



RESEARCH REPORT

“Our Young People Can Also Lead in Contributing to Peace”

Youth, Peace and Security in Timor Leste



Funded by
the European Union



Edition:

August 2024

Research, Writing and Editing Team:

Afonso de Jesus, Alva F. da Silva, Amandina Maria Helena da Silva, Arminda Godinho Pereira, Cezario Cesar da Costa Hornay, Eldiano Isaac Fernandes, George Leyendekkers, Inocencio Xavier, Joao Casimiro Campos, Jose Luis de Oliveira, Madeline Feledy, Nick Dobrijevic, Renezio de Carvalho.

Design:

Asia Justice & Rights

Published by Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR). This work was carried out with funding from the European Union. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the European Union.

About Us

Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) adalah organisasi hak asasi manusia regional yang bekerja untuk meningkatkan kapasitas aktor lokal dan nasional, terutama korban, kelompok korban, dan organisasi masyarakat sipil lokal dalam upaya melawan impunitas yang mengakar. AJAR berfokus pada transformasi konflik, dokumentasi hak asasi manusia, pendidikan, dan pengembangan hubungan kuat antar negara-negara di kawasan Asia-Pasifik.

Table of Contents

Chapter I: Introduction	1
Research and methodology	1
Chapter II: Background and context	3
Brief history of martial arts and ritual arts groups in Timor-Leste	3
Legal responses to martial arts and ritual arts-related violence	5
Chapter III: Key themes from focus group discussions and PAR workshop	6
Motivations for joining martial arts and ritual arts groups	6
Triggers of conflict	7
Legacies of the past	9
Martial arts and ritual arts groups and their position on violence	10
Stigma and family perceptions	10
Perceptions and visions for peace and non-violence	11
Exploring the current situation of peace	12
Key causes or contributing factors of youth violence	15
Access to education	15
Unemployment and poverty	16
Political system	17
Abuse of alcohol	19
Chapter IV: Key Findings, conclusion, and recommendations	20
Chapter V: Recommendations	21
Bibliography	23
APPENDIX 1: AJAR's PAR Research and Focus Group Discussion	24

Chapter I: Introduction

“Our country still lacks justice. In Timor, many people still face injustice ... We still have conflict because we didn't get real justice, what we see is conflict ongoing all the time ... there should be justice for all.” (PSHT, 77 and IKS members in discussion)

Since restoring its independence in 2002, Timor-Leste's path to peace and democracy has been marred by moments of violent political and communal conflict. At times, this violence has been instigated by or linked to martial arts and/or ritual arts groups. These groups have a long history in Timor-Leste, although it is important to note that not all are linked with violence, and some played an important role in resisting violent occupation in the past. Today, different martial arts and ritual arts groups exist in districts across the country. They can have a significant impact on social and community dynamics – and security – at both the local and national levels.

Timor-Leste is a young country – according to the 2022 Population and Housing Census, almost 65% of the population is below the age of 30.¹ In addition to making up a significant proportion of the population, young people also constitute a large proportion of martial arts and ritual arts group members. Understanding what motivates young people to join these groups, as well as their perceptions of conflict, its causes and consequences, is therefore an important step in efforts to strengthen peace and tackle the root causes of violence.

Research and methodology

This research paper aims to understand the role of martial arts and ritual arts groups in Timor-Leste, in particular their relationship with and impact on youth and peace in the country. The analysis draws on information obtained during a series of focus group discussions and participatory action research (PAR) workshops held in Timor-Leste in 2022-2023 as well as desk research. It also draws on focus group discussions (FGDs) with members of youth groups in ten municipalities in Timor-Leste.

In the communities where the PAR was conducted, discussions were based on six indicators of peace which included ongoing conflict, safety and security, militarisation, inclusion, accountability, and gender. This interactive method ensures a collaborative, community-centred research framework that seeks to understand root causes and drivers of violence

¹ Timor-Leste National Institute of Statistics, 2022 Population and Housing Census, May 2023, accessed 31 July 2024, https://timor-leste.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/final-main-report_tlphc-census_2022.pdf.



and conflict, strengthen knowledge, awareness, and understanding among participants, and identify practical solutions which are rooted in the experiences of those most affected.²

The research for this report consisted of eight FGDs and one PAR workshop in Dili between September 2022 and June 2023 with current and former/non-active members of three martial arts groups and one ritual arts group. They included **IKS** (*Ikatan Kera Sakti*); **KORKA** (*Kmanek Oan Rai Klaran* or Wise Children of the Land), and **PSHT** (*Persaudaraan Setia Hati Terate* or Faithful Fraternity of the Lotus), all martial arts groups, and **77** (*Sete-Sete*), a ritual arts group.

In total, 41 people – 34 men and seven women – participated in the FGDs, which were held in Dili. In addition to FGDs, from 6-7 February 2023, AJAR facilitated a PAR workshop on perceptions of peace. In total 21 people (four women and 17 men) took part. Participants were aged between 17-30. The PAR workshops deployed four specific AJAR participatory tools: 1) Timeline (2000-present); 2) Tree of Conflict; 3) Tree of Justice; and 4) House of Peace.³

2 AJAR has developed and deployed a number of participatory action tools in conflict and post-conflict settings in the Asia-Pacific Region, including in Timor-Leste. See AJAR, *Mosaic: A manual for rebuilding lives and communities after torture*, 5 January 2018), 1-141.

3 For examples of participatory tools used in PAR workshops, see AJAR, *Stone & Flower: A Guide to Understanding and Action for Women Survivors*.

Chapter II: Background and context

Brief history of martial arts and ritual arts groups in Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste has a long history of martial arts groups. While most groups were formed in the 1980s and 1990s during Indonesia's violent occupation of what was then known as East Timor (1975-1999), martial arts groups were also a feature of the Portuguese colonial period (1702-1975). During this time *Moradores* – a form of colonial gang – were used as a tool for repression against the local population.⁴

During the Indonesian occupation martial arts groups were a combination of groups introduced from Indonesia to control the local population, while others developed within Timor to resist the occupying oppressors. In the 1990s, some martial arts groups were recruited for paramilitary and militia groups and were responsible for chaos and violence during the 1999 Referendum.

