

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Dynamics of Resistance to Sovereignty Violation: The Case of East Timor (1975-1999)

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Abstract : The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as much of the scholarship on the organisation, celebrates its ability to uphold the principle of regional autonomy, understood as upholding the norm of non-intervention by external powers in regional affairs. Yet, in practice, this has been repeatedly violated. This dichotomy between rhetoric and practice suggests an interesting avenue for further study. The East Timor crisis (1975-1999) has been selected as a case-study to test the dynamics of ASEAN state resistance to sovereignty violation in two distinct timeframes: Indonesia's initial invasion of the territory in 1975, and the ensuing humanitarian crisis in 1999 which resulted in a UN-mandated, Australian-led peacekeeping intervention force. These time-periods demonstrate variation on the dependent variable. It is necessary to observe covariation in order to derive observations in support of a causal theory. To establish covariation, my independent variable is therefore a continuous variable characterised by variation in convergence of interest. Change of this variable should change the value of the dependent variable, thus establishing causal direction. This paper investigates the history of ASEAN's relationship to the norm of non-intervention. It offers an alternative understanding of ASEAN's history, written in terms of the relationship between a key ASEAN state, which I call a 'vanguard state', and selected external powers. This paper will consider when ASEAN resistance to sovereignty violation has succeeded, and when it has failed. It will contend that variation in outcomes associated with vanguard state resistance to sovereignty violation can be best explained by levels of interest convergence between the ASEAN vanguard state and designated external actors. Evidence will be provided to support the hypothesis that in 1999, ASEAN's failure to resist violations to the sovereignty of Indonesia was a consequence of low interest convergence between Indonesia and the external powers. Conversely, in 1975, ASEAN's ability to resist violations to the sovereignty of Indonesia was a consequence of high interest convergence between Indonesia and the external powers. As the vanguard state, Indonesia was able to apply pressure on the ASEAN states and obtain unanimous support for Indonesia's East Timor policy in 1975 and 1999. However, the key factor explaining the variance in outcomes in both time periods resides in the critical role played by external actors. This view represents a serious challenge to much of the existing scholarship that emphasises ASEAN's ability to defend regional autonomy. As these cases attempt to show, ASEAN autonomy is much more contingent than portrayed in the existing literature.

Keywords : ASEAN, east timor, intervention, sovereignty

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