

Timor-Leste's ASEAN Accession: The Role of Diplomacy and International Support in Regional Integration

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Abstract—Since 2011, Timor-Leste has been persistently seeking ASEAN membership because of its aspirations for greater national identity within the region, political stability, and economic advantages. However, the country has yet to attain full membership despite ongoing efforts. This study looks at the reasons behind Timor-Leste's bid, the difficulties it confronts, and how ASEAN members feel about its admission. The study is based on a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing how social interactions, ideas and norms shape regional dynamics and integration processes. Using secondary data sources from government documents, media stories, and scholarly literature, this study uses qualitative approaches. Thematic analysis is employed to find trends regarding the reasons for, difficulties encountered, and advantages of Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership. Important conclusions include that Timor-Leste has several obstacles, even if the country is driven by the possibility of increased political stability, economic progress and the strengthening of regional identity. These obstacles include the need for significant outside assistance, diplomatic initiatives, political instability and problems with governance. The ASEAN norms significantly impact the integration process, particularly with respect to sovereignty and non-interference.

Keywords— International Support, Diplomatic Efforts, ASEAN, Political Instabilities, Government Issues, Timor-Leste, Constructivist Viewpoints.

I. INTRODUCTION

Timor-Leste, as a small, newly independent country in Southeast Asia, has declared directly through the government that integration into regional organizations is the main objective of its foreign policy. It began its application for ASEAN membership in 2011, and after 12 years has yet to be accepted as a full member of ASEAN (Soja, 2018). This raises important questions about the challenges Timor-Leste faces in its ASEAN accession process and the potential benefits that becoming a member could bring. Investigating this topic is crucial to understanding the dynamics of regional integration, the specific obstacles as a new independent state, and the interest in integrating regional organizations. Timor-Leste's integration process has taken more than a decade, but it has not been entirely accepted by ASEAN members, which have fallen short of offering maximum support for Timor-Leste's accession. Regional integration is critical for states seeking to enhance economic cooperation, political stability, and social cohesion (Pedersen, 2002).

Thus, Timor-Leste's interest in joining ASEAN aligns with the broader trend of countries seeking to solidify their position within the regional bloc to achieve their objectives. Regional integration fosters economic integration, political stability, and social cohesion among member states, just as regional integration contributes to forming regional identity and a sense of community, which is essential for collective development (Katzenstein, 1996). ASEAN, founded in 1967, has grown to include ten member countries. The association promotes economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the region, as well as regional integration, which stimulates economic growth, forms alliances, and

strengthens mutual understanding (Adler & Barnett, 2000). In addition, the first objective of a state in international relations is to pursue its national interest. Therefore, countries need to advocate for their interests abroad in the context of regional integration. For this, it is essential to work together and reconcile national interests among states in the region (Schiff & Winters, 2002).

For Timor-Leste, joining ASEAN is about economic benefits, strengthening its national identity, and political stability in the regional framework. Scholars have extensively analyzed the potential political, financial, and sociocultural impacts of Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN (Castro Seixas et al., 2023). These dimensions will be explored, providing a comprehensive view of what ASEAN membership could mean for Timor-Leste and existing ASEAN members. These studies underline that Timor-Leste's integration into ASEAN can be a means of strengthening regional cooperation, economic development, geopolitical stability, and cultural exchange in the ASEAN community.

Despite the strategic benefits of ASEAN membership, Timor-Leste faces several significant challenges that have delayed its accession. Timor-Leste's accession process has exceeded a decade in length, and ASEAN is still determining whether to accept the nation as a full member, even as Timor-Leste has been actively participating in ASEAN activities since submitting its application in 2011. Timor-Leste recently received a positive signal from the ASEAN leadership, which declared that Timor-Leste would become the 11th member of ASEAN at the 42nd ASEAN Summit in 2023 (Martínez-Galán, 2021). However, the result differs from the previous decision. Still, this cannot be accepted by ASEAN member countries by consensus.

This study aims to answer the critical question: What motivates Timor-Leste to make efforts that have taken a long time but remain a priority for the state, and what are the main challenges and benefits associated with Timor-Leste's interest in joining ASEAN despite the long time and the uncertain perception of ASEAN member countries? A significant challenge is the political and economic criteria that ASEAN sets for new members to meet before they can be integrated into the regional organization. These criteria include a commitment to financial integration, political stability, and adherence to ASEAN principles and agreements (Severino, 2007). Timor-Leste is a newly independent and developing country struggling to meet these strict requirements, with economic disparities, limited human resource capacity, and underdeveloped infrastructure, which are significant constraints to Timor-Leste's ASEAN candidacy (Spencer, 2014).

Another challenge is Timor-Leste's perception of readiness within the ASEAN community. Despite Timor-Leste's efforts, some ASEAN members still need to be convinced of Timor-Leste's ability to contribute effectively to the organization, mainly regarding Timor-Leste's political maturity, economic stability, and capacity to implement ASEAN agreements and policies. For these reasons, ASEAN member countries will be concerned about not admitting Timor-Leste to become a full member of ASEAN soon, and there is no specific indication when it will become a full member of the regional organization (Berlie, 2017). In addition, there needs to be more current knowledge about the specific paths Timor-Leste can take to overcome these challenges and the concrete steps needed to align more closely with ASEAN expectations. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of diplomatic efforts from the perspective of ASEAN members through bilateral cooperation and international support for Timor-Leste's accession process. Also, it will explore the obstacles that Timor-Leste faces and the potential benefits that Timor-Leste can get from joining ASEAN.

Research Questions

Why is Timor-Leste pursuing ASEAN membership and what factors are preventing it from becoming a full member of ASEAN?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review aims to explore the complex dynamics of Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN and the factors that hinder Timor-Leste's accession. Since gaining independence in 2002, Timor-Leste has expressed interest in joining ASEAN, seeing accession as a strategic political and economic policy priority. However, it is still persistent. Unfortunately, Timor-Leste has not gained full accession to ASEAN. This review addresses two main questions: Why is Timor-Leste interested in joining ASEAN? What factors prevent Timor-Leste from becoming a full member of ASEAN? By examining a wide range of academic sources, this review provides a comprehensive understanding of Timor-Leste's aspirations to join ASEAN and the obstacles it faces.

Juli & Marsal (2023), looking at progress and opportunities in ASEAN as a regional organization in "Timor-Leste's

National Interest in ASEAN: Economic and Political Considerations", show that Timor-Leste's national interest in becoming a member of ASEAN is a result of the economic and political benefits of being part of the organization. Especially on the financial issue, Timor-Leste must respond to domestic needs and seek alternative products from ASEAN member states or seek a partnership with ASEAN. The author further emphasizes that the government of Timor-Leste can use this to address its internal concerns, including boosting the country's economy, raising healthcare and education standards and providing better employment opportunities for Timor-Leste.

The main reason Timor-Leste wants to join ASEAN, according to a survey by the Indonesia-Timor-Leste Commission of Truth and Friendship, is that Timor-Leste joined ASEAN for geopolitical strategy, the economy and potential benefits that will be obtained from members through collective security arrangements, promoting regional political stability, and access to programs for socioeconomic development (Strating, 2014). Similarly, research by Salvador & Soares (2021) in the "Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste: The Road to ASEAN Membership" shows that Timor-Leste's interest in ASEAN mainly results from its desire to develop its economy, which it has been striving to do since the restoration of independence in 2002. However, some challenges limit Timor-Leste's ambition to become a full member. Timor-Leste's interest in becoming a member is very significant for its economy. It can guarantee security and shape its identity with a position in the regional and global order, and joining ASEAN can help ensure its identity as a small, newly independent state and distinguish its political and cultural identity from neighboring countries (Sahin, 2012).

Following this, "The Paradox of ASEAN: Timor-Leste Betwixt and Between" shows that Timor-Leste's interest in becoming a member of ASEAN can be in the local strategy and objectives of its foreign policy, which include strengthening regional cooperation further and treating ASEAN membership as a state priority (Castro Seixas et al., 2023). Another reason, according to McWilliams & Leach (2019), for Timor-Leste's interest in accessing ASEAN is that it is an important space to engage in diplomacy and also to focus on political security aspects to face challenges such as democracy and national security, as well as Timor-Leste's strategy to manage complicated international dynamics by reflecting its goals for greater regional cooperation and integration. According to previous research by Shoesmith (2011), Timor-Leste's candidacy for ASEAN was significant for development strategies, including strengthening economic relations with ASEAN member states through integration into regional organizations.

Sahin (2014), in "Timor-Leste's Foreign Policy: Securing State Identity in the Post-Independence Period" shows Timor-Leste's interest in joining ASEAN and its foreign policy decisions in the broader context of Timor-Leste, which has just been born into the global political order. Furthermore, Timor-Leste's interest in becoming a member of ASEAN is shown by the results of a survey in "Accepting Timor-Leste as an ASEAN Member: An Act of Compassion or Geopolitical Necessity", which shows that Timor-Leste's interest in integrating into the regional organization anticipates the

geopolitical rivalry between China and the US in the region, so Timor-Leste needs to join ASEAN (Azis & Safira, 2024).

Factors from previous studies in this literature review stated that Timor-Leste was still facing challenges, which were barriers to the ASEAN accession process.

Guterres (2018), in "Opportunities and Challenges in Timor-Leste's Path to Becoming a Member of ASEAN", said there were obstacles such as limited human resource capacity and economic sectors that will be dependent on imports, which Timor-Leste must overcome before joining ASEAN. Similarly, Berlie (2017), in the dynamics of the typical procedures of Timor-Leste's admission as a permanent member of ASEAN, also produced unfavorable results. ASEAN member countries rejected Timor-Leste's accession because the country was unstable and the economic sector was underdeveloped.