Martial arts groups were a way to instil discipline and loyalty, as well as an example of the militarisation of young people. Today, leaders of some martial arts groups are celebrated for their role in the resistance movement while others are said to have been strategically planted or loosely organised to encourage pro-Indonesia sentiment during the occupation.

Clashes between martial arts groups have been a consistent feature in Timor-Leste since the restoration of independence. Conflict between martial arts groups in Viqueque led to the destruction of most homes in Olobai and Boramatan villages in March 2001 and the burning down of fifty houses in Ainaro town in August 2004.⁵ Belun, one of the largest non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Timor-Leste, recorded 133 incidents of unrest or conflict

involving martial arts groups between February 2009 and September 2013.⁶

Perhaps the most well-known example of the involvement of martial arts groups in political violence was seen during the internal conflict between 2006-2008, often known as the 2006 crisis. This crisis was sparked by an internal conflict between different elements of the military

4 Scambary, James, Hippolito da Gama, and Joao Barreto, *A survey of gangs and youth groups in Dili, Timor-Leste*, 15 September 2006, (*A survey of gangs and youth groups*, 2006).

5 *A survey of gangs and youth groups*, 2006.

6 Belun, *Dynamics of martial arts related conflict and violence in Timor-Leste*, May 2014, (Belun, *Dynamics of martial arts related conflict and violence in Timor-Leste*).

which saw a collapse of the security forces – namely the National Police of Timor-Leste the (*Polícia Nacional de Timor-Leste*, PNTL), and the Timor-Leste Defence Force (*Forças de Defesa de Timor-Leste*, FFDTL) – and an attempted coup. The disintegration of the security forces left a power vacuum which was filled by multiple violent groups, including martial arts and ritual arts groups. During the first six months of the conflict, some 2,000 houses were burnt to the ground and up to 140,000 people were displaced.⁷

Unrest continued into 2007-2008, and martial arts and ritual arts groups were prominent in further violence. In early 2007, fighting between armed gangs – some with links to martial arts groups – remained an ongoing threat to the stability and safety of citizens, with the highest rates of violence occurring in Dili. Collective feelings of marginalisation among youth, lack of community reconciliation and trauma-healing efforts, long-held socio-political rivalries, and high mobilisation of young males to post-conflict urban areas also contributed to the use of violence during the crisis.⁸

Sporadic and violent martial arts and ritual arts group-related conflict continued after 2008 until the present day. Street violence can be seemingly disorganised and sudden, and the civilian population as well as non-affiliated martial arts group members have historically been caught in the crossfire. Although martial arts groups have been closely associated with political and intercommunal conflict, it is important to stress that not all groups are associated with violence. A number of groups, including those focused on the practice of Tae Kwon Do, Karate, and Kenpo are well-regarded as “disciplined and peaceful sporting organisations”.⁹

Another group of organisations which have at times been associated with political or intercommunal violence are ritual arts groups. These groups are defined in relation to syncretic rituals and beliefs based on different elements of Timorese traditional culture, animism, and Catholicism.¹⁰ They are often seen by members as being home grown, authentic organisations embodying Timorese tradition and culture. Groups such as 77 (*Sete-Sete*) were established during the Indonesian occupation and functioned as clandestine resistance organisations.¹¹ Members of 77 have a symbolic longitudinal scar – called *pontus* – that runs vertically up their right arm with seven nodes.

7 Scambary, James, “Anatomy of a conflict: The 2006–2007 communal violence in East Timor,” *Conflict, Security & Development*, 9(2) (2009): 265-288.

8 *A survey of gangs and youth groups*, 2006.

9 Belun, *Dynamics of martial arts related conflict and violence in Timor-Leste*, p. 2.

10 Myrttine, Henri, “Martial Arts, Mysticism and Belonging – Constructing Post-Conflict Masculinities in Timor-Leste,” *Timor-Leste: Island of the World*, Vol. I Tomo II, (2021, TLSA PT 2020): 277-284.

11 77 (*Sete-Sete*) is the only ritual arts group included in this research.

Legal responses to martial arts and ritual arts-related violence

The violent involvement of martial arts and ritual arts groups in political and inter-communal conflict, in particular the 2006 crisis, led to increasing pressure on the government to regulate these groups. Between 2008-2012, the Government of Timor-Leste instituted a series of legal responses, including the enactment in 2008 of Law No. 10/2008, which aimed to regulate and authorise martial arts activities in order to ensure “public order and respect for the rights, freedoms and guarantees of the citizens”.¹² The law included the creation of the Martial Arts Regulatory Commission (*Komisaun Reguladora Arte-Marsiál*, or KRAM), which remains operational today.

Between 2008-2013, sporadic violence perpetrated by martial arts groups, as well as conflict between two groups in Indonesia which resulted in the murder of an Indonesian PSHT member in 2011, added to a growing government crackdown, including through the introduction of further legal responses. In 2013, the government introduced a Law No.16/2013 on Extinction of Martial Arts Groups, which criminalised the association and activity of three martial arts groups: IKS, KORKA, and PSHT.¹³ The ban was criticised by civil society groups as being a reactive policy, which ignored the root causes of violence and violated human rights, specifically the right to freedom of association. The right to freedom of association is guaranteed in the Constitution unless the intention of the association is to promote violence.¹⁴

The law did little to curtail violence, however, and in the year that followed, conflict involving martial arts and ritual arts groups continued. Many of the participants of the PAR workshop described being involved in or affected by clashes between different martial arts and ritual arts groups between 2017 and 2019.

