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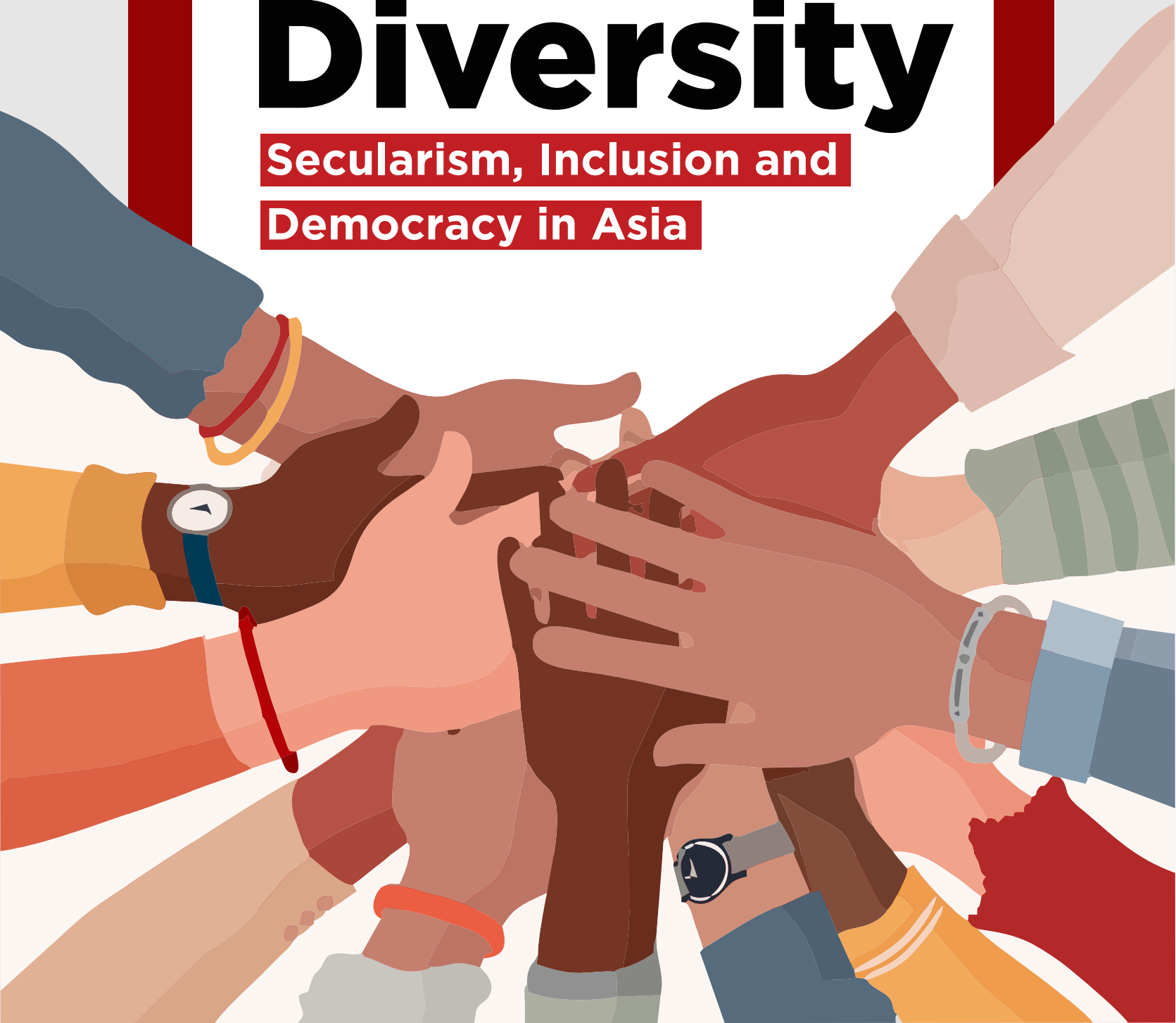
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Unity in Diversity

Secularism, Inclusion and
Democracy in Asia





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By: Natalino Ornai Guterres

Affirming the Role of Social Democrats

Challenging the Negative Politicization of Identities in Timorese Politics

Timorese society is generally an accepting one, or it seem so on the surface. The country is highly commended for its religious tolerance, its high representation of women in parliament, and its emerging annual LGBTIQ+ Pride March.