Azis and Safira (2024) state that factors that serve as barriers to Timor-Leste's accession include the consolidation of democratic state institutions in Timor-Leste and the economy, which lacks sustainability and internal security. The author further emphasized that Timor-Leste depended only on the Petroleum Fund, which could not be guaranteed for non-renewable resources and could be lost soon. The GDP per capita is the second-lowest, and the poverty and unemployment rates are high. Furthermore, Escollano et al. (2023), regarding Timor-Leste's interest in ASEAN accession, found that it causes economic disparities dependent on external sources and is very different from ASEAN's neighbors. Thus, it will impact Timor-Leste's accession, especially to meet the criteria that meet ASEAN's requirements as criteria for new countries. Moving forward, as emphasized by Fidalgo Castro et al. (2021), ASEAN member states argue that differences in observations about Timor-Leste's interest in becoming a permanent member are not only economic but also include security policy and human resource capacity challenges. The author argued that Timor-Leste's limitations might not contribute to the region but would serve as an obstacle to forming the ASEAN economic community. Regarding Timor-Leste's accession to the ASEAN community, it is noted that countries that oppose Timor-Leste's admission to ASEAN are against reintegrating it into the ASEAN community.

However, according to Soares (2018), regarding the political security barriers and difficulties that Timor-Leste has to overcome to become a member of ASEAN, security is optional. However, Timor-Leste must prepare adequately to develop industries such as infrastructure, human resources and the economy because these obstacles in the short term will prevent Timor-Leste from joining ASEAN. The author further reinforces that Timor-Leste's accession process has received international support and diplomatic efforts with ASEAN member countries, as newly established countries must receive more significant support from other countries to facilitate integration into the regional organization. Thus, according to the study "The Struggle to Become the 11th State of ASEAN: The Case of Timor-Leste," for Timor-Leste to become the 11th ASEAN member, it must meet the requirements of sustainability according to the ASEAN Charter's legal provisions, which provide a comprehensive

explanation of why Timor-Leste cannot be accepted as an ASEAN member (Windraskinasih & Afriansyah, 2018).

The author clarifies that the study shows that Timor-Leste must satisfy the significant conditions listed in Article 6, paragraph 2, which include (a) being located in a recognized Southeast Asian region, (b) being recognized by all ASEAN member states; (c) having agreed to be bound by and comply with the Charter; and (d) being capable and willing to perform the responsibilities of membership. Research shows that Timor-Leste satisfies parts a, b, and c but fails to satisfy part d regarding its ability to respond to a member state's obligations, which must be addressed.

Mangku et al. (2023) further argue that the factor that limits Timor-Leste's accession process is that it does not meet the criteria as a new country to join ASEAN, according to Article 6 and line 2 part (d), which stipulates that the ability and willingness to perform obligations as an ASEAN member must be proven and monitored before enforcement, referring to Article 5 paragraph 2. Compliance relates to the ability and willingness to carry out this obligation, for example, to carry out physical and non-physical development standards following the standards established by ASEAN. "Are you ready? Timor-Leste's Final Push to join ASEAN", by Hansson & Weiss (2023), states that Timor-Leste has the smallest economy in Southeast Asia and limited resources to meet all the obligations of ASEAN membership, including participation in nearly 1,000 meetings each year, and signing and ratifying the highest number of conventions, declarations, and agreements. Similar to Fisher et al. (2022), it is stated that Timor-Leste's interest in joining ASEAN is founded in Article 6 of the ASEAN Charter, which offers both possibilities and difficulties, based on the findings of previous studies. Although Indonesia and Cambodia have assisted, the lack of other ASEAN members and their reluctance to accept Timor-Leste as a new member create severe obstacles for newly independent countries, and ASEAN member countries have not been able to reach a consensus on Timor-Leste's accession.

According to Rifqi Mahardika Putra et al. (2022), Timor-Leste's accession status to ASEAN, based on the 2007 ASEAN Charter, is to determine the obstacles that Timor-Leste faces and the reasons for its delayed ascension to ASEAN. In addition, the author further argues that Timor-Leste's membership status in ASEAN has yet to be ratified because Timor-Leste still needs to comply with all the requirements in Article 6. Currently, it is still an observer country, not a member. In addition, what makes Timor-Leste's acceptance as an ASEAN member difficult is the use of a rigid and absolute consensus, as well as an era of growth that has made ASEAN countries increasingly see many factors in the decision to accept Timor-Leste, after seeing Timor-Leste's economic growth, which is the slowest in Southeast Asia. Observing that it is one of the poorest countries in the world makes the authors feel that Timor-Leste's membership status in ASEAN will not be accepted anytime soon.

Timor-Leste's interest in joining ASEAN, according to Juli & Marsal (2023), Salvador & Soares (2021), Guterres (2018) and Starting (2014), is economic and related to accessing potential benefits through cooperation with ASEAN member countries to respond to domestic needs, such as creating jobs

for Timorese to increase economic diversification and sustainability. The authors further argue that Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN has excellent potential to increase its economic growth through regional cooperation to address the lowest GDP per capita in Southeast Asia.

Timor-Leste's interest in becoming a full member of ASEAN, according to Castro Seixas et al. (2023) and McWilliam & Leach (2019), is the objective and target of state foreign policy through diplomatic involvement to achieve political security and guarantee national security and democracy. According to Sahin (2014), Timor-Leste's interest in becoming a full member of ASEAN is to seek a part in the global order as a newly independent country. Azis & Safira (2024) contend that Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN will strengthen regional cooperation and anticipate geopolitical competition between China and the US. Sahin (2012) states that Timor-Leste is seeking to integrate into organizations with its identity in the regional and global order to help ensure that, as a small state, it maintains its own identity in the region.

According to previous research by scholars on barriers and limitations in the process of Timor-Leste's accession, including by Guterres (2018), Berlie (2017), Azis & Safira (2024), the biggest challenge for Timor-Leste in the ASEAN accession process is the economy, which is the chief barrier to full membership. Currently, Timor-Leste is dependent on oil as a non-renewable resource. Escollano et al. (2023) argue that Timor-Leste's economy depends on imports, impacting most of the population, including through poverty and high unemployment. According to Fidalgo Castro et al. (2021) and Martínez-Galán (2021), economic factors and human capacity limitations include security policies, which will not contribute to the region. They will be an obstacle to the formation of the ASEAN economic community. Participation in regional and international meetings and being able to ratify conventions and agreements according to ASEAN's requirements is also an obstacle for Timor-Leste. However, Soares (2018) states that security is not a priority for Timor-Leste's accession. Still, the economy, infrastructure, and human resources delay Timor-Leste's accession to regional organizations.

According to Windraskinasih & Afriansyah (2018), Timor-Leste has not met the criteria to join ASEAN. According to the 2007 ASEAN Charter, Article 6 paragraph 2, Timor-Leste has met a, b, and c, but not yet d, as an obligation as a member and it would be doubtful for ASEAN members to accept Timor-Leste. Mangku et al. (2023) exemplify the barriers stopping Timor-Leste from meeting Article 6, and continuing to Article 5, line 2, as physical and non-physical development according to ASEAN standards. Limsiritong & Sookhakich (2024) find that these obstacles have impacted ASEAN member countries' ability to reach a consensus on Timor-Leste's accession. There is a complex interaction of factors influencing Timor-Leste's quest for ASEAN membership and the challenges it faces. Timor-Leste's interests in ASEAN membership are related to economics, politics, geopolitics, security, regional identity, and strengthening regional cooperation. Factors that have been a barrier during Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN for over a decade are a weak economy, human resources, and the fact that the country is still underdeveloped, still needing to meet the ASEAN

Charter Article 6 paragraph 2 requirements. This impacts the consensus on the importance of Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN.

The main gaps in this research are the continuation of Soares (2018), who researched Timor-Leste's security capacity, potentially becoming a member of ASEAN, which focuses on the realist perspective of regional integration and prioritizes security and balance of power against external threats. The author also said ASEAN member countries and international support had accepted Timor-Leste's process. However, the author must clearly explain how ASEAN members have perceived Timor-Leste's accession and global support. Therefore, this research aims to fill the gaps that need to be filled in previous research. From the results of the literature review, scholars use a liberalist perspective to give priority to material interests as the first factor for Timor-Leste's accession rather than norms, ideas and social interaction in the ASEAN community to shape regional identity.

This research is different from the results of previous research, which is very necessary to study and analyze the perception of ASEAN member countries through diplomatic efforts with international support and factors of political instability and governance problems of Timor-Leste in the process of integration into regional organizations. In addition, this researcher uses a constructivist perspective in Timor-Leste's accession process, which focuses on norms, ideas, and social interaction as factors that can push Timor-Leste to join ASEAN to form a regional identity.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research uses constructivist theory to examine Timor-Leste's interest in integrating into ASEAN. It explains clearly how the constructivist perspective's view of norms, ideas, and social interaction can influence Timor-Leste's integration into regional organizations through its influence on the social and behavioral construction of the state (Wendt, 1999). In addition, constructivist theory can provide a deeper understanding of how identity, norms, and social construction shape behavior through interaction between states.

Therefore, this study uses a constructive perspective to analyze the accession process of Timor-Leste. Indeed, ASEAN always uses the role of identity, norms, discourse, and social integration among ASEAN member countries, particularly on the issue of Timor-Leste, to integrate into the ASEAN community (Katsumata, 2006). From a constructivist perspective, shaping the behavior of member states to support Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN, which can develop regional identity, is very important to foster cooperation between member states, which creates a sense of collective regional identity (Acharya, 2021).

Usually, ASEAN member states contribute to a collective regional identity through the ASEAN Way, a unique set of diplomatic norms and practices to emphasize decision-making regarded as informal, non-confrontational, and based on consensus. This approach is considered to give value to each other through social practices among ASEAN member countries (Acharya, 2005). It is seen that constructivism highlights the process of socialization through which states

need to internalize regional norms and values. Thus, in ASEAN, it is generally seen that socialization occurs through regular interaction, dialogue, and joint activity, and these interests promote the diffusion of norms such as non-interference, mutual respect, and peaceful conflict resolution (Nesadurai, 2012). For example, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which serves as a platform for dialogue and trust-building among member states, contributes to the socialization of security norms in the region (Emmers, 2011). It is known that norms or collective expectations of appropriateness are central to constructivist theory. In ASEAN, norms play a central role in maintaining regional order and stability. The principle of internal non-interference of member states is a fundamental norm of ASEAN, and this norm reflects the sensitivity of ASEAN countries to sovereignty and territorial integrity (Acharya, 2009).