In 2022, after years of discussions, the three martial arts groups banned in 2013 were legalised and required to register under the Secretariat of State for Youth and Sports (*Ministério Juventude, Desporto, Arte e Cultura*, SEJD) as a sporting code. However, they were banned again in 2023 after violence erupted between rival martial arts groups in Bobonaro district.¹⁵ Restrictions on martial arts groups continue to provoke negative responses from members, who argued that members who had not done anything wrong were being unfairly blamed and punished.

12 Law No.10/2008 on the Practice of Martial Arts, 16 July 2008.

13 Council of Ministers, Government of Timor-Leste, “Extraordinary Meeting of the Council of Ministers on July 2, 2013,” accessed 31 July 2024, <https://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=8485&print=1&lang=en>.

14 Pawelz, Janina, “Security, Violence and Outlawed Martial Arts Groups in Timor-Leste,” *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (2015): 121-136, p. 126.

15 Rádio e Televisão de Timor-Leste (RTTL), “Rising violence between martial arts groups in Timor-Leste”, 13 November 2023, accessed 31 July 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L65-bn55EjM>.

Chapter III: Key themes from focus group discussions and PAR workshop

Understanding the role of martial arts and ritual arts groups at the individual, community, and national level, as well as the motivations and perceptions of group members plays an important role in better understanding root causes and structural drivers of conflict, as well as how to build sustainable, peaceful, and just societies. Several key areas emerged during the FGDs and PAR workshops which allow for a better understanding of the situation. This includes young peoples' motivation for joining martial arts and ritual arts groups, triggers for conflict, the impact of past legacies of violence, perceptions of violence, stigma and family perceptions, and visions for peace and non-violence.

Motivations for joining martial arts and ritual arts groups

Young people involved in FGDs explained a range of motivations for joining martial arts and ritual arts groups. Some explained that they joined because their friends and family were already members while others, particularly from the 77 ritual arts group, joined because of the link with Timorese culture and history.

“I’ve known about ritual arts since 2022 from my friends. I wanted to join the ritual arts group with my full heart and soul because ritual arts are pure Timor-Leste.” (A male member of 77 ritual arts group since 2022)

“I have been involved in ritual arts since 2022, I joined because of my friend from the same neighbourhood.” (A male member of 77 ritual arts group who joined in 2022)

“When I was 15, I saw my brothers and cousins training and I assisted. This made me interested. Eventually I became a member of PSHT.” (A member of PSHT martial arts group)

However, just as membership of the same martial arts or ritual arts group can strengthen familial ties, membership of different or rival groups can create internal family tensions, as a member of 77 explained:

“Even if it’s our own brother, if we’re from a different martial arts organisation, then we also don’t like each other.”

In addition to social connections, several participants explained that they joined because of the positive physical and mental benefits of martial arts training:

“I wanted to join because there are a number of mental and physical things that need to be improved. This is the first organisation [that I joined], the doctrine was good which is why I wanted to join. I didn't join because I was looking for problems,” explained a female IKS member. Another member of IKS similarly explained: *“Before I joined, I was shy in public. After I became a member, I became more confident ... [I became] diligent in my learning and improved my physical and mental wellbeing.”*

Several participants also said that joining martial arts and ritual arts groups allowed them access to the mental and physical healing powers of the groups, which could be used by themselves and their family members.

“Personally, I wanted to join because it's good for me and my parents. My grandmother was sick and was healed by one of the martial arts group members. When I was in senior high school, they came and healed my mum who was sick. That motivated me to join IKS. We [martial arts group members] can heal others and defend ourselves, defend others, and defend our family. We can help people that need our help, like people who are sick. We can heal people, healing the things that doctors can't heal.” (A female IKS member)

Triggers of conflict

Although Timor-Leste is no longer considered to be engaged in domestic or international armed conflict, sporadic violence between martial arts, ritual arts, and non-aligned youth groups still occurs. In focus group discussions, participants explained that this violence is often sparked by interpersonal issues among youths or existing tensions within or between communities. A member of a ritual arts group explained:

“[Conflict occurs] because some members use martial arts to solve individual problems. Sometimes, some members get drunk and provoke people, and then people blame it on martial arts members. Other times, people who are not martial arts members cause conflict, and it's blamed on martial arts group members because we're from the same neighbourhood. Sometimes conflict is caused because of family problems, and the families use martial arts groups in the family conflict, leading to destruction of houses and other property ...” (A member of 77 ritual arts group)

One participant said that even when conflict is sparked by interpersonal tensions, the wider group can become involved out of a sense of loyalty:

“Sometimes we know the conflict is caused by individual problems, but because we consider each other as maun alin [brothers], then we support them.” (A member of 77 ritual arts group)

However, it appears that wider group involvement in individual disputes does not always occur, as one participant stated:



“Many times, people say that IKS is involved in problems, but it’s not all members. It depends on the individual.” (A member of IKS martial arts group)

Alcohol is often a vehicle for triggering violence. Poor regulation of the production, sale, and advertisement of alcohol coupled with an absence of a national legal minimum age for consumption means that alcohol is both cheap and accessible. There is a worryingly high prevalence of alcohol use among adolescents in Timor-Leste, as well as early initiation of alcohol use, leading to major health and social concerns across the country.

Conflict between martial arts and ritual arts groups can also be linked to the legacies of the Indonesian occupation. Some martial arts groups that practise *pencak silat*—a form of Indonesian martial arts—still have connections to Indonesia. For example, the most senior leaders of PSHT and IKS are in Indonesia, and PSHT members have to visit Indonesia in order to proceed to the next belt.¹⁶ This association with Indonesia can play a role fuelling or exacerbating tensions and conflict. Several participants explained that martial arts groups tend to be more associated with Indonesia while ritual arts groups are associated with Timorese culture and tradition. One ritual arts group member explained:

“Ritual arts belong to Timor-Leste and martial arts belong to Indonesia. That’s why we call them [martial arts group members], milisi [militia]. Only ritual arts belong to Timor, all the others are not Timorese.” (A member of 77 ritual arts group)

¹⁶ Despite the association with the Indonesian occupation, members of PSHT were involved in the clandestine movement for independence. PSHT members were also martyrs for Timorese independence, such as Manuel F.S, Julio Lemos Ximenes and their friends who were martyred during the occupation in the 1990s.

