Kent (2012), pp. 69, 118, 122–131;
        Kingsbury (2008), pp. 35–37, 47; Mearns (2008), p. xv–xvii; Philpott (2009), pp. 237,
        242–244, 248.

the period of occupation influenced elite power struggles up to and during the crisis. The utilization of language was just one of a number of resources used by the elite to promote their interests; it contributed to their aspirations for state control and power, but adversely impacted upon state cohesiveness and national identity.

The divisions in leadership led to deep-rooted problems in governance. This was manifested in basic capacity deficits in government management, administration and policy making, a failure to diversify resources within the population, and the concentration of power in Dili where Portuguese was used as the language of government. The highly centralized decision-making system contributed to shortcomings in the development of a democratic culture and practices, and uneven success in transforming state building into human development and the building of sustainable institutions. The failure to adequately address nation-building was evidenced in the lack of success in reducing poverty, inequality and unemployment, and in providing adequate education, health and social services. The failure of the political leadership to sustain a sense of national identity since the autonomy vote manifested itself most seriously in communal factionalism between persons from the east (Loro Sa'e (or Lorosa'e)) and west (Loro Munu, (or Loromunu))[12] of Timor-Leste based on the popular association of the resistance with the eastern regions of the country. The "east-west phenomenon" was manipulated during the crisis by groups with specific political interests and in the absence of impartial political leadership infected the armed forces, police and communities particularly in Dili. Yet the division was a simplification of a far more complex issue, namely "sensitive issues in Timorese society relating to notions of national and communal identity". This "poorly defined" national identity, particularly in the absence of a common post-1999 enemy was critical to understanding how the east versus west distinction arose as a central issue in the crisis.

Borgerhoff's thesis explains and critiques these assessments of the crisis through detailed arguments that show that language and power structures were closely linked in Timor-Leste.[13] He demonstrates that the language tetralemma influenced the primary interest of political stake which was a central issue in the dissent. Language was one of a group of "secondary identity markers": it distinguished the core stakeholders in the language tetralemma discourse and familiarized and mobilized the population along identity lines. The core identity markers created by the competing stake-

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12   Borgerhoff (2012) refers to these groups respectively as Firaku and Kaladi, p. 81.

13   See on the following, Borgerhoff (2012), pp. ix–xiv, 2–9, 36, 39, 61–72, 93–96, 99–102, 166–167, 308, 312–313.

holders in the new polity were "seniority", "education" and "origin", each of which consisted of elements that were attributable to the language tetralemma. Thus, Borgerhoff argues the contested site of language policy was threefold:

- generational (seniority – the old against the young),
- educational (the Lusophone elites against the Indonesianized) and
- political (origins – the exiled (outsiders) against the liberation resistance (insiders)).

These identity markers reflected a distinction between the "first line of leadership", represented by the political accession of the outsider, Lusophone elites who constituted the first government in Timor-Leste, and the "second line of leadership", the opposition "regime-in-waiting". They operated as a set of "independent variable factors" with "bipolarist dimensions" that affected the way in which language policy arose as a fundamental cause of political dissent, and impacted upon the broader nation-building framework – the political, sovereign and strategic choices of the competing groups which contributed to contested notions of nationalism, sovereignty and collective memory.[14] In particular, the differences in bipolarist attributes established a set of circumstances that underpinned the clash between stakeholders, and distinguished the position of the first and second line of leadership. In other words, it affected the stake of each of the primary actors in the nation-building process – and this in turn underpinned the "claims" of the young, "indonesianized" insiders against the old Lusophone outsiders with respect to participation in the new polity. The difference between how each group perceived their stake in the claims contributed to the dissent: therefore the claims played a fundamental role in the sociopolitical discontent and in the "cleavages" that arose from the independent variable factors.[15] Due to these factors the distinctive, or discursive, polarization between the stakeholders became a "salient feature of contemporary Timorese discourse", and this was "critical to comprehending the (impact of) the language tetralemma."