Previous research on Timor-Leste's interest in integrating into regional organizations has used various perspectives, such as Arisanto (2020) using foreign policy theory to interpret the activity of state actors in the form of action, reaction, and interaction vis-a-vis the external environment to increase foreign policy success in domestic and international factors. Soares (2018), the realist perspective for Timor-Leste's accession process, focuses on the quality of security in the region. Martínez-Galán (2021) looks at foreign policy theory on social interaction to support Timor-Leste's accession process. Spencer (2014) explores Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN through a regional identity perspective.

This study differs from the perspectives of previous theories that analyze the interest of Timor-Leste in joining ASEAN, focusing on other perspectives such as realist and liberal security, balance of power, and material and economic interdependence (Rochester, 2018). Keohane Nye (1987) puts material factors as a priority for the process of Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN, such as economic interests, and Hongi (2000) explores ASEAN as a regional institution to facilitate only economic activity. Campbell (2007) finds that Timor-Leste is seeking accession to ASEAN to increase power and security, along with allies to balance energy.

However, this study uses the constructivist perspective to examine Timor-Leste's accession process from social interaction among members during this time to Timor-Leste's interest in integrating into regional organizations. Following this idea, closer to Amitav Acharya's article, "Do Norms and Identity Matter? Community and Power in Southeast Asia's Regional Order," and related to regional integration. Acharya (2005) elaborates on the role of norms, identity, and community as crucial in shaping the regional order of Southeast Asia and the social significance and political considerations that influence regional identity.

Expanding on this idea to address this need is seen from a constructivist perspective as creating a more complete understanding of Southeast Asian regionalism by considering norms, identity, and regional dynamics. Given the importance of ideational forces in forming regional order, rather than prioritizing traditional power-based analyses, Leifer (1999) states that material troops, such as balancing power, significant power interactions, and security dependencies, are key determinants of regionalism. It considers regional

institutions secondary to power dynamics and focuses on intergovernmental conflict and cooperation.

Regarding the role of socialization in institutions such as ASEAN to form a regional identity, the state can imagine and construct, through social and political acts, the aspects of regionalism that ASEAN itself promotes (Jones, 2012). It is essential to consider ideational forces, such as norms and identities, to understand them as central to regionalism in the Southeast Asian region. ASEAN's success in maintaining its unity and relevance among member states with different political systems and antecedent histories was facilitated by constructing a regional identity centered on non-interference principles between ASEAN member states, building consensus, and respecting sovereignty (Acharya, 2009). Acharya argues that ASEAN leaders and institutions actively promote and institutionalize norms that support regional cooperation, conflict management, and collective security.

Constructivists shape regional integration, such as in the 2007 ASEAN Charter, which formalizes ASEAN's commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law as reflected in the values and norms shared by its member states (Leiter, 2010). The process of Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN can be seen in the context of the ASEAN Charter, in line with the principles, and Timor-Leste has shown its readiness to contribute to and benefit from the ASEAN normative framework (Caballero-Anthony, 2008). In addition to the points mentioned earlier, normative practices within ASEAN, such as the ARF and the East Asian Summit (EAS) forums, not only facilitate regional cooperation but also reinforce ASEAN's identity as a community that has a commitment to peace, stability, and mutual respect (Ruland, 2009). The constructivist perspective offers a deeper understanding of ASEAN through Amitav Acharya's research on regionalism, which emphasizes the role of identity, norms and social construction in forming practical cooperation among ASEAN members to influence the accession process from a constructivist perspective. Timor-Leste is an identity-based regional organization in Southeast Asia (Haacke, 2002).

Research seeks to explore and analyze the perceptions of ASEAN member countries about Timor-Leste's accession process, focusing on efforts supported by international authors. Factors such as political instability and governance challenges should also be considered to understand and analyze the perceptions of support for Timor-Leste to integrate into regional organizations. Previous studies on Timor-Leste's interest in becoming a full member of ASEAN still need a more comprehensive analysis of ASEAN member states' perceptions. This study aims to address these gaps by investigating how ASEAN member states view Timor-Leste's accession process and how diplomatic efforts and international support shape these perceptions. Furthermore, political instability and governance problems in Timor-Leste have impacted its integration into ASEAN.

In addition, the center of this research is the constructivist perspective, which asserts that norms, ideas, and social interactions are critical in shaping state behavior and international outcomes. This study will focus on norms within ASEAN regarding accession criteria and regional identity, as well as ideas through diplomatic channels and international

forums that influence ASEAN's position on Timor-Leste's accession. These include social interactions between ASEAN member states and Timor-Leste, as well as diplomatic commitments and negotiations.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a constructivist perspective as the theoretical foundation. Constructivism emphasizes the role of norms, ideas, identity and social interaction in shaping state behavior and international outcomes (Wendt, 1992). This approach was considered suitable because Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession process involves diplomatic engagement, regional identity formation and ASEAN norms such as consensus, sovereignty and noninterference (Acharya, 2004). The constructivist framework helped explain how social interactions and diplomatic relations influence ASEAN member states' perceptions toward Timor-Leste's membership aspirations.

This research used secondary data sources to collect information. The data were gathered from academic journal articles, books, government reports, policy documents, ASEAN publications, media reports, and institutional publications relevant to Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession process (Bowen, 2009). Secondary data were used to analyze historical developments, diplomatic efforts, political challenges and international support concerning Timor-Leste's bid for ASEAN membership. The study specifically relied on government documents, media reports and scholarly literature to provide comprehensive evidence for analysis.

To analyze the data, the study applied thematic analysis. This method helped identify recurring themes and patterns concerning the motivations behind Timor-Leste's pursuit of ASEAN membership, the obstacles delaying accession, diplomatic strategies, political instability, governance challenges and international support mechanisms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through thematic analysis, the researcher categorized findings into major themes to better understand the complexities surrounding Timor-Leste's integration into ASEAN. In addition, the study emphasized ASEAN norms and principles, particularly regional cooperation, consensus building, sovereignty and noninterference to understand how these factors shape ASEAN member states' perceptions of Timor-Leste's readiness for membership (Narine, 2002). The research sought to provide a deeper explanation of regional integration beyond economic and political factors by focusing on social interactions and diplomatic engagement among ASEAN countries.

V. FINDING

A. International Support

Preparations for Timor-Leste's integration into ASEAN show that Timor-Leste began its application to ASEAN in 2011. Since then, Timor-Leste has made continuous efforts to become an ASEAN member. This indicates that the Timorese government's cooperation with ASEAN member states and international organizations has elicited support for Timor-Leste's candidacy for ASEAN accession, which has made significant progress during the long process (Nixon, 2012). Notably, foreign institutions such as the Asian Development

Bank (ADB) and the Japan Foreign Cooperation Agency (JICA) have aided significantly in the Timor-Leste accession process.

Building on the establishment of previous partnerships, the Asian Development Bank and Timor-Leste have worked together in vital areas, including on basic infrastructure, to make Timor-Leste ready for ASEAN accession. Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN has been hampered by problems such as infrastructure, roads, bridges, and energy and concerns about nutrition and food security (Khor et al., 2021). Because of these difficulties, Timor-Leste's accession process to ASEAN has taken too long, and ASEAN member countries are now concerned about Timor-Leste's potential for internal infrastructure development (Karim, 2017).

Therefore, coordination between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Timor-Leste and institutions such as the ADB is essential. The ADB's support in crucial sectors is very important for Timor-Leste to meet the necessary criteria to become an ASEAN member. Through such collaborative efforts, Timor-Leste wants to meet these challenges and strengthen its candidacy for ASEAN membership (Bank, 2022).

As a result, the ADB has become a vital partner for Timor-Leste in helping to develop the country's fundamental infrastructure and meet ASEAN standards. These issues are essential to Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN and have raised significant concern among ASEAN members to try to agree on Timor-Leste's development requirements before joining ASEAN (Haas, 2022). For this reason, in 2013, the government of Timor-Leste began to identify and implement the reforms necessary for regional economic integration and develop related systems and processes, and this involved the establishment of capacity-building for government officials and support training to facilitate participation in relevant events and activities related to Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession plan (ADB, 2013).

The main focus of these efforts is on research-based projects conducted by the ADB's Regional Integration Office, including an assessment of Timor-Leste's readiness for ASEAN accession, and a study made by JICA on the advantages, disadvantages, and conditions of ASEAN membership (Rosser & Bremner, 2013). ADB director-general for the ASEAN region Ramesh Subramaniam and Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak of Timor-Leste met and discussed the process and implementation of the ADB's assistance to Timor-Leste, including projects such as road construction, electricity infrastructure, and others funded by the ADB to support regional integration (Tatoli, 2019).

In 2020, the ADB assessed Timor-Leste's economic growth, which slowed until mid-2021, but Timor-Leste's economy would begin to recover in 2022 and 2023. This indicates that in 2022, internal conditions in Timor-Leste faced significant inflationary pressures, impacting fuel prices (World Bank, 2022). Thus, through a combination of prudent management and efficient use of oil revenues, Timor-Leste has increased investment in human capital infrastructure, created a conducive business environment, strengthened institutional capacity, and improved the performance of public

service, all of which are essential for sustainable growth (Cd, 2009).

As a result, the ADB has been an essential partner to Timor-Leste since its independence, prioritizing infrastructure development and institutional improvements to pave the way for sustainable development, mainly supporting Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession process (ADB, 2024). Timor-Leste's efforts to enhance fundamental internal development and foster an environment that promotes private sector growth and economic diversification have received special attention from the ADB. The ADB stands as a crucial partner for Timor-Leste in supporting infrastructure development. To date, the ADB has provided 80 percent of loans, grants, and technical assistance to the public sector, totaling \$756 million to Timor-Leste. Currently, Timor-Leste has 14 active loans from the ADB, totaling \$574.5 million. Cumulatively, loans and grants to Timor-Leste amounted to \$289.12 million, intending to enhance economic development, particularly in infrastructure, which is crucial in Timor-Leste's preparation for ASEAN accession (Tatoli, 2019).