This perception was also noted by a member of PSHT, who explained that his being a member of a martial arts group had led to tensions with family members who were members of ritual arts groups:

“Actually, the one that calls me milisi (militia) is my own cousin from a ritual arts group. He says that [martial arts] is Islam, it’s milisi, that if we join this group, then they [Indonesia] will dominate Timor. [Because of this], we don’t like each other. My cousin says martial arts belongs to Indonesia, that it is an Indonesian thing, it’s like an inheritance left in this country from Indonesia. He says we should not follow something that is from Indonesia but follow what is from Timor. He says that PSHT is milisi or Islam, but in reality there are [people of] different religions in PSHT.”

This dynamic of group membership, in which a rival is identified as the ‘other’ plays a significant role perpetuating cycles of violence and revenge among young people. It is clear that group membership, in particular membership of a rival group, plays a strong factor in the decision to become involved in an incident of unrest or violence.

Legacies of the past

Timor-Leste has a long history of serious human rights violations, many of which have gone unpunished. Perpetrators of such violations have rarely been held to account while victims and their families seldom obtain justice, truth, or reparations. A 2014 report by the NGO Belun strongly suggested that many people who have been affected by martial arts violence link this back to an entrenched culture of impunity.¹⁷ *“Our past history is still creating the current conflicts,”* explained a martial arts group member.

This sentiment was echoed by a young male student who pointed especially to weaknesses in the judicial system during the House of Peace accountability session:

“The Government doesn’t have the capacity to minimise violence because we see many injustices continuing, and the tribunal system is just not effective.”

In addition to impunity, participants also noted concerns about corruption, a lack of transparency, lack of police impartiality, and a lack of quality investment in youth issues. One martial arts group member stated:

“I don’t believe there is transparency or good control of administration, and this has fuelled corruption. A poor example at the higher Government level, where all that matters is to secure a seat at the table, plus the poor implementation of decentralisation has meant that local leaders don’t yet have the competence or control needed.”

¹⁷ Belun, *Dynamics of martial arts related conflict and violence in Timor-Leste*, p. 6.

Martial arts and ritual arts groups and their position on violence

Both martial arts and ritual arts group leaders state that they do not condone involvement in communal or interpersonal violence.¹⁸ Members of 77 said that the senior members of their organisation explicitly forbade them from being involved in conflict:

“When I got the pontus [marking on arm] from my senior, they said just stay calm and don’t get involved in any problems. Because of that, I have not been involved in any street brawls.” (A member of 77 ritual arts group since 2022)

“The senior has never asked us to cause problems. He said, ‘when you accept the pontus, don’t ever be involved in problems, provoke the other martial arts groups, and don’t show off in the community’. There was a senior who told us: ‘accept the pontus to protect yourself and respect others like they were your own family’.” (A member of 77 who joined the group in 2022)

Members of martial arts groups also said they were not encouraged to engage in violence, but instead their groups placed a strong emphasis on using martial arts skills for self-defence:

“There are only individuals [involved in trouble]. They bring the name of the organisation down.”
(A member of IKS martial arts group)

Several participants also explained that their martial arts group encourages respect for women and girls and as well as equal treatment of male and female members:

“In PSHT, we are taught that, ‘we are always one heart in the lotus’ [persaudaraan setia hati terate]. There are men and women in this organisation, and we are treated the same and women also have the same rights.” (A member of PSHT martial arts group)

Another, a member of 77 explained:

“The trainer says that if you train in this [martial and ritual arts], you have to do good things and respect the girls. Sometimes our cousins from different martial arts groups tease us but the trainer said just stay silent and the important thing is to always consider them your siblings.”

Stigma and family perceptions

Due to their association and involvement in violence and unrest in Timor-Leste, there is split public opinion about martial arts and ritual arts groups in Timorese society. Participants reflected on these negative perceptions among their families and communities:

¹⁸ Belun, *Dynamics of martial arts related conflict and violence in Timor-Leste*, p. 17.

“I train it [martial arts], so I know about it deeply. For the others who don't train, they will think that if we're involved then we're looking for problems. They only see the bad side, they never see the good side of it.” (A member of IKS martial arts group)

“[My family said] Eh, if you join you will be a criminal, you will be involved in causing problems. My mother is always watching me, keeping an eye on me.” (A member of KORKA martial arts group)

“They do not know [that I am a member], but if they did, they would be sad. One time the police caught me and put me in prison for 72 hours. When I got back home, I lied to my parents and said that I was staying at one of my friends' houses.” (A member of 77 ritual arts group)

On the other hand, some families' reaction to membership was positive, or at least, not overwhelmingly negative:

“My parents motivated me, [they said], ‘you can train, but only do the good things’. My parents supported me but said to always be careful.” (A member of PSHT martial arts group)

“My parents said, ‘now you are part of the group, we can't say anything, the important thing is that you take care of yourself, don't show anyone [that you're a member], and don't be arrogant. Become well trained, don't go and look for problems like your friends that cause destruction.” (A member of IKS martial arts group)

In addition, some members also received support from community:

“When we train among the community, our parents support us. Sometimes our neighbours prepare coffee for us. We get support from our parents and the community.” (A member of IKS)

Perceptions and visions for peace and non-violence

Throughout the FGDs and PAR workshop, youth participants articulated a range of feelings and ideas about how they see the role of martial arts and ritual arts groups in Timorese society today. This ranged from the local – such as providing protection for one's family and community – to the national and international level, such promoting national pride and Timor-Leste's international image:

“As a Timorese youth, don't say I am bad for Timor-Leste. I follow ritual arts to defend myself and my family.” (A ritual arts group member)

