

***Political Institutions in East Timor: Semi-presidentialism and Democratization.* By Lydia M. Beuman. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2016. Hardcover: 141pp.**

After the 1999 referendum which led to its independence from Indonesia, East Timor underwent a unique political process. The United Nations (UN) transitional authority was given unprecedented powers to lay the foundations for a democratic polity. Disregarding academic wisdom on pre-requisites for democratic survival encapsulated in Juan Linz's dictum "no state, no *Rechtsstaat*, no democracy" (1991), Timor-Leste embarked on a simultaneous process of state-building *and* democracy-building. In this context, the Constituent Assembly adopted a government system not found elsewhere in Southeast Asia, but sometimes found in young democracies in other parts of the world: semi-presidentialism, a system in which a popularly elected fixed-term president exists alongside a prime minister and cabinet officials who are collectively responsible to the legislature.

Lydia M. Beuman presents a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the formative years of this innovative experience. Based on her doctoral thesis, the book attains the highest standards of academic proficiency: it includes a comprehensive survey of the existing literature; is grounded in fieldwork during which the author engaged with all the relevant actors; and provides a cogent analytical framework.

The book begins with an introduction to the theoretical debates on the relationship between semi-presidentialism and democracy, followed by a characterization of the Timorese case, positing that it falls into the "premier-presidential" sub-type of semi-presidentialism, i.e., one in which the survival of government depends solely on parliamentary support. Chapter 3 offers a historical overview of the framework through which semi-presidentialism was derived. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the notions of "cohabitation" and "divided government" during two different periods under President Xanana Gusmão, before Chapter 6 addresses the "unified majority government" under President Jose Ramos-Horta. Chapter 7 discusses the main findings pertaining to the relationship between semi-presidentialism and democracy, and suggests that the former "facilitated institutional conflict" (p. 121) even if at the end of the day democracy survived. Finally, in Chapter 8, Beuman offers a

Postscript surveying the main developments under the presidency of Taur Matan Ruak.

After establishing semi-presidentialism as a *tertium genus* of government systems, today's analysts contemplate several sub-types, namely those emerging from Matthew S. Shugart and John M. Carey's 1992 work on "premier-presidentialism" and "president-parliamentarism". More than just an exercise in taxonomy, in 2011 Robert Elgie suggested these categories help explain the survival of regimes and the quality of democracy, given the incentive mechanisms operating under each of those sub-types. Beuman claims Timor-Leste to be "premier-presidentialist" (assumed to generate incentives for good quality democracy that tends to endure), echoing the majoritarian standpoint. However, I consider this claim to be inconsistent with section 107 of the Constitution: the government is doubly responsible before the parliament and the president — a situation generally classified as "president-parliamentarism". The argument that the responsibility of the government before the president is merely institutional is not corroborated in the case of Timor-Leste. The political nature of this dependency was made clear by President Ramos-Horta's decision to appoint the leader of the second largest party as prime minister, who then managed to construct a post-electoral majoritarian platform and consequently, relegated the largest party to the opposition. Both Presidents Xanana and Ramos-Horta considered their powers of supervision to be political rather than institutional; both leaders felt they could dismiss the prime minister based on a political assessment of the office holder's performance.

In her analysis of tensions at the heart of the semi-presidential system, Beuman employs the concept of "cohabitation". Usually in such a system the president and prime minister belong to different and competing parties; but in Timor-Leste all three presidents fought the election as "independent" candidates without party affiliations. The related notions of "divided government" and "unified majority government" presuppose the president has been engaged in party politics. However, since the issue of "independent" presidents was singled out by Elgie as deserving special attention, the opportunity was missed to delve into a debate on the merits of this peculiar system embraced by Timor-Leste. As Maurice Duverger noted in 1996, the relationships between presidents and prime ministers under semi-presidentialism can accommodate three situations: presidents as leaders of the government majority; presidents as leaders of the opposition to government i.e. cohabitation; and presidents

“without majority” — which seems to be the case in Timor-Leste. These considerations weigh on the structure of party systems and their relationship with the presidency, and hence, should not be dismissed as “pure fantasy” as Matthew S. Shugart and David J. Samuels suggested in 2010. The fact that President Xanana decided not to seek re-election and organized his own political party to run for prime minister, and that President Taur Matan Ruak seems poised to follow suit, reveal the extent to which treating the Timorese case as one of cohabitation can lead one astray from the ethos of the Timorese system.

Finally, Beuman highlights some important tensions and conflicts between presidents and prime ministers on national security issues, the “Achilles’ heel” of semi-presidentialism which is particularly dangerous in post-conflict situations. However, what is striking when comparing Timor-Leste with other democratic consolidation processes is the positive experience the semi-presidential system has provided: Timor-Leste has witnessed six governments in fourteen years (one of which for an interim course, another when the opposition joined forces to form a cabinet of “national inclusion”) and all parliaments have completed their full terms. Frictions between president and prime minister, in a situation of very uneven development of constitutionally designed institutions, can be attributed to the government being by far the strongest of all, the presidency playing a leading role in the process of checks and balances and horizontal accountability that lay at the heart of democratic polities. Such tensions can be understood as institutional responses to disparate social ambitions fuelled by the realization of the dream of independence; and perhaps therefore testament to the state’s growing capacity to accommodate political competition within its own walls.

A discernible conundrum seems to emerge from Beuman’s analysis: on the one hand, the alleged instability underlined in her book offers a contrast with the presumptive democratic virtues of “premier-presidentialism”, while, on the other, a new hypothesis other than asserting “counter-intuitive” (but not elaborated) factors (p. 122) is required to account for the survival of democracy. Perhaps a detailed study of “independent presidents” could offer valuable insights into unravelling this paradox.

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