On the other hand, collaborative efforts between Timor-Leste, the ADB, and JICA aim to support Timor-Leste in addressing domestic issues, particularly in infrastructure development and economic growth, which are barriers to its accession to ASEAN. These concerns may raise doubts among ASEAN members about reaching a consensus to accept Timor-Leste into ASEAN (ADB, 2024). Therefore, JICA is an essential partner in assisting Timor-Leste's stabilization and sustainable development, according to the Strategic Development Plan (SDP) launched in 2011. JICA's support prioritizes development, improved infrastructure, industry diversification, and the expansion of public services, which are priority areas in Timor-Leste (JICA, 2017). These priority areas challenge Timor-Leste and require development to promote economic activity and focus on quality infrastructure development. Also, collaboration with JICA was strengthened to offer technical support to the government of Timor-Leste in its admission to ASEAN, with particular emphasis on implementing the ASEAN Roadmap under the direction of ASEAN Director- Gen. Elisa Maria da Silva (Tatoli, 2024).

This international support has provided a framework for understanding the strategic interactions involved in Timor-Leste's aspirations to join ASEAN, encompassing diplomatic engagements and external partnerships aligned with Timor-Leste's interests in regional cooperation (Beeson, 2019). The intricacies of regional integration become evident when assessing how diplomacy, international relations, and strategic alliances were investigated throughout Timor-Leste's candidacy for ASEAN membership. Based on the country's strategy to communicate with other ASEAN members to establish an agreement on supporting its accession, diplomatic efforts have considerably helped Timor-Leste's candidacy for ASEAN (Novak, 2023). Based on the concept of soft power, the diplomatic initiative uses public diplomacy and diplomatic negotiations to analyze Timor-Leste's diplomatic resources, cultural heritage, and international partnerships to promote its aspirations for ASEAN membership. As defined by Joseph Nye (2004), soft power emphasizes the importance of persuasion, attraction, and influence in international relations,

making diplomacy crucial in shaping perceptions, building trust, and promoting cooperation among states (Saaïda, 2023).

Therefore, Timor-Leste's diplomatic initiatives within ASEAN reflect its soft power strategy, seeking to enhance its reputation, credibility, and visibility in regional organizations through diplomatic engagement and cultural exchange campaigns in public diplomacy. According to observers, the United States, Australia, and China are just a few major countries that have shown solid political support for Timor-Leste's admission to ASEAN, which also observed significant aid and support for the country's preparations (McDermott, 2013).

1. United States

ASEAN is at the core of their vision for the Indo-Pacific, which includes a strong commitment to ASEAN as a core regional architecture and strong support for ASEAN perspectives on the Indo-Pacific, according to Tom Daley, Business Attaché of the US Embassy in Dili, Timor-Leste, in 2017 (Daley, 2017). He highlighted the strong bilateral ties between the US and Timor-Leste, noting that the US would continue to support Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN while honoring the final decision of ASEAN member states. Additionally, Tom Daley reaffirmed that through talks between ASEAN foreign ministers and annual discussions between the US and ASEAN, the US will offer more significant assistance to Timor-Leste's admission.

In 2017, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Timor-Leste's Ministry of Finance jointly funded 5 million dollars in new projects, demonstrating a robust mutual commitment to transparent economic development, business security, and adoption of global trade standards. The latest customs project is supported by USAID, according to Diana Putman, USAID mission director in Timor-Leste. This is done to ensure that the government of Timor-Leste can meet international standards for customs operations, which is a requirement for ASEAN and WTO membership (USAID, 2017).

Tom Daley reaffirmed that US support for Timor-Leste's growth, especially in the tourism industry and sustainable destination planning, was achieved when the United States met with Timor-Leste's ministers at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation through USAID. He went on to say that creating new, strategic national tourism projects was the country's top priority when it came to tourism (Tatoli, 2023). Through high-level contacts in the area, the US continues to assist Timor-Leste. Ambassador Yohanes Abraham told ASEAN that the US supported Timor-Leste's road map to join regional organizations. Yohanes Abraham further said Timor-Leste would continue to benefit from US expertise when ready (ANTARA, 2023).

2. China

China declared its support for Timor-Leste's admission to ASEAN during the 18th ASEAN Plus Three Foreign Ministers Meeting in Manila on Aug. 7, 2017. It also asked ASEAN member states to prioritize Timor-Leste in its proposal for ASEAN membership. Timor-Leste's proximity to Australia and Indonesia highlights the need to continue conversations about the country's interests and capabilities as a small island nation in Southeast Asia and Australia (Chin,

2017). China's support for Timor-Leste was reaffirmed on June 8, 2022, during Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Dili, Timor-Leste. This support is especially evident in health care and joint economic and infrastructure development efforts to prepare Timor-Leste to join ASEAN. China firmly supports Timor-Leste's political and financial preparations for ASEAN accession, which aligns with Timor-Leste's main diplomatic objective of fostering friendship with member states in the Southeast Asian area (Fahey, 2022).

According to publications by the Chinese Embassy in Timor-Leste, China's support for Timor-Leste, particularly regarding its accession to ASEAN, underlines bilateral cooperation to support Timor-Leste's basic development needs. However, it is argued that China's strong relationship with ASEAN member countries may not necessarily influence ASEAN's decisions regarding Timor-Leste, as each country maintains its sovereignty in decision-making (Meaghan Tobin, 2019). On April 4, 2024, Bendito do Santos Freitas, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation for Timor-Leste, traveled to China to meet with Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi. The meeting's main agenda included China's support for Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession preparations and significant development needs, such as building infrastructure, increasing food self-sufficiency, and raising people's living standards. This summit discussed the essential requirements that Timor-Leste had to satisfy before considering joining ASEAN (CGTN, 2024).

3. Australia

As Australia directly stated through Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Penny Wong in Dili on Sept. 1, 2022, the Australian government strongly supports Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN, recognizing the significant economic advantages that it can bring to Timor-Leste. Wong stated that Australia had provided AU\$6.5 million to assist Timor-Leste in preparing for ASEAN accession, mainly focusing on meeting critical conditions necessary for ASEAN accession and aligning with ASEAN principles (Tatoli, 2022). In addition to the above, during the ASEAN-Australia Summit on March 6, 2024, in Melbourne, Australia, Prime Minister Antony Albanese reaffirmed Australia's readiness to support Timor-Leste in any area required for accession to ASEAN. Albanese further emphasized Timor-Leste's commitment to peace, stability, prosperity, and a sustainable future in the region. Additionally, in his statement in Melbourne, Albanese emphasized enhancing cooperation between ASEAN and Australia, aiming to establish a partnership focused on strengthening business, education, cultural relations, and community ties among Australia, ASEAN member states and Timor-Leste (Albanese, 2024).

Further expanding on this point, Australia will also offer scholarships under Aus4ASEAN to ASEAN member states and Timor-Leste, together with regional energy policy plans, including implementing the ASEAN Strategy for Carbon Neutrality. In particular, priority will be given to supporting Timor-Leste in its ASEAN accession process, providing adequate training programs as it moves toward ASEAN accession.

B. Perceptions of ASEAN Member Countries

Timor-Leste's aspiration to join ASEAN permanently is often linked to its activity as a political leader and its diplomatic efforts through events hosted by ASEAN as an observer member. The Government of Timor-Leste expressed its aspiration to join ASEAN through speeches, active involvement in various regional and international forums, and discussions and negotiations with influential personalities that ASEAN member countries take into consideration (Leach, 2017). Therefore, the objective is to support and assist Timor-Leste's efforts to join regional organizations. As a result, more information on Timor-Leste's collaboration with ASEAN members will become available, along with policy statements on support and assistance for Timor-Leste's integration into the regional group. Stakeholder activities, Timor-Leste's diplomacy, and engagement with member countries to offer mutual aid in bilateral relations with Timor-Leste will all work to achieve this (Alves, 2018).

1. Indonesia

As one of ASEAN's founding members, Indonesia has been an unwavering supporter of Timor-Leste's membership in the organization. Timor-Leste applied for membership in 2011 and was granted direct assistance by Indonesia, which was holding the ASEAN chair position at the time.

Then, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa underlined that ASEAN accession was just a question of time and underscored the geographic and geopolitical significance of Timor-Leste in Southeast Asia (Natalegawa, 2014). Taur-Matan Ruak, the president of Timor-Leste at the time, visited Indonesia in 2013 as part of diplomatic attempts to establish ties with the country. Timor-Leste's ambition to join ASEAN was a significant topic of conversation during this visit, emphasizing the political and economic relations between Timor-Leste and Indonesia. This diplomatic outreach continued under President Joko Widodo and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (Diplomatic, 2023). In addition, Indonesia was a significant player in the 2015 ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Its primary task was to address the question of Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership. This reflects Indonesia's continuous provision of the highest level of support for Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership (ASEAN, 2015).

On April 26, 2020, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, confirmed the country's complete support for Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership candidacy. Additionally, the minister expressed optimism that Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession process would soon be complete. This support persisted at the 42nd ASEAN Summit in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, in 2023. Under the direction of President Joko Widodo, Indonesia convened the Labuan Bajo meeting and once again showed its commitment to supporting Timor-Leste's ambitions to join ASEAN. During this summit, Indonesia unveiled a plan for Timor-Leste. Timor-Leste, represented by Prime Minister Taur-Matan Ruak, was there to adhere to the rules and become a permanent member of ASEAN (ASEAN, 2023).

2. Malaysia

Timor-Leste's geographic position in Southeast Asia is a compelling argument for the Malaysian government to support

Timor-Leste's full inclusion in ASEAN. When questioned about Malaysia's stance on Timor-Leste's 2019 bid for ASEAN membership, Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah said Malaysia directly supported Timor-Leste. He said that when Timor-Leste's deputy minister of foreign affairs and cooperation, Dionisio da Costa Babo Soares, visited Malaysia in July 2019, Malaysia expressed its support for Timor-Leste's participation in ASEAN (Ramadhany et al, 2021).

Malaysia is committed to facilitating a plan for Timor-Leste to become a permanent member of ASEAN shortly through bilateral collaboration between the two countries, which was enhanced in December 2022 (VietnamPlus, 2022). Anwar Ibrahim, the prime minister of Malaysia, made this promise explicitly when he said that his country would keep collaborating with the other ASEAN members to make it easier for Timor-Leste to become the bloc's eleventh member. Additionally, he stressed that, as reaffirmed in discussions with President Ramos Horta, Malaysia continued to assist Timor-Leste's socioeconomic growth and security. Through their continued collaboration, the two countries continue to help Timor-Leste in several ways.