“The organisation is like a tree. We have to use this organisation for good. We're the ones who use the organisation, the organisation doesn't use us. We have to do something for (positive) change.” (A martial arts group member)

“As youth, we should contribute to progress by being involved in organisation. Use the organisation as an opportunity to compete in national and international competitions and give Timor-Leste a good name.” (A martial arts group member)

“Martial arts groups are not to put down the country’s reputation [hamorin], but to raise the image of the country.” (A martial arts group member)

Exploring the current situation of peace

Participants of three martial arts groups and one ritual arts group, as well as university students, analysed conflict and justice, and discussed their perspectives of peace under six themes: the recurrence of conflict; safety and security; militarisation; participation and inclusion; accountability, and gender equality. This interactive method empowers youth to create their own long term and inclusive vision of peace.¹⁹

¹⁹ Vision of Humanity, “The Global Peace Index: Exploring the 23 Indicators of Peace.” accessed 13 August 2024, <<https://www.visionofhumanity.org/chart-of-the-week-indicators-of-peace/>>.

Ongoing Conflict

Much of the current street violence in Timor-Leste is perceived to be 'martial arts related.' Violence is mostly carried out by young men who target opposing groups with rock throwing, stabbings and hit and runs. The conflation between conflict stemming from interpersonal tensions or disagreements and conflict linked to martial, ritual, and non-aligned youth groups means that it is difficult to assess the true scale of martial arts violence.

What is clear, however, is that current violence is seen as inextricably linked to and a continuum of historical violence. During a workshop facilitated by AJAR in February 2023, youth martial arts group members recalled in particular the 2006 crisis and the impact it had on their childhood. Violence, destruction and displacement impacted around 15% of the population, with IDP camps in Dili and the districts hosting up to 78,000 people.

"I became a victim [during the 2006 Lorosa'e/Loromonu crisis] when someone from a martial arts group stabbed me in Mascarinhas [neighbourhood of Dili]". (A member of PSHT martial arts group)

"When the Lorosa'e/Loromonu crisis happened, I still remember the problems in our area. During that time, our family home in the districts was burnt down". (A martial arts group member)

This conflict continued into 2007-2008, where martial arts groups were prominent in upholding street violence. Once again, ordinary people bore the brunt of the violence, with many forced to flee their homes.

"My siblings and I had to flee to Baucau from Dili in 2007." (A member of IKS martial arts group)

"I still remember the conflict between martial and ritual arts groups 77 and PSHT, I remember members of 77 coming and burning down our house in Mascarinhas." (A member of PSHT martial arts group)

Despite the scale of violence and the number of people affected, there has been a lack of any transitional justice or attempt to engage young people in nation building. These failures, and their link to the recurrence of gang-like violence must be acknowledged and addressed.

Accountability

As noted earlier, young people in Timor-Leste have a strong understanding about the impact impunity for past human rights violations has on their current life. Some participants expressed a strong perception that where it exists at all, accountability is partial, and only accessible to people considered to be 'real' victims by the government:

“The Government does not prioritise victims. They still consider some victims as the perpetrators of conflict. The Government uses martial arts groups as a scapegoat for problems not linked to us, therefore not prioritising justice for the real victims by treating us [members of ritual/martial arts] poorly.” (A member of 77 ritual arts group)

Others felt that they were used by self-interested politicians, and that their legitimate concerns and grievances – for example corruption, impunity, lack of transparency, under investment in youth, and non-inclusion in political and other decision-making processes – were often ignored or forgotten:

“When the leaders start campaigning for elections, they promise to better the lives of civilians, then after, in reality, they aren’t interested at all and continuously abandon us with false promises.” (A member of 77 ritual arts group)

Societal safety and security

People in communities impacted by martial arts violence express concerns about their safety and security. Feelings of insecurity within the community are expressed by people who live close to big roads and experienced rock throwing and threats from passing by groups as well as those who know someone subjected to police brutality. This was the case for the friends of a young PSHT member who died as the result of alleged ill-treatment in police custody in 2022. Lack of trust in the security forces, perceptions of police bias, as well as impunity for police brutality further fuel feelings of distrust. Young martial arts group members reflected these sentiments when detailing their experiences:

“The police and other security forces often intervene in our ability to walk freely around. They strongly pressure us.” (A member of 77 ritual arts group)

“There are often unknown people patrolling our neighbourhood every night.” (A member of PSHT martial arts group)

For some young women, safety is also compromised in the home. This is often because of patriarchal values or the economic stability in their families:

“I don’t feel safe at home because I am always being pressured by my brothers.” (A female IKS member)

“I don’t feel secure because in my house there is still violence between me, my sister and my mother just because of what I am wearing.” (A female IKS member)

Militarisation

Despite the attempted reforms of the security forces following the 2006 crisis, many people still feel unsatisfied with the way in which police and the military interact with the community. Fundasaun Mahein has regularly reported on police violence and impunity. Young martial arts group members also described experiencing heavy handed security forces responses, including physical violence, with victims receiving little to no recourse:

“I don’t believe in the security forces because from what we’ve seen, the armed forces come to show their power against civilians without proper investigation. I’ve seen first-hand someone causing trouble, and [an] entire group of naval forces came and proceeded to beat up the person causing trouble.” (A female IKS participant)

Key causes or contributing factors of youth violence

Through discussions with members of youth groups across ten municipalities, it became clear that the root causes of violence against young people and conflict between martial arts and ritual arts groups include limited or inadequate access to education, poverty, lack of rule of law, Timor-Leste’s political system, and abuse of alcohol among young people.

Access to education

While there have been significant efforts to expand education in Timor-Leste since independence, there remain ongoing concerns about accessibility, affordability, and quality. The cost of education remains a challenge for many families, in particular those living in remote or marginalised areas and communities.