Based on this analysis Borgerhoff offers an insight into how and why developments during the period from 2002 to 2007 contrasted to the inclusiveness of "emancipatory nationalism" founded on Mauberism ideology

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[14]   For elaboration of the argument with respect to how each of these elements contributed to the central dispute constituted by language policy see Borgerhoff (2012), pp. 37–96. The detailed analysis of the way in which these factors developed and were played out as core issues is set out at pp. 101–166.

[15]   The claims are not elaborated here. Their importance in the author's thesis is reflected in the "extra attention" that they are given in the work (p. 9, for summary of the 5 claims, see xiii). They are dealt with in detail in Part III (pp. 171–309).

that had, prior thereto, forged an identity of consensual, unified, participatory resistance to the occupation.[16] The change happened because, as Borgerhoff convincingly puts it, emancipatory nationalism gave way to "modernist nation-building" which neither prioritized public expectations of inclusiveness and participation, nor formed an "exclusive Timorese affair" based on consensus, in the way that "resistance nationalism" had done during the occupation. This "conversion of incentive" and "termination of collectivism" became a principal source of "popular uncertainty" characterised by resentment, disappointment and anguish that many felt as a result of their exclusion from the benefits of independence. The sense of national identity established by the liberation movement had dissolved. It was replaced by feelings of destabilization and this led to fear, anxiety, anger and an impulse toward self-preservation which was directed toward the threatening perceived, and constructed, "other". At the same time however the certainty of each side's beliefs solidified and became more rigid, and normal social interaction between once inclusive groups with a common purpose broke down. The negativity and hostility generated by this process inhibited learning and made it impossible to create the trust that was necessary for social cohesion and tolerance of difference. The language policy of the government, typified by the language tetralemma, was not the sole cause of this state of affairs or the crisis inevitably nurtured by it, but as Borgerhoff demonstrates, and I fully agree with him, it played into it and nourished the anxieties upon which the conflict was borne.

Borgerhoff's focus on the contribution of language to the rise of dissent in Timor-Leste offers an important analysis of why its first governments failed to maintain or at least, after the transitional administration period, reinvigorate, the inclusive nationalism of the resistance period and create a shared sovereignty that could have avoided decline into conflict. Consistently with the wider literature it demonstrates that nation-building and statebuilding are ongoing processes that need to be carefully managed by newly emerged states and offers an insight as to why these processes are fraught with failure. Although its focus on language policy as a factor in Timor-Leste's problems has been noted by other commentators, its significant contribution to this discourse is its comprehensive, scientific analysis of this issue. In this regard its focus on the language tetralemma as a major underpinning catalyst of the dissent locates the research within the study of sociolin-

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[16]   See on this and the following, Borgerhoff (2012), pp. 36–54, 84, 93–95; Grenfell (2008), p. 95; Kent (2012), pp. 110, 114–115, 120; Kingston (2009), p. 547; Mearns (2008), pp. xiv–xvii; Philpott (2009), p. 237.

guistics.[17] The concept of social framing is presented as a theoretical framework for analyzing how language contributed to the complex competing political, sovereign and strategic interests identified by Borgerhoff, as well as in other studies, that manifested themselves in the early years of the new state.