3. The Philippines

As one of ASEAN's founding members, the Philippines has steadfastly advocated for Timor-Leste's membership. The Philippines' strong support for Timor-Leste's intention to join ASEAN was demonstrated during the 22nd ASEAN Summit by President Benigno Aquino (GUTIERREZ, 2017). The Philippines reaffirmed its commitment to closely collaborating to support Timor-Leste's integration into the region, particularly in future regional dialogue and development initiatives, once Timor-Leste joins ASEAN, and the Philippines also pledged its full support for Timor-Leste in its efforts to join the ASEAN community.

During the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Jakarta on Feb. 3, 2023, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Timor-Leste maintained diplomatic relations with the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) of the Philippines, Enrique Manalo. Timor-Leste's bid to join ASEAN permanently has received significant backing from the Philippines (Rocamora, 2023). They recognized Timor-Leste as a recently formed country ready to engage fully in all discussions, including the High-Level Summit. In addition, Indonesia and the Philippines reiterated their continued backing for Timor-Leste to join as the 43rd ASEAN Summit's 11th member and permanent member on Sept. 5, 2023 (News, 2023).

4. Thailand

Thailand is prepared to provide Timor-Leste full support in its application to join ASEAN permanently. On Nov. 18, 2022, this was officially announced by Anucha Burapachaisri, the acting government spokeswoman and deputy secretary-general of the prime minister, via the national media source *Khmer Times* (Khmer Times, 2022). It was announced that Thailand would formally develop a plan with goals and requirements for Timor-Leste to join ASEAN permanently. He said that all of ASEAN's members and any outside allies would help Timor-Leste reach its objective by offering aid,

developing its capability, and providing any other pertinent support required for Timor-Leste's interest in joining ASEAN.

It also highlighted Prime Minister Prayuth Chan O-Cha's eagerness to help Timor-Leste join ASEAN as its eleventh member. The 40th and 41st ASEAN High-Level Summits were held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where the ASEAN leadership convened. Before the summit, they discussed Timor-Leste's observer status and whether or not it could attend all ASEAN meetings. Pushing member states to allow Timor-Leste to join ASEAN showed Thailand's support for Timor-Leste's accession through high-level ASEAN meetings (Bernama, 2022). Together, ASEAN leaders decided to codify requirements based on the road map's goals for Timor-Leste to join as a full member, which included identifying the results of the Fact-Finding Mission and submitting them for approval at the 42nd ASEAN High-Level Summit. Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN has been confirmed by Thailand's former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kasit Piromya, according to a 2019 publication from the Thai Embassy.

5. Singapore

According to the literature analysis on Timor-Leste's aspiration to join ASEAN, Singapore, one of the organization's founding members, denied Timor-Leste's application when it was filed in 2011 (Strating, 2018, pp. 396–396). Timor-Leste's economic instability, lack of human resource qualifications, inexperience and inability to lead ASEAN dynamics, and contribution as an ASEAN member state that must pay dues to support meetings were among the reasons for this rejection. As a result, Timor-Leste needed help winning Singapore's approval, but its diplomacy and leadership persisted in its interactions with Singapore. As a result, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong met with Taur-Matan Ruak personally on Feb. 16, 2023, and stated that Singapore was willing to assist Timor-Leste in becoming the eleventh member of ASEAN (Hariz Baharudin, 2023).

Lee Hsien Loong further underlined that since Timor-Leste attained independence in 2002, regional integration procedures had improved bilateral ties between Timor-Leste and Singapore. These processes began in March 2011, when Timor-Leste applied to join ASEAN, and in 2015, Timor-Leste was admitted as an observer. The association confirmed Timor-Leste's admission as the 11th member of ASEAN in a declaration made during the ASEAN Summit in November 2022. This allowed Timor-Leste to participate in all ASEAN meetings, including the Summit, and to develop a road map based on the requirements for Timor-Leste's accession. Findings from the relevant Fact-Finding Mission carried out by the Three ASEAN Community Pillars were identified as part of this (VietnamPlus, 2023). As a result, Timor-Leste President José Ramos Horta expressed optimism that his country would join ASEAN as its eleventh member in 2023. Singapore pledged to encourage Timor-Leste's participation in the organization.

Additionally, Singapore played a significant role in helping Timor-Leste join ASEAN as a full member by hosting the 42nd ASEAN Summit in May 2023 in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong emphasized that ASEAN had a great deal of responsibility in this area since its members' choices were made by consensus, and

Timor-Leste would need some time to come to terms with them (Strategy, 2017). He again underlined how crucial it was that Timor-Leste finish all of the procedures to join ASEAN. Singapore plans to finish the procedures Timor-Leste needs to follow to join the bloc as a full member. On July 24, 2023, Singapore Minister of Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan traveled to Timor-Leste to fortify bilateral ties with the country, open an embassy in Dili and uphold the pledges made by the ASEAN Summit regarding Singapore's backing for Timor-Leste's ascension as the region's eleventh member (MFAS, 2023).

Vivian Balakrishnan met with José Ramos Horta, the president of Timor-Leste, and the minister of foreign affairs and cooperation to address the need for more preparations for Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership, as well as bilateral cooperation in some areas, including the economy. According to Vivian Balakrishnan, the primary objective of Timor-Leste's development as a new nation was to establish a Singaporean embassy there to fulfill the promises made by the Singaporean leadership before the ASEAN Summit (ASEAN, 2024).

6. Brunei Darussalam

On July 3, 2019, Timor-Leste Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Dionisio Babo Soares visited Brunei Darussalam to reaffirm Brunei's support for Timor-Leste's bid for ASEAN membership through diplomatic efforts and Timor-Leste's leadership. This confirmation was acquired at the Istana Nurul Iman in Brunei during a visit with the Sultan. Timor-Leste's ambitions to join ASEAN would have the full support of Brunei, the Sultan said. He also acknowledged the country's development and expressed optimism that ASEAN membership would occur soon (The Scoop, 2019). His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkhiah of Brunei Darussalam reaffirmed Brunei's utmost support for Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership during the 22nd Independence Day ceremony in Dili, Timor-Leste, on May 20, 2024. In particular, Brunei committed to supporting Timor-Leste's national development and ASEAN membership preparations by offering aid and support in tourism, education, health care, environmental protection, and bilateral cooperation. In line with ASEAN's goals, this commitment seeks to advance sustainable development (GoTL, 2024).

7. Myanmar

Myanmar's support for Timor-Leste's entrance has also been requested, considering the beginning of ties between Timor-Leste and Myanmar, Timor-Leste's relationship with its ASEAN accession, and Myanmar as a member nation. When Timor-Leste applied to join ASEAN, Myanmar was first unwilling to approve the application (Goh Ruoxue, 2023). The reluctance was impacted by the prior good rapport between Aung San Suu Kyi and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, who are both regarded as democratic leaders in Myanmar. However, because of his reaction to US activities in Iraq, José Ramos Horta was seen by Myanmar as a supporter of humanitarian assistance. However, in a 2010 Hanoi, Vietnam, proclamation during the 43rd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Myanmar stated its support for Timor-Leste. Following this, on Aug. 23, 2023, the President of Timor-Leste met with the Minister of Human Rights of the National Unity

Government of Myanmar, Aung Myo Min, to discuss Myanmar's continued support for Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership and to discuss jointly addressing human rights abuses in Myanmar and rejecting the military junta regime (Tatoli, 2023).

8. Laos

Similar to Singapore's case, Laos' stance toward Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership is evident in its political statements. According to research conducted by ASEAN Studies Center (ASC) scholar Dio Herdiawan Tobing, Timor-Leste's membership in ASEAN was rejected by both Singapore and Laos (Laotian Times, 2023). They contended that ASEAN could be at risk from Timor-Leste's uncertain economy, which could create future political, economic, and security issues. Singapore and Laos viewed this as a possible danger to ASEAN and thought it would impede the organization's efforts to lessen economic inequality among its members. Timor-Leste's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Dionisio Babo Soares, traveled to Laos on June 5 and 6, 2019, to formally state Laos' stance and secure backing for Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership. Laos showed its unwavering support for Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership.

Following this, on March 1, 2024, Laos President Thongloun Sisoulith and Timor-Leste President Jose Ramos Horta visited Laos to reiterate Laos' support for Timor-Leste's ASEAN admission (Presidencial.tl, 2024). President Sisoulith gave Timor-Leste his full support to join ASEAN in 2025 as a result of the conference. President José Ramos-Horta underlined that Laos would be the ASEAN president in the upcoming year and that Timor-Leste would have to step up its promotion efforts and have private conversations with ASEAN member states.

9. Cambodia

Timor-Leste's bid to become ASEAN's 11th member was first approved by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen in 2016, marking the beginning of Cambodia's support for Timor-Leste's membership in the organization (Cambodianess, 2019). To improve the caliber of human resources, Hun Sen also promised to give Timor-Leste technical support and to grant scholarships to Timorese students yearly to study in Cambodia. With this partnership, the goals of meeting ASEAN standards for human resource quality and economic growth would be strengthened (The Phenom Penh Post, 2024).

On Oct. 19, 2022, José Ramos Horta, as the president of Timor-Leste, visited Cambodia to enhance bilateral cooperation concerning Cambodia's endorsement of Timor-Leste's regional integration. Amid the discussions, Cambodia reiterated its endorsement of Timor-Leste's membership, highlighting the political advantages for the area and the possibility of collaborative decision-making over regional foreign policy (Khmer Times, 2023). President José Ramos Horta strengthened the relationship between Cambodia and Timor-Leste to aid Timor-Leste in its accession process. After the General Debate of the 78th session of the UN General Assembly on Sept. 22, 2023, in New York, this was explicitly discussed in a meeting with Prime Minister Hun Manet.