“If families have the money, they can access a better education for their children. But, for many people who don’t have [money], they don’t receive a quality education.” (A member of PSHT martial arts group)

A major problem affecting the quality of education is that teachers are not sufficiently trained to use the official textbooks and educational materials, which were developed in Portugal. Another challenge is that the Ministry of Education has prioritised capacity building for education in natural sciences and Portuguese, sidelining other important subjects. An assessment of the social sciences curriculum in public junior and senior high schools found that social sciences subjects – including history, human rights, and citizenship education – were not adequately taught, and not accessible to all.

Young people also lack opportunities to engage in activities that instil a sense of pride, inclusion and vision for the future. *Escuteiros*, Timor-Leste scouting organisation has long advocated for the Ministry of Education to include scouting activities as extra-curricular activities, without success. As a result, there are no extra-curricular activities to develop talent and motivation in schools which means that students often end up organising their own extra-curricular activities, such as martial arts and ritual arts training.

Outside of formal education systems, there are no specific education or awareness raising programs targeting families and communities. Traditional Elders often have little support for activities focused on youth education and traditional values. Increases in family and domestic violence have led to many ‘broken homes’. Many young people involved in violence between

martial arts and ritual groups described experiencing problems in their homes or extended kinship networks.

“If we want discrimination within the family and the community to end, we need to make sure religious and state authorities cooperate to provide quality training on diversity and respect. Within households and families, it is the responsibility of parents to educate their children.” (A member of 77 ritual arts group)

In Timor-Leste, there is no government orientation on how martial arts organisations carry out education and training for their members. The Secretary of State for Youth and Sports has a program under KRAM to regulate the operations of all martial arts organisations, including clear rules and regulations, approval of teaching materials and permission for trainers to train. However, this program was discontinued following the change in government in 2023. As a result, it is difficult to ensure that teaching provided by martial arts and ritual arts groups does not include harmful, discriminatory, or violent content.

Unemployment and poverty

Poverty is a significant driver of youth involvement in martial arts and ritual arts groups. Young people in Timor-Leste face a range of challenges, including underdevelopment, economic insecurity and lack of meaningful employment opportunities. As a result, many lack the opportunity to develop their future and engage in society.

“My older brother works in maintenance, but it’s inconsistent. Sometimes he has work, and sometimes he doesn’t.” (A member of PSHT martial arts group)

Martial and ritual arts groups can offer motivation, as well as a support network.

“Martial arts contribute to the development and security of people’s economy, for example in KORKA, when one of our brothers is experiencing hardship, we all support him through it-including sharing our economic resources.” (A member of KORKA martial arts group)

More than 50% of the population relies on agriculture for income, however key challenges include unreliable and poor investment in agricultural markets, threats of climate change, high competition with imported products, and low wages—the minimum wage is US\$ 115 per month. For women and girls, unemployment and poverty is often exacerbated by gender inequality, including patriarchal attitudes and discrimination in the workplace as well as within cultural and family structures.

“How we as boys are treated at home compared to the girls is very different. When I get pocket money from my parents, it is often twice that of what my older sisters get.” (A member of IKS martial arts group)

One of the very few secure employment opportunities is in the public sector. However, nepotism and corruption mean that only some have access to these opportunities. A lack of formal employment schemes is one of the reasons young people have increasingly sought opportunities

to study and work overseas. However, poverty or low socio-economic backgrounds means that this option is not available to all.

Unemployment among young people can lead to their involvement in martial arts, ritual arts, or non-aligned youth group activities. In some cases, martial arts and ritual arts organisations have provided informal support for members applying for Government-endorsed overseas employment schemes, as they would do when supporting members going through other economic hardships including cultural events, or school.

“An example [of our doctrine] is to help each other out when someone experiences hardship. We’re here to carry the load when someone has a lia-mate [traditional ceremony associated with a death], or needs help to graduate at school—or even when their basic necessities aren’t sufficient. We respond by coming together, putting money together to lighten the load.” (A member of KORKA martial arts group)

Political system

It is clear that the enforcement of justice in cases of violence amongst martial arts and ritual arts groups has not served as a deterrent for violence. Heavy-handed enforcement of the law by security forces, often committed with impunity, has often further triggered violence. Police officers lack sufficient training in the proper use of force during law enforcement operations, while some members of the security forces are themselves members of martial arts and ritual arts groups, which can further complicate efforts to regulate these groups or de-escalate violence.

“When I was working in Suai, we were still training [martial arts] even though it was illegal at the time. Our trainer was one of the local security officers in the Police force... others like Commanders and Sergeants were also participating.” (A male member of PSHT martial arts group)

“A lot of police officers are biased—their attendance of issues is based on kor [martial arts associated colour] or neighbourhood.” (A member of PSHT art group)

Lack of trust in and respect for the police has at times emboldened young people to openly commit acts of violence or even fight back against police officers. At times, the government has had to deploy members of the armed forces to handle violence involving youth. As already noted, impunity for acts of police violence has further fuelled mistrust in security forces, which in turn can perpetuate martial arts and ritual arts-related violence.

“The Government doesn’t have the capacity to minimise violence because we see many injustices continuing, and the tribunal system is just not effective.” (A male student)

“In 2022, a young PSHT member died in a police cell. Afterwards, the police were defending each other instead of taking responsibility for the death.” (A PSHT martial arts group member)

The lack of government attention to issues facing young people and failure to engage with youth and civil society to identify solutions further drive youth involvement in martial arts and ritual arts groups.



“The Government can’t keep operating on its own whim, they have to cooperate with civil society and other relevant institutions to address old and new conflict.” (A member of KORKA martial arts group)

“The Government created KRAM to regulate martial arts groups, not to give us our liberties, but because it was within the power and interests of politicians and elites.” (A female member of IKS)

Participants noted a tendency by state officials to use violence to solve problems. This issue is a legacy of the past, both the Indonesian occupation which promoted military culture and violence as well as colonialism which undermined the role of the family or *uma lisan* (customary institutions) in the education and development of young people.

