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Press Release

Research Report on Community Conflict, Traditional Dispute Resolution and Trauma Politics in Timor-Leste

The following research report examines the drivers of community conflict in Timor-Leste and explores the role of traditional mechanisms in resolving them. The research found that contemporary community conflict dynamics in Timor-Leste are shaped by a combination of structural socio-economic vulnerabilities, historical legacies and deeply embedded socio-cultural patterns.

Structural socio-economic pressures remain the primary drivers of conflict. Limited education, high unemployment, technological challenges, dependence on land and widespread domestic or interpersonal violence create environments where disputes intensify quickly. These pressures disproportionately affect youth, who often feel excluded from economic and political life and who may become involved in MAG activities or quasi-organised theft networks.

Digital misinformation has emerged as a powerful conflict trigger, capable of producing panic, mobilisation and disorder within hours. Communities lack the tools to verify information, and both traditional and formal institutions struggle to respond quickly enough. The case studies on community panic demonstrated that a single viral video or manipulated photograph can overwhelm communities, even where traditional authority is strong.

Land disputes remain persistent and unresolved, particularly where claims derive from displacement during the Indonesian occupation. Traditional leaders reduce tensions but cannot resolve disputes rooted in legal ambiguity or historical injustice. Municipal authorities lack the ability to enforce decisions, and the national government has not yet systematically addressed complex land ownership problems inherited from previous administrative eras (Portuguese and Indonesian).

Youth-related crime reflects both structural pressures and family-based behavioural influences. Quasi-organised theft rings involving young people, as documented in Viqueque, show how economic stress and social peer dynamics combine with weakened parental authority and community oversight to produce persistent petty crime, resulting in significant community disharmony.

This research also finds that **intergenerational trauma is a significant yet understudied factor shaping both community conflict and Timor-Leste's**

political culture. Past experiences of violence continue to influence behaviour and social norms. Many adults use harsh disciplinary practices or demonstrate aggression towards family and community members. Youth who did not experience war directly often inherit behavioural patterns and emotional vulnerabilities from their elders.

Past trauma also shapes Timor-Leste's political leadership style and governance. Many leaders often vividly recount resistance-era suffering in emotional and public ways. While these narratives are part of national identity, they may unintentionally re-traumatize communities or reinforce a political culture based on emotion, personal loyalty and historical grievance rather than on formal positions and rule-based institutions. The intersection of trauma, oral culture and informality may limit progress toward transparent, efficient and accountable governance.

Taken together, these findings highlight that **community conflict in post-independence Timor-Leste is a complex expression of socio-economic stress, historical memory, inherited trauma, politicization and weak formal mechanisms.** These are layered on to indigenous socio-cultural features such as strong kinship networks and oral culture, and further shaped by complex influences derived from multiple external sources, including Portuguese colonialism, the Catholic Church, Indonesian occupation, UN transitional administration, foreign aid programs, global media and international trade.

In order to successfully navigate these challenges and consolidate itself as a democratic, prosperous country with effective state institutions, FM believes that Timor-Leste must assert its own distinct political identity which incorporates the aspects of Timorese traditions most conducive to individual and societal wellbeing, such as social solidarity and deep family ties, while embracing modern values such as transparent, accountable and efficient governance, universal human rights and meritocracy. To achieve this, young Timorese intellectuals must engage in rigorous public debates on the future of Timor-Leste's political, social and economic development, challenging entrenched perspectives and offering alternatives grounded in local wisdom, rational analysis and scientific evidence.