The leaders emphasized the potential for cooperation in various sectors, such as tourism, agriculture, and connectivity between the two nations. President Ramos Horta also urged

Cambodia to invest jointly in commercial industries and establish direct flights to enhance confidence between the societies and economies of the two countries. Hun Manet reiterated this support during the 43rd ASEAN Summit, reaffirming Cambodia's commitment to supporting and assisting Timor-Leste, especially in its future ASEAN accession process.

10. Vietnam

Vietnam has supported Timor-Leste's admission based on its own ASEAN membership experience. This was made clear when discussing Timor-Leste's application and preparedness to join ASEAN during the 9th Meeting of the ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group (ACCWG) in Da Nang, Vietnam, on March 5, 2020 (Vietnam Politics, 2023). On July 29, 2021, during the 11th Coordinating Council Working Group Meeting, Vietnam reiterated its strong support for Timor-Leste's efforts to become an ASEAN member. The team from Vietnam, headed by Nguyen Quoc Dung from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that they were willing to assist Timor-Leste in becoming ready to join ASEAN. Additionally, Nguyen Quoc Dung suggested that the ACCWG evaluate the effects of Timor-Leste's entrance and that foreign ministers and senior ASEAN officials meet (Government News, 2023).

On Feb. 4, 2023, in Jakarta, Indonesia, Adaljiza Albertina Xavier Reis Magno, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation for Timor-Leste, and Bui Thanh Son, the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Vietnam, met and agreed that Vietnam would work with all ASEAN members to discuss support for the requirements, processes, and processes for Timor-Leste to become an official ASEAN member soon (NhanDan, 2023). Furthermore, both parties agreed to enhance bilateral cooperation further, promoting delegation exchanges at all levels, starting with the inaugural meeting of the Joint Commission for Bilateral Cooperation at the ministerial level, based on the Technical and Economic Cooperation Agreement signed in April 2010. To implement this agreement, negotiations will be held to sign new contracts, mainly focusing on tourism cooperation and people-to-people exchanges between the two nations.

C. Diplomatic Efforts

Timor-Leste seeks ASEAN membership with solid reasons in its historical and geopolitical context. After centuries of Portuguese colonial rule and a tumultuous period of Indonesian occupation, Timor-Leste gained independence in 2002 (Spencer, 2014). Timor-Leste immediately sought to integrate into regional and international organizations to ensure political stability, economic development, and security. It is seen that ASEAN, with its focus on regional cooperation and stability, emerges as a natural partner for Timor-Leste's aspirations (Sahin, 2014).

ASEAN, founded in 1967, aims to promote political and economic cooperation, regional stability, and cultural exchange among its member states. Timor-Leste's geographical location, cultural ties, and historical ties to Southeast Asia make ASEAN membership a strategic objective (Braz, 2014). However, Timor-Leste will face many challenges, including political instability, economic

underdevelopment, and governance issues, which require comprehensive diplomatic efforts to gain acceptance from ASEAN member countries (Lopes, 2021).

Timor-Leste has engaged in extensive bilateral diplomacy with ASEAN member states to gain support for its membership bid. Timor-Leste seeks to build strong bilateral relations with ASEAN members such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines (A. Smith, 2005). These efforts have included high-level visits, diplomatic dialogues, and agreements on cooperation in various sectors. For example, Indonesia, a neighboring country with historical ties to Timor-Leste, has played a crucial role in supporting its ASEAN aspirations (Aucoin et al., 2014).

In addition to bilateral commitments, Timor-Leste has actively participated in regional and international forums to advocate for its accession to ASEAN. Timor-Leste has had observer status and participation in ASEAN-related meetings and activities to demonstrate its commitment to regional integration (Mahein, 2023). Timor-Leste's involvement in the ARF, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) underscores its dedication to ASEAN principles and objectives (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). Recognizing the need to align with ASEAN economic and political standards, Timor-Leste has undertaken significant reforms to address its internal challenges. These reforms have focused on improving governance, enhancing financial stability, and promoting sustainable development (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2023). Timor-Leste seeks to strengthen its institutions, fight corruption, and increase transparency to meet ASEAN's criteria for membership. Timor-Leste is making efforts to diversify its economy, attract foreign investment, and develop infrastructure to achieve the economic resilience needed for ASEAN integration (Tatoli, 2024).

Timor-Leste has actively participated in regional cooperation initiatives to demonstrate its commitment to ASEAN's objectives. It has been involved in various regional projects and programs related to trade, tourism, education, and cultural exchange. Timor-Leste's involvement in the AEC and APSC plans demonstrates its determination to contribute to regional development and security (Cardoso, 2024).

D. Political Instabilities

Timor-Leste's journey to independence has been one entirely of conflict and turmoil. After centuries of Portuguese colonial rule, the country experienced a brief period of independence in 1975 before being invaded and occupied by Indonesia (Magazine, 1993). The Indonesian occupation, which lasted from 1975 to 1999, was marked by widespread human rights abuses and violent resistance. The eventual independence referendum in 1999, supervised by the United Nations, caused widespread destruction and displacement as pro-Indonesian militias wreaked havoc in the country (Sousa, 2005).

Timor-Leste officially became an independent nation on May 20, 2002, establishing a new government. Building a stable political system from this tumultuous history has been challenging. Timor-Leste has experienced several periods of political instability that have impacted its efforts to join

ASEAN (Berlie, 2017). Political instability in Timor-Leste can be attributed to various interrelated factors, including factionalism, weak institutions, economic challenges, and social divisions (Barma, 2021).

These dynamics have manifested in different ways, contributing to uncertainty and volatility. Timor-Leste's political landscape is characterized by solid factionalism and rivalry between leaders and political parties (Saldanha, 2008). The country's political system, which includes a semi-presidential model with a president and prime minister, has often seen power struggles between different factions. Important political figures, such as Xanana Gusmão, Mari Alkatiri, and José Ramos-Horta, have played central roles in shaping the country's politics, sometimes leading to conflicts and power struggles that destabilize the government (Guterres, 2006).

The country's governance structure and institutions have struggled to develop robust mechanisms to maintain political stability. Corruption, inefficiency, and limited administrative capacity have impeded effective governance (Feijo, 2014). The judiciary, law enforcement, and public administration have faced challenges in establishing credibility and enforcement of the rule of law, and weak institutions have made it challenging to manage political crises and ensure a stable political environment (Dolven, 2012).

Several prominent political crises have highlighted the challenges of political instability in Timor-Leste and its impact on the country's candidacy for ASEAN membership. For instance, one of the most significant political instabilities in Timor-Leste was the 2006 crisis (Porter & Rab, 2010). Triggered by grievances within the military, the crisis was met with widespread violence and displacement. The dismissal of about 600 soldiers from the armed forces led to armed clashes, looting, and fires (Engel, 2007). The crisis exposed deep divisions in the military and broader society, the fragility of the country's political institutions, and the government's inability to manage the situation effectively, highlighting the challenges of maintaining political stability.

Timor-Leste faces frequent leadership disputes and government collapses, contributing to political instability. In 2007, a disputed presidential election resulted in violence and unrest (Maria, 2015). The subsequent formation of coalition governments often results in fragile alliances and power struggles. In 2017, the collapse of the minority government led by Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri resulted in a prolonged political impasse, delaying critical governance and development initiatives to meet ASEAN accession requirements (Leach, 2019). From 2018 to 2020, we witnessed new political turbulence in Timor-Leste, with the coalition government led by Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak facing internal conflict and disputes over budget allocation (Leach, 2019). In early 2020, the government collapsed after a failed budget vote, leading to the formation of a new coalition under Prime Minister Taur Matan-Ruak has shown that repeated episodes of political instability have made it difficult to govern and implement consistent policy to prioritize essential infrastructure development (Wallis & Neves, 2021).

Timor-Leste's political instability has significantly impacted its attempt to join ASEAN. The organization's

principles and criteria for membership emphasize political stability, economic resilience, and adherence to regional norms. Timor-Leste's internal challenges have raised concerns among ASEAN member states about the country's readiness to contribute to regional stability and integration that remain in doubt for ASEAN member countries to reach a consensus quickly on Timor-Leste's accession (Unique, 2016). ASEAN's main objective is to promote regional stability and security. However, political instability in Timor-Leste raises concerns about the potential impact on regional stability if the country joins the organization (Rohani et al., 2016). ASEAN member states distrust welcoming new members, which may cause internal conflicts and governance challenges in the regional framework (Windraskinasi & Afriansyah, 2018).

ASEAN economic integration initiatives, such as the AEC, require member states to meet specific economic and development criteria regarding Timor-Leste's economic challenges, including its dependence on oil revenues and limited economic diversification, raising questions about its ability to participate effectively in ASEAN economic integration efforts (Shoesmith, 2011). Political instability further complicates efforts to implement economic reforms and attract foreign investment. ASEAN strongly emphasizes good governance, the rule of law, and effective institutions. Timor-Leste's fight against corruption, weak governance, and limited institutional capacity poses challenges to meeting these criteria (Kingsbury, 2018). It shows that the country's political instability has hindered the development of robust governance mechanisms and institutions capable of meeting ASEAN standards (Strating, 2018).

E. Government Problems

One of the main governmental issues that has delayed Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN is the persistent political instability since independence. The governance has changed frequently, and no party has maintained a stable majority for an extended period (Affairs & Columbia, 2013). This volatility is detrimental to the consistent and effective implementation of policies necessary to meet ASEAN accession criteria (Shoesmith, 2003). Political instability has manifested in many forms, including contentious elections, parliamentary deadlock, and frequent leadership turnover (Wallis & Neves, 2021). For example, the 2018 elections resulted in a hung parliament, necessitating protracted negotiations to form a government. These instabilities may also hamper Timor-Leste's ability to present a coherent and unified front in its diplomatic efforts toward ASEAN accession (Croissant, 2022).

Governance issues, particularly corruption and weak institutional capacity, further delay Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN, and corruption undermines the effectiveness of government institutions and public trust (Oliveira & Basuki, 2023). Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index consistently ranks Timor-Leste poorly, reflecting widespread corruption in the country's political and administrative systems (Scheiner, 2021). Weak institutional capacity is a significant governance problem, and many of Timor-Leste's government institutions lack the expertise, resources, and infrastructure necessary to function effectively (A. et al., 2020). The weak capacity of institutions affects the

government's ability to implement the reforms and policies needed to align with ASEAN standards.