There have been scattered processes to promote reconciliation between survivors and perpetrators of past and ongoing conflicts. Despite government claims of fostering peace through culture and customs, implementation of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms like *tara bandu* and *nahe biti bot*—which are ways for community resolution—and other culturally-rooted, nonviolent approaches to solving problems in the community have been inadequate.²⁰

²⁰ Babo-Soares, Dionisio, “Nahe Biti: The Philosophy and Process of Grassroots Reconciliation (and Justice) in East Timor,” *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 5, no. 1, April 2004.

These local practices for community resolution should be encouraged alongside judicial processes for larger human rights violations that have gone unresolved.

“A lot of people have been able to resolve their issues through cultural mediation, like tara bandu [cultural prohibition], but there continues to be problems.” (A member of PSHT martial arts group)

Abuse of alcohol

Participants explained that alcohol – which is easily accessible for young people in Timor-Leste – is a major trigger of violence between young people, and in particular youth members of martial arts and ritual arts groups. For example, in 2023, a fight between young people from two different martial arts groups in Suai was triggered by drinking alcohol. These children were involved in an argument at school, then when they came home, one of the groups bought alcohol, drank it, then went to attack another group with sharp weapons. One youth was stabbed to death.

“There will always be violence in the community fuelled by drinking tua [palm wine or other hard liquor]. Drinking until we’re drunk, we provoke each other. Especially on important public holidays. There will always be fights between old rivals like 77 and PSHT.” (A member of PSHT martial arts group)

Chapter IV: Key Findings, conclusion, and recommendations

AJAR's research found that young people in Timor-Leste join martial arts and ritual groups for a range of reasons, including social, economic, psychological, and spiritual motivations. These groups provide a sense of belonging and solidarity, physical and mental wellbeing, respect, pride and self-esteem, as well as – in some instances – access to networks of culture, social capital, and status. The importance of family, community, and kinship networks is also often a reason for becoming involved as members.

The research found that while martial arts and ritual arts groups play a role in violence – including street brawls, destruction of property, and rock throwing at times leading to serious injuries, stabbings and even murder – they are not the cause of the violence itself.²¹ This is consistent with the findings of a July 2023 report by the NGO Fundasaun Mahein which concluded that “... while there are valid concerns regarding the activities of martial arts groups and their contribution to violence, disorder and instability, many of the risks associated with martial arts groups are neither isolated to, nor primarily driven by, martial arts groups themselves.”²²

It is likely that conflicts involving martial arts and ritual arts groups are sparked by interpersonal issues among youth or existing tensions within or between communities. A minor tension can escalate into significant unrest, violence, and instability – as was seen in the violent events in Bobonaro in November 2023. While the leadership of different martial arts and ritual arts groups do not formally condone violence, the groups can be a vehicle used to perpetuate cycles of violence and revenge, including based on interpersonal and community grievances

Membership of different groups can cast rival group members as the ‘other’, contributing to or further solidifying an ‘us versus them’ mentality which can increase tensions and spark violence. The situation is exacerbated by perceptions of some groups as being more or less ‘Timorese’. In a sign of the ongoing legacy of the Indonesian occupation, association with Indonesia can also be used to justify conflict. Past conflict, historical injustice – including entrenched impunity – as well as lack of trust in state institutions can further fuel outbreaks of violence.

21 Consistent with the report of Fundasaun Mahein, *Politicisation of Martial and Ritual Arts Groups: Implications for National Security, Peacebuilding & Development*, 11 July 2023, which concluded that: “... while there are valid concerns regarding the activities of martial arts groups and their contribution to violence, disorder and instability, many of the risks associated with martial arts groups are neither isolated to, nor primarily driven by, martial arts groups themselves.

22 Fundasaun Mahein, *Politicisation of Martial and Ritual Arts Groups: Implications for National Security, Peacebuilding & Development*, 11 July 2023.

Chapter V: Recommendations

The recommendations below seek to reinforce and strengthen peace-building initiatives in Timor-Leste, particularly concerning addressing youth violence, specifically involving martial arts and ritual arts groups. These should be read alongside key recommendations made by Timor-Leste's Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR, known in Portuguese as *Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor Leste*) relating to youth, including the need to provide human rights and peace education.²³

1. The country's leadership, in particular the older generation and veterans, should recognise the important role of young people in society, and their role as future leaders. The state should further prioritise investment in young people's educational, social, sport and economic development, enabling and empowering them to become active participants across all levels of public life.
2. The Ministry of Education should develop a new national curriculum which includes specific human rights, peaceful conflict-resolution and healthy relationship education and training. The Ministry should further develop quality training programs for educators for students at all levels – including sport organisations – that are oriented towards the transformation of students and the promotion of values, beliefs and attitudes that encourage individuals to uphold their own rights and those of others, and not just teaching for exams.
3. The Ministry of Government Administration, especially the department responsible for overseeing village officials, should cooperate with the Secretary of State for Cultural Affairs to develop the knowledge and capabilities of village officials and traditional community leaders to help educate people about tolerance and non-violence and promote peaceful conflict resolution. This should include education and training for leaders of martial arts and ritual arts organisations and groups.
4. The Ministry of Youth and Sports should immediately develop policies and programs for the development and regulation of martial arts and ritual arts organisations and groups, in line with international human rights law and standards. The Ministry should engage in regular dialogue with leaders of martial arts and ritual arts organisations, and undertake socialisation and anti-violence campaigns aimed at fostering a sense of unity among members of martial arts and ritual arts groups.
5. The Ministry of Home Affairs, which is responsible for domestic security issues and the prevention of violence, should immediately develop regular campaigns and programs

²³ Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor Leste (CAVR), *Chega! The final report of the Timor-Leste Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR)*, Volume V, Part 11: Recommendations, October 2005.

working directly with communities prone to violence. This should involve the cooperation of Conflict Prevention Department staff and mediators, village police officers and village officials. Specific efforts should be made to ensure the inclusion, consultation, and representation of women and other at-risk groups. The Ministry should immediately identify villages or towns at increased risk of violent conflict which should be prioritised for interventions.