As well as highlighting its relevance and importance to the current literature, the socio-political and historical location of Borgerhoff's thesis establishes an important framework for the next stage of Timor-Leste's evolution. His argument that his work constructs a framework which could be used for reassessing progress in nation-building and multilingualism in Timor-Leste beyond the research period[18] is borne out by contemporary developments. Successful presidential and parliamentary elections in 2012 and the ending of the peace keeping and political mission operated by UNMIT (the UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste) on 31 December 2012 mark the beginning of a "new phase of development" in Timor-Leste.[19] UNMIT commenced its work in August 2006 in the aftermath of the crisis. Its departure, after 13 years of UN presence (the "transition period") is a recognition that the country has made tangible progress in multiple areas and achieved a number of milestones, and that the time has arrived to break the "dependency cycle." Timor-Leste is no longer regarded as a weak, conflict-affected, recipient country: it has entered a new phase, the "post-2012 phase", which is focused on "state-building and institutional strengthening and development." Although there are ongoing difficulties, it is now regarded as a success story and is held up as a "lessons learned" example for other countries emerging from similar historical circumstances. Its immediate future lies in the "principle of national ownership of sovereignty" according to which its leaders and people will have ownership of its medium-term strategy in a new partnership with the UN. The continued, though background, role of the UN however recognizes that there are still "gaps and weaknesses", and long term tasks and challenges continue which will require continued attention and support from the UN and other partners. The implementation of a successful language policy which serves the interests of all of the population of Timor-Leste may be regarded as one of the chief concerns of this new partnership.

The prospective application of Borgerhoff's research is significant. Although the closure of UNMIT is presented as a "consensus position" and is the preferred position of the country's current governing class, it is not the

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[17]   See especially for Borgerhoff's methodology adopting and explaining this framework, pp. 10–14, 168–169.

[18]   Borgerhoff (2012), pp. 3, 316.

[19]   See on this and the following, UN Security Council (2012), at (59–65, 69–78); UN Security Council (2012), at (5–16, 19, 30–41).

unanimous opinion in Timor-Leste society. In particular it is criticized by the parliamentary opposition. Alkatiri, the leader of Fretilin, argues that there is no broad agreement about the complete closure of UNMIT and maintains that in the absence of its political assistance role there is a risk of a repetition of the failure of 2006. It should be remembered that Timor-Leste was praised as a success story immediately before it collapsed into the chaos of that time. The *sine qua non* of democratic rule, the "disposition of elites to compromise, flexibility, tolerance, conciliation, moderation, and restraint"[20] had not been established, despite appearances, and this was typified by a divisive language policy.

Summary

Borgerhoff's research argues that the construction and use of language by decision makers for their primary interests can lead to over-competitive nation-building and this can impair the emergence of a "resilient and productive national community".[21] His work aims to contribute to "a broader understanding of the inter-relationship between nation- and state-building" and the creation of dissent and conflict in post-colonial, post-conflict states, and posits a model for assessment of current initiatives by Timor-Leste's government and the UN. He has accomplished these goals admirably.

The analysis of how language policy fed into social discontent, and the crisis that arose from it, which Borgerhoff's research contributes to analysis of Timor-Leste's development, constitutes an important resource for drawing lessons and planning a framework for how the catastrophe of the crisis may be avoided in the future. It is clear that this requires an ongoing commitment by the whole of the political class to developing an inclusive national identity which recognizes social and political diversity and the importance of open, accessible, democratic institutions which allow effective participation. Borgerhoff's work sets a framework for achieving this by demonstrating the importance of integrating different languages into the polity and the dramatic cost of failure to do so. Language policy is a critical component for the construction of a successful democratic framework. Its successful implementation symbolizes the achievement of core values and concerns that inform the "logic of democracy" but its failure exacerbates its risks. As one commentator has put it, democracy requires "agreeing to disagree within an institutional ecology bounded by accountability and pluralism

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[20]   Miall / Ramsbotham / Woodhouse (1999), p. 233.

[21]   Borgerhoff (2012), pp. 8–9.

– because the alternative is perpetual instability, conflict and stalemate."[22] Borgerhoff's thesis is a critical contribution to the way in which language policy informs this concept of democracy and of the risks and consequences associated with how it has been manifested in Timor-Leste. He has contributed a genuinely original idea to nation-building theory by cogently demonstrating that language policy and decisions about national language have far-reaching consequences for national identity and cohesion, and play a critical role in underpinning pluralism and democracy.

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[22]   Hicham Ben Abdullah El Alaoui (2013), p. 2.

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