

Box 3.7.1 The Failings of Security Sector Reform in Timor-Leste

*Shepard Forman**

Whether through a simple failure of policy imagination or a misreading of the political, cultural, and economic realities of Timor-Leste, four successive UN missions have gradually handed off authority to the fledgling state without ensuring its capacity to exercise the sine qua non of national sovereignty: the ability to protect its borders and provide basic security to its citizens. The failure is all the more conspicuous since its starting point, Falintil (East Timor's defense force), was a disciplined and courageous national liberation force that managed, with full support of the East Timorese population, to maintain its resistance to the Indonesian occupation for nearly a quarter century. Fighting as army to army, Falintil never engaged in an act of terrorism, and actually submitted to self-imposed cantonment while an Australian-led international force drove marauding militias across the border in the aftermath of the independence referendum in 1999.

What went wrong? First, the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) chose not to recognize the important place Falintil held in the imagination and hearts of the East

Timorese people, sidelining it as an institution while placing defense responsibility fully in the hands of international forces. Large numbers of Falintil fighters were decommissioned with little more than a parade to honor them and no provisions for any sort of productive livelihoods. With cross-border defense issues largely resolved by the international force, the newly established Falintil-Forças de Defesa de Timor-Leste (F-FDTL) had virtually no institutional role to play in building the new nation, was given little training or actual resources beyond uniforms and rudimentary material (despite a five-year, \$37 million defense cooperation program with the Australians), and quickly became subject to national political infighting among rogue members of the government of Timor-Leste.

UNTAET and its successor missions did little more to help establish a credible national police force. This was needed to manage increasing tensions among political rivals and diverse regional groups who were crowding into and vying for property and resources within the capital, including gangs of unemployed and disaffected youth.

Police officers, recruited from the general population and having little formal training, were often placed under the command of officers who had previously served as police under Indonesian occupation. A \$40 million, multiyear, joint UK-Australian police training and development program, begun in 2004, hardly had time to professionalize the police force before dissension in the police ranks and the sacking of nearly half the armed forces led to a complete breakdown of the security forces and escalating violence.

The task before the new mission, the UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT), is clear. It needs to vest leadership in the hands of the Timorese, who must assume the responsibility for defense and security in their country. It is up to the Timorese government to sort out the proper roles of the national police and defense forces, to align these with a credible national system of criminal and civil justice, and to seek advice, training, and technical assistance from governments that are willing to make a firm commitment to Timorese sovereignty and success.

*Shepard Forman is director of the Center on International Cooperation.