6. The National Police Force (PNTL) must regularly receive law and human rights education. All police officers must know the contents of all laws, especially those relating to the field of police work, so that in carrying out their duties there are no violations. The police oversight body must be strengthened to ensure that it is consistent in acting firmly and transparently against police officers who violate the law.
7. Military members of the Timor Leste Defence Force (F-FDTL), especially middle—and high-ranking officials, must also receive education regarding law and human rights in the military sector. Mastery of humanitarian law should be a requirement for promotion, in addition to military-technical capabilities. Members of the Military Police unit must understand the law and human rights so that in carrying out their duties, human rights are respected. This should involve civilian supervision of the military, specifically supervision from Parliament.
8. Judicial actors including judges and prosecutors must ensure that their duties and functions produce a deterrent effect for acts of violence which occur in society. This includes improving their abilities regarding human rights in addition to their mastery of the law. There should be mandatory and continuous education for judges and prosecutors regarding the latest human rights and modern laws. The control mechanisms of the High Council of Justice and Prosecutors must also be strengthened and transparent to the public.
9. Universities that have human rights and conflict resolution programs or departments should actively develop collaboration with related state institutions such as *Centro Nacional Chega!* (CNC) and Office of the Provedor for Human Rights and Justice (PDHJ) as well as non-governmental organisation to undertake socialisation activities, including seminars, conferences, and workshops, for politicians about the importance of building a culture of human rights and peace.
10. The Government should take effective action to end impunity, including by ensuring justice, truth, and full and effective reparations for past crimes, as recommended by the final report of the CAVR.²⁴

²⁴ Ibid. Volume IV, Part 11: Recommendations: Justice and truth.

Bibliography

- The Asia Foundation, *The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia*, 11 October 2017. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/state-conflict-violence-asia/>.
- The Asia Foundation, *The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia 2021*, 20 October 2021. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/the-state-of-conflict-and-violence-in-asia-2021/>.
- AJAR, *Mosaic: A manual for rebuilding lives and communities after torture*, 5 January 2018.
- Babo-Soares, Dionisio, "Nahe Biti: The Philosophy and Process of Grassroots Reconciliation (and Justice) in East Timor," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 5, no. 1, April 2004.
- Belun, *Dynamics of martial arts related conflict and violence in Timor-Leste*, May 2014. https://belun.tl/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Policy-Brief_MA_24-June-2014_FINAL.pdf.
- Fundasaun Mahein, *The crisis of Timorese youth as institutional failure to promote responsibility, creativity and inclusion*, 29 March 2024, <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2024/03/29/the-crisis-of-timorese-youth-as-institutional-failure-to-promote-responsibility-creativity-and-inclusion/>.
- Fundasaun Mahein, *Martial and Ritual Arts Groups: a complex challenge requiring an integrated strategy*, 27 September 2022. <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2022/09/27/martial-and-ritual-arts-groups-a-complex-challenge-requiring-an-integrated-strategy/>.
- Fundasaun Mahein, *Politicisation of Martial and Ritual Arts Groups: Implications for National Security, Peacebuilding & Development*, 11 July 2023. <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/MNH20PoliticisationMAGs-FINAL.pdf>.
- Myrttine, Henri, "Martial Arts, Mysticism and Belonging – Constructing Post-Conflict Masculinities in Timor-Leste," *Timor-Leste: Island of the World*, Vol. I Tomo II (2021, TLSA PT 2020): 277-284.
- Pawelz, Janina, "Security, Violence, and Outlawed Martial Arts Groups in Timor-Leste," *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (2015): 121-136.
- Scambary, James, "Anatomy of a conflict: the 2006-2007 communal violence in East Timor," *Conflict, Security & Development*, 9(2) (2009): 265-288.
- Scambary, James, Hippolito da Gama and Joao Barreto, *A survey of gangs and youth groups in Dili, Timor-Leste*, 15 September 2006. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313758421_A_survey_of_gangs_and_youth_groups_in_Dili_Timor-Leste.
- Vision of Humanity, "The Global Peace Index: Exploring the 23 Indicators of Peace", <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/chart-of-the-week-indicators-of-peace/>.
- Ximenes, Manuel, Sudarmo, and Kristina Setyowati, "Conflict Resolution on Martial Arts Organization Through Collaborative Governance: A Case Study in Timor-Leste," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, Volume 581 (2021): 238-244.

APPENDIX 1: AJAR's PAR Research and Focus Group Discussion

Between September 2022 and May 2023, AJAR held eight FGDs with current and former/inactive members of three martial arts groups (IKS, KORKA and PSHT) and one ritual arts group (77).

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION				
Date	Martial/ritual arts group	M	F	Total
13 Sep 2022	PSHT	5	-	5
17 Sep 2022	KORKA	4	-	4
4 Oct 2022	IKS	4	1	5
8 Oct 2022	IKS	3	3	6
13 Oct 2022	PSHT	4	-	4
13 Oct 2022	KORKA	2	-	2
1 May 2023	77	7	-	7
28-29 Jun 2023	77	5	3	8
TOTAL		34	7	41

AJAR also facilitated a Participatory Action Research (PAR) workshop on 6-7 February 2023 in Dili. The workshop focused on perceptions of peace with participants linked to three martial arts groups (IKS, KORKA, and PSHT) and one ritual arts group (77). The PAR Workshop used the following modules: 1) Timeline (2000-present); 2) Tree of Conflict; 3) Tree of Justice; and 4) House of Peace.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) WORKSHOP					
PAR Group	Martial/Ritual Arts Group	Origin of participants	Number of Participants	M	F
1	KORKA	Becora Cameira	5		
2	77	Beto	1		
3	IKS	Beto	6		
4	PSHT	Mascarinhas	9		
Total			21	17	4