When former Prime Minister Rui Maria de Araújo made a statement in support of the LGBTIQ+ community to mark the country's first ever Pride March in 2017, he was labeled “a breath of hope in a region of surging discrimination.” Since then, several national leaders have publicly shown support for the LGBTIQ+ community; and representatives of political groups, like FRETILIN Youth, even joined the 2018 Pride March.

However, despite the positive image that the country is trying to portray, identity topics such as gender, sexual orientation, religion, race and ethnicity remain sensitive topics and can trigger hateful sentiments when politicized. This is evident in the hateful attacks we usually see every five years during election campaigns.

Timorese National Identity

The Timorese people are generally proud of their country's recent history and their struggle for independence.

Culturally, while many still hold on to strong Melanesian tribal values, there is also a heavy Portuguese influence.

“Despite the positive image that the country is trying to portray, identity topics such as gender, sexual orientation, religion, race and ethnicity remain sensitive topics and can trigger hateful sentiments when politicized.

Image: www.outinperth.com



The Catholic Church also played a crucial role in the country's struggle for independence and in the process of building Timorese identity. In fact, Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion in the country today with more than 97 percent of the people identifying themselves as Catholic, followed by almost two percent Protestant and less than one percent Muslim.

Despite the above-mentioned characteristics, Timor-Leste is still a young and vibrant nation that is in the process of constructing and defining its own identity, and this can put minority groups in a situation of vulnerability to discrimination as various groups, including the majority, try to reclaim their place in the country.

Political rivalries, dominated by male heroes and former leaders of the independence movement known locally as the *Maun Bo'ot* or Elder Brothers, are often filled with speeches about who can better represent the “true Timorese identity” and build a stronger nation.

Current Political Climate

The country's political arena has been mainly dominated by two of its biggest political parties: FRETILIN (The Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor-Leste) — which started the movement for Timor-Leste's independence in 1974 — co-led by one of its founders Mari Alkatiri who is also considered a founder of the nation, and CNRT (National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction) — founded in 2007 and led by its founder Xanana Gusmão — also regarded as a national hero. In addition, there are other smaller parties playing the bargaining card, jumping from one side to another.

Most, if not all Timorese political parties, claim to be of the center-left with a political ideology of social democracy, which values social equality. This is translated into national support for initiatives that protect and affirm equal opportunity and a constitution that upholds the principles of equality and human dignity, although we have yet to see anti-discrimination legislation for vulnerable groups and other related policies.

In 2015, there were efforts to reconcile the two biggest parties so that they can work together in developing the country, given that neither of them had won a majority of the votes in recent elections. However, the differences between the two parties have made it difficult for them to work together. One of their main differences is their opinion on how to best use the country's petroleum fund. While FRETILIN's goal is to strengthen the system to help tackle corruption and end government's



Image:www.iwda.org.au

“The constitution upholds the principles of equality and human dignity, although we have yet to see anti-discrimination legislation for vulnerable groups.

reckless spending on large infrastructure projects (which many argue have contributed to the rise in inequality), CNRT's main mission, on the other hand, is to reach its ambitious target of completing its large infrastructure projects on time and contribute to poverty alleviation as set out in its Strategic Development Plan for the country.

Politicization of Identities

Despite their shared social democratic principles, their ambition to rule often make militants of the two biggest parties use hate speech to attack each other, politicizing certain identities for their own interest — especially those of minority groups — and putting marginalized groups at risks of hateful attacks.

During the 2018 election campaign, when an influential political figure called another influential political figure “terrorist” on stage, allegedly implying the latter's religious background, it sparked hateful exchanges on social media against the minority Muslim community. Images of people

in burka on a Dili street were posted on Facebook by fake social media accounts calling for people not to vote for FRETILIN “to avoid terrorists flooding the country.” These posts were backed by anti-Muslim comments from real accounts that also shared their fear of terrorist attacks. The whole episode happened merely a few days after a series of suicide bombings hit three churches in Surabaya, Indonesia.