Economic challenges are closely linked to governmental problems and have significantly delayed Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN (Martínez-Galán, 2021, p. 15). The country's economy relies heavily on oil and gas revenues, which constitute the bulk of its national income. This dependence makes Timor-Leste vulnerable to world oil price fluctuations and limits the government's ability to diversify the economy (Azis & Safira, 2024, pp. 10–15). Moreover, high levels of poverty and unemployment persist, further complicating government efforts to implement sustainable development policies. Economic challenges are exacerbated by inadequate infrastructure, particularly transportation, education, and health care, which are critical to the country's overall development and regional integration (Salvador & Soares, 2021, pp. 126–212). The ASEAN accession criteria and process also contribute to the backlog. The organization has set stringent criteria for new members, focusing on political stability, economic performance, and adherence to ASEAN principles and norms (Escollano et al., 2023).

Timor-Leste's governmental problems, as discussed, hinder its ability to meet these criteria effectively. Furthermore, the ASEAN decision-making process operates on a consensus basis, requiring unanimous agreement among all member states to admit new members (Gede & Mangku, 2017, pp. 5–9). This consensus-based approach could slow down the accession process, especially if one or more member states have reservations about Timor-Leste's readiness to join.

F. Constructivist Perceptions

Timor-Leste's identity as a sovereign state and its desire to join ASEAN is deeply rooted in its historical experience and sociopolitical context. The Indonesian occupation and the subsequent struggle for independence have significantly shaped Timor-Leste's national identity (Ortuoste, 2011, pp. 1–24). This identity, characterized by resilience, a desire for international recognition, and a commitment to regional integration, is crucial in becoming an ASEAN member (Slater, 2012). As a regional organization, ASEAN is built on a set of norms and principles known as the "ASEAN Way." These include respect for sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, consensus decision-making, and promoting regional peace and stability (Acharya, 2021, p. 112). The constructivist analysis highlights how these norms shape the behavior of member states and the criteria for new members. Timor-Leste's efforts to align with these norms demonstrate its commitment to ASEAN values and its readiness to be part of the regional community. The country has taken significant steps to adhere to ASEAN norms, such as maintaining political stability, promoting economic development, and engaging in regional dialogues (Tse, 2004).

Socialization is a central concept in constructivist theory, referring to the process by which states adopt the norms and practices of a community. Timor-Leste's interaction with ASEAN member states and participation in ASEAN-related activities can be seen as a process of socialization (Order, 2007). Through these interactions, Timor-Leste internalized ASEAN norms and gradually aligned its policies and practices

with those of the regional organization (Checkel, 1999). For instance, Timor-Leste has been an observer at ASEAN meetings since 2011, allowing it to engage with member states and participate in regional discussions. This involvement helps Timor-Leste understand and adopt the ASEAN normative framework, thus facilitating its integration into the organization. Constructivist perspectives emphasize the importance of diplomatic efforts and the role of leadership in shaping international relations (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Timor-Leste's diplomatic initiative to access ASEAN can be analyzed through this understanding, highlighting the country's efforts to build a favorable identity and receive support from member states.

Timor-Leste's leaders have repeatedly emphasized the country's Southeast Asian identity and its historical and cultural ties to the region (Kingsbury, 2010). Timor-Leste seeks to demonstrate its compatibility with the ASEAN community by promoting this regional identity. This effort is evident in the statements of Timorese officials, who highlight the shared cultural heritage and historical links with other Southeast Asian countries (Temby, 2007). President José Ramos-Horta has repeatedly emphasized Timor-Leste's Southeast Asian identity in his speeches and diplomatic engagements (Baviera & Maramis, 2017). By framing Timor-Leste as an integral part of the region, it aims to build a narrative that resonates with ASEAN's emphasis on regional unity and identity. Constructivist theory highlights the role of norm entrepreneurs, individuals, or groups who actively promote new norms and advocate for policy changes (Kusumawardhana & Dewi, 2023). In the context of Timor-Leste's candidacy for accession to ASEAN, key political leaders and diplomats serve as norm entrepreneurs, advocating for the country's accession and highlighting its commitment to ASEAN values.

The Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão is a prominent advocate of Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN. Through diplomatic efforts, it has engaged with ASEAN leaders, participated in regional forums, and articulated Timor-Leste's alignment with ASEAN norms (Kingsbury, 2013, pp. 10–17). His role as a norm entrepreneur emphasizes the importance of leadership in shaping the country's accession process. While Timor-Leste has made significant progress in aligning with ASEAN norms, there are still challenges (Nygaard-Christensen, 2016). Constructivist analysis provides insights into how these challenges can be addressed by focusing on the social and ideational aspects of the adhesion process. Trust and confidence-building are essential for Timor-Leste's successful integration into ASEAN. The country's historical experiences and relatively recent independence may lead to skepticism among some ASEAN member states about its readiness for accession (Merican, 2007).

Constructivist perspectives suggest that fostering trust and confidence requires sustained social interactions and demonstrated adherence to regional norms. Timor-Leste can build trust by actively participating in ASEAN activities, engaging in bilateral and multilateral dialogues, and transparently resolving any concerns raised by member states (Bader, 2001). These efforts will help reassure ASEAN

members of Timor-Leste's commitment to regional stability and cooperation. Timor-Leste's engagement with ASEAN extends beyond formal diplomatic channels and can enhance regional engagement through cultural exchanges, people-to-people interactions, and participation in regional initiatives (Suyat, 2012). These activities contribute to constructing a shared regional identity and facilitate socialization.

Timor-Leste's participation in ASEAN cultural and educational programs can promote mutual understanding and strengthen regional ties (Borgerhoff, 2016). Such initiatives help bridge gaps, foster a sense of community, and reinforce Timor-Leste's identity as part of the ASEAN family. The constructivist analysis highlights the importance of shared values in promoting regional cooperation. Timor-Leste can emphasize its commitment to values such as democracy, human rights, and sustainable development, which are also crucial to ASEAN (Leach, 2002).

Timor-Leste can demonstrate its compatibility with the ASEAN normative framework by aligning its national policies with these shared values. ASEAN itself plays a crucial role in the accession process. As a regional organization, ASEAN has mechanisms and methods to evaluate and admit new members. Constructivist perspectives suggest that ASEAN's approach to Timor-Leste's accession should focus on socialization, norm diffusion, and capacity building (Haacke, 2003, p. 20). ASEAN can facilitate Timor-Leste's accession by promoting socialization and diffusion of norms. This involves creating opportunities for Timor-Leste to engage with member states, participate in ASEAN activities, and internalize ASEAN norms (Berlie, 2017, pp. 80–96).

By fostering these interactions, ASEAN will help to integrate Timor-Leste into the regional community. For example, ASEAN could invite Timor-Leste to participate in more ASEAN meetings, working groups, and forums as an observer (Shoesmith, 2017). This increased involvement will allow Timor-Leste to understand ASEAN's operational dynamics better and strengthen its alignment with the organization's norms. ASEAN can support Timor-Leste's capacity-building efforts to address governance and development challenges. By providing technical assistance, training programs, and institutional support, ASEAN can help Timor-Leste increase its administrative capacity and implement reforms aligned with ASEAN standards (Soares, 2018, pp. 25–32). The ASEAN Integration Initiative (IAI) and the AEC Plan offer capacity-building and cooperation development frameworks. Timor-Leste's participation in these initiatives can accelerate its readiness for accession and demonstrate its commitment to regional integration (Ortuoste, 2019, pp. 5–11).

G. Regional Identity

Timor-Leste's journey to ASEAN membership is not only a political or economic effort but is deeply linked to the concept of regional identity. This research explores how seeking ASEAN membership reflects Timor-Leste's efforts to build a regional identity, the significance of regional identity in Southeast Asia, and the challenges and prospects ahead (Shiosaki, 2017). Regional identity refers to a sense of belonging and shared identity among countries within a

region, often based on shared historical, cultural, and sociopolitical ties (Kingsbury, 2010, pp. 20–28). In Southeast Asia, ASEAN has played a central role in shaping and promoting a regional identity that emphasizes unity, cooperation, and shared values among its member states. Since gaining independence in 2002, Timor-Leste has repeatedly expressed its desire to join ASEAN. This pursuit is driven by various factors, including the desire for political stability, economic development, and regional integration (Leach et al., 2010).

Timor-Leste's leadership sees ASEAN membership as a critical step in achieving these objectives. ASEAN, founded in 1967, has been instrumental in shaping the regional identity of Southeast Asia (Pollard, 2010). The organization, its fundamental principles, and its initiatives have fostered a sense of belonging and shared identity among its member states. One key initiative was adopting the ASEAN Charter, thus making official the organization's commitment to democracy, human rights, and regional integration. Another is the ASEAN Community. Launched in 2015, it consists of three pillars: the ASEAN Political- Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (Keling et al., 2011). These pillars enhance political, economic, and sociocultural cooperation between member states.

Moreover, ASEAN promotes cultural exchanges and initiatives to celebrate the region's diverse cultures and heritage, fostering a shared regional identity. Various regional and international actors have supported Timor-Leste's quest for ASEAN membership. ASEAN member states and international organizations have provided technical, capacity-building, and diplomatic support to Timor-Leste's efforts (Dolven, 2012, pp. 10–15). Some ASEAN member states have expressed support for Timor-Leste's accession candidacy. Countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have been particularly supportive, recognizing Timor-Leste's historical and cultural ties to the region. These forms of international support are crucial to the country's capacity-building and governance reforms (Gede & Mangku, 2017, pp. 4–8).

H. Timor-Leste's Accession to ASEAN

A complex interaction of international influences, effects, and linkages has shaped Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession journey. This study delves into the factors that influenced Timor-Leste's path to ASEAN membership. It examines how different stakeholders directed their efforts, the effects of these actions, and the interconnected nature of the processes involved by analyzing the role of actors such as the United States, China, Australia, ASEAN, and international organizations such as ADB and JICA. Timor-Leste's aspiration to join ASEAN represents a significant milestone in diplomatic and regional engagement efforts. Since the beginning of its application in 2011, Timor-Leste has brought a complex landscape of international relations, seeking support and guidance from various actors to meet the requirements of the ASEAN accession process. It explores how these international influences have shaped Timor-Leste's accession journey, examining the directed efforts of

stakeholders, the effects of their actions, and the interconnected nature of these processes.