In fact, this was not the first and the last time that people's identities were politicized, especially those of minority groups.

In 2005, when the First Constitutional Government, led by former Prime Minister and FRETILIN's Secretary General Mari Alkatiri, proposed a legislative action that would require schools not to make religion a mandatory learning subject (which is a normal practice in most secular states), he was accused of being anti-Catholic and trying to promote his Muslim culture in a Catholic majority country. We would often hear anti-Muslim slurs from his detractors and over the years, similar religious and ethnic-based comments have been made against him.

When he was still Prime Minister, Alkatiri had actually initiated negotiations with the Vatican to finalize a concordat, but this was not picked up by the succeeding governments after he was forced to step down in 2006. Ten years later, under the leadership of Rui Maria de Araújo, Timor-Leste and the Holy See finally signed a concordat, in which it also reinforced the principle of non-mandatory religion classes at schools. However, as of today, religion is still a mandatory subject.

Most recently, during the 2022 presidential campaign, one of the most popular candidates, José Ramos-Horta, was attacked for briefly mentioning about the need to create a more inclusive society for all, including LGBTIQ+ people, during a live debate on television. His comments stirred a heated debate on social media where he was said to be “promoting same-sex marriage and destroying society's moral fabric and the sanctity of marriage” in a Catholic majority country. Racist attacks have also been made against the CNRT-backed candidate for being a *mestiço* and not a “pure Timorese,” the same way FRETILIN's Mari Alkatiri has always been attacked for being of Middle Eastern descendant.

“In its effort to reinforce and popularize its stand for social equality, FRETILIN issued a resolution condemning any discriminatory action and appealing to all its members to avoid the use of actions and languages that are discriminatory and offensive against others.

Image: www.sbs.com.au





Image: www.gaystarnews.com

“We must uphold the respect for diversity, bring positive visibility for marginalized groups, and promote inclusiveness.

Discriminatory and offensive comments are, unfortunately, normalized and camouflaged as jokes. During the latest election campaign, in its effort to reinforce and popularize its stand for social equality, FRETILIN issued a resolution approved by its National Political Council condemning any discriminatory action and appealing to all its members to avoid and not allow the use of actions and words that are discriminatory and offensive against others.

But the biggest politicization of identity was perhaps the one that led to the political turmoil and crisis in 2006, the East vs. West narrative, which tore the country into two and led to the forced resignation of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri.

The Role of Social Democrats

These events have taught us that although the Timorese people may seem to live together harmoniously in spite of their differences, political manipulation can easily lead to outbreaks of hateful attacks, proving the country's vulnerability and the people's conservatism and lack of knowledge and understanding on diversity and human rights. And those who suffer most tend to be minority groups.

In a country where education is still a huge problem, political manipulators are successful in rallying some groups by speaking to their fears and playing with their emotions. And when manipulated groups feel threatened, they retreat to tribalism.

As progressives and as social democrats, our role is to point out when our identity is being used and when our emotion is being exploited to benefit particularistic interests. It is our role to recognize that someone is playing us.

We must challenge fake information and help educate ourselves and others on issues we do not understand.

For those of us who are actively involved in a political party, we must call out, not only the leaders of the opposing parties, but also our own leaders when they promote hate speech.

We must uphold the respect for diversity, bring positive visibility for marginalized groups, and promote inclusiveness, not only in our campaigns but also in our policies.

Currently, FRETILIN, honoring its party constitution as a social democratic political party, has been making efforts towards progressive political training, especially for its youth members, with the objective of passing on the principles of social equality. Those efforts, although still in their initial stages, are already showing good results and giving hope that in the long-term, greater positive changes can be achieved. But given the fact that we are still immersed in a strong patriarchal society, the struggle still exists, and more efforts are required to be able to achieve the goal of equality.

We must hold on to the same values we held when we liberated our country from oppression — unity in diversity. Only then can we liberate our people from poverty and inequality. ■

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