China's declaration of support for Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN highlights the strategic importance of Timor-Leste's inclusion in the regional bloc. China's advocacy for Timor-Leste's prioritization within ASEAN underscores the diplomatic maneuvers in the accession process, the effects of China's support on Timor-Leste's candidacy, and the broader implications for regional dynamics. Australia's strong support for Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN reflects the economic and strategic benefits that the Australian government sees in the financial assistance provided by Australia to help Timor-Leste meet ASEAN requirements and align with regional principles.

ASEAN supports Timor-Leste's capacity-building efforts through technical assistance, training programs, and institutional support. Programs such as the ASEAN Integration Initiative and the AEC Plan are frameworks for capacity building and development cooperation. The interconnected nature of ASEAN's support will enhance Timor-Leste's readiness for accession and promote regional integration. The Asian Development Bank and the Japan Foreign Cooperation Agency have contributed to Timor-Leste's accession process through financial support and technical assistance. The project is based on research that assesses Timor-Leste's readiness for ASEAN accession and studies the advantages, disadvantages and conditions of collaborative efforts by international organizations to address infrastructure challenges and promote regional integration.

This study notes that Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN has become complex and has been going on for over a decade. Fortunately, in the last two years, Timor-Leste has made significant changes through all its efforts and has shown positive signals from the ASEAN member countries. In addition, ASEAN leaders expressed satisfaction with the results of the Fact-Finding Mission, which involved the ASEAN member states and the ASEAN Secretariat and was held on July 6 to 8 and July 19 to 21, 2022, to assess Timor-Leste's preparation for ASEAN accession. The leaders agreed to create a road map with goals based on achieving the requirements for full accession to ASEAN, considering the mission's conclusions critical to Timor-Leste's admission. They also reiterated their resolve to collaborate with external parties to provide the assistance Timor-Leste needs to meet its membership goals. On March 6, 2023, in Jakarta, ASEAN leaders reconvened to consider resolutions from 2022 on Timor-Leste's admission as an 11th ASEAN member (The Diplomacy, 2023). As a result of this event, ASEAN leaders discussed the idea of a road map to enable Timor-Leste's full accession to ASEAN. They are committed to ensuring that this accession process plan for Timor-Leste is well thought out, practical, and on schedule.

They also discussed capacity-building initiatives beyond the Three Pillars that ASEAN member states and other dialogue partners can provide to Timor-Leste. It is clear from this Summit that ASEAN members are prepared to support Timor-Leste's accession through their representatives, who help oversee collaboration in areas such as political security, the economy, and sociocultural factors (Bachtir, 2020).

Timor-Leste's active involvement is seen as a component of efforts to familiarize itself with ASEAN's operational procedures through diplomatic and leadership efforts within the organization. In addition, Timor-Leste is allowed to attend all ASEAN meetings as an observer through an agreement with ASEAN leaders. Overall, during the last five years, there have been many changes to Timor-Leste's accession process to ASEAN, especially in 2020 and beyond. Based on the statements on Timor-Leste's application for ASEAN membership, ASEAN leaders decided to accept Timor-Leste as the organization's eleventh member during the 40th ASEAN Summit and the 41st in Phnom Penh in November 2022.

Timor-Leste was granted observer status after the ASEAN Presidents made this announcement, allowing it to participate in future ASEAN meetings. The 42nd ASEAN Summit was held in Labuan Bajo, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), Indonesia. Before ASEAN leaders finalized the road map, which intends to accelerate Timor-Leste's accession process to the regional bloc, ASEAN consistently fulfilled its promises (ANTARA, 2023). ASEAN's position remains unchanged following the previous decision to recognize Timor-Leste as the organization's 11th member and establish a plan for Timor-Leste to become a full member of ASEAN. ASEAN leaders reiterated their support for Timor-Leste's efforts to achieve its objectives by offering comprehensive assistance, including programs aimed at capacity building and relevant support that addresses Timor-Leste's path to full membership in ASEAN.

In addition, Timor-Leste is responsible for following the road map's instructions in cooperation with ASEAN, emphasizing prioritizing infrastructure development in Timor-Leste, such as airports and internet connectivity. These fundamental advances are essential elements that ASEAN leaders have addressed in their plan, which aligns with the Three Pillars of ASEAN. Timor-Leste has consistently led the ASEAN community in promoting unity. Despite these efforts, Singapore has shown that it is prepared to support Timor-Leste's entry as a regional member. With other ASEAN members reaffirming their commitment through bilateral collaboration with Timor-Leste and engagement at the regional and international levels, Singapore directly assists and supports Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession process.

All this assistance and support aims to accelerate Timor-Leste's ascent to full membership of ASEAN by 2025. Timor-Leste has shown positivity and readiness to join the regional bloc, according to the findings of the fact-finding mission in the country and an assessment of its accession preparations, with particular emphasis on the Three Pillars of ASEAN: AEC, APSC, and ASCC. Toward this aim, ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn visited Dili on March 1, 2024, where he strongly supported Timor-Leste's preparation process and directed talks with Bendito do Santos Freitas, Timor-Leste's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, as well as José Ramos Horta and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão (ASEAN, 2024). Kao Kim Hourn strongly supported Timor-Leste's imminent participation in ASEAN, and this assessment aims to assess the country's readiness for admission. In addition, he initiated a leadership program for the Prime Minister and the President of Timor-Leste during his tenure as ASEAN

secretary-general. The program aims to develop future leaders from Timor-Leste's public and commercial sectors (ASEAN, 2022).

Through this program, participants will gain practical experience through trips to ASEAN member countries to build contacts and knowledge and in-depth instruction on leadership and ASEAN from national and regional specialists. This leadership program will significantly enhance Timor-Leste's preparation for ASEAN regarding human resources (Tatoli, 2024). After the visit of Kao Kim Hourn, through the continuous active service of the ASEAN general directorate in formal meetings related to ASEAN requirements, direct participation took place in the 20th ASEAN-Russia Senior Staff Meeting (ARSOM), which was held at the Mariinsky Palace in St. Petersburg, Russia, on April 26, 2024.

This shows that ASEAN leaders have begun to involve Timor-Leste at the international level to discuss the development of ASEAN and the Russian Federation and to strengthen further cooperation between the parties (Tatoli, 2024). It is clear from Milena Rangel's direct representation as Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, who oversees ASEAN activities, that ASEAN offers Russia and Timor-Leste the opportunity to build strong bilateral ties. However, the National Parliament of Timor-Leste has begun to approve the creation of a commission to oversee the government's preparations for ASEAN accession (Tatoli, 2024).

VI. CONCLUSION

This study explores Timor-Leste's interest in becoming a member of ASEAN, which has taken a long time, more than a decade. Timor-Leste it is still striving to integrate into the regional organization. Although it has yet to receive full acceptance and consensus from ASEAN member countries, it is still a priority for Timor-Leste's foreign affairs. In addition, there are barriers for Timor-Leste that have taken a long time to overcome. Therefore, this study explored the following questions: Why does Timor-Leste have an interest in joining ASEAN? Moreover, what factors prevent Timor-Leste from becoming a full member of ASEAN?

The results show that Timor-Leste's accession process was supported by international organizations such as the ADB and JICA. They provide technical and financial assistance for Timor-Leste's internal accession process of infrastructure development. Likewise, countries such as the US, China, and Australia provide maximum support for Timor-Leste to integrate into regional organizations by supporting the accession process, such as human capacities assistance and financial resource training to improve the economy and infrastructure for the preparation process of Timor-Leste's regional accession.

From a constructivist perspective, in the process of Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN, this study shows that Timor-Leste's interaction with ASEAN member countries has shaped the behavior of states to consider Timor-Leste as part of Southeast Asia. ASEAN also adapts norms and ideas, such as the ASEAN Way and ARF, that apply to member countries. Thus, the issue of Timor-Leste's accession will be considered

through social interaction from diplomatic efforts to shape state behavior as a sense of collective identity in the region.

Thus, ASEAN member countries developed their full support for Timor-Leste to join ASEAN through Timor-Leste's diplomatic efforts through bilateral and regional services. ASEAN member countries have given priority to Timor-Leste following the 42nd ASEAN Summit in 2023, in a manner distinct from previous years, which often supported political statements. Singapore has changed its position to directly declare that it will support Timor-Leste's internal human and technical resource training and help Timor-Leste meet the road map. In 2025, Timor-Leste will become a full member of ASEAN.

To answer the question of this study, the factor that prevents Timor-Leste from becoming a full member of ASEAN is that Timor-Leste still has factors such as political instability, government problems and economic and infrastructure underdevelopment. These factors have been a barrier to Timor-Leste's accession during this time, despite being accepted by ASEAN member countries and the possibility of becoming a full member of ASEAN in 2025. However, political instability and government problems will have an impact on the lack of consistency in focusing on the development of basic infrastructure, which is urgently needed to fulfill the obligation of member countries to respond to activities that meet ASEAN's requirements each year, and this will be questionable for Timor-Leste's accession.

Recommendation

Timor-Leste remains committed to providing critical technical and financial assistance to these entities, and their continued support will be essential to addressing infrastructure and development challenges. By enhancing its economic infrastructure and human resource capacity, Timor-Leste can better align with ASEAN requirements and demonstrate its readiness for full accession. Furthermore, diplomatic efforts should be intensified, particularly in engaging with ASEAN member states to build stronger bilateral and multilateral relations, emphasizing shared regional goals and interests. Timor-Leste must address its internal political instability and governance issues to ensure a stable and effective government. Political harmony and stable governance is crucial for consistent policy implementation and progress in development. Strengthening political institutions and fostering cooperation among political leaders can reduce factionalism and create an environment conducive to sustainable development.

Additionally, Timor-Leste must prioritize the development of basic infrastructure and the economic sector, ensuring that these areas meet the standards expected by ASEAN. This includes focusing on projects that improve the quality of human resources, thus aligning with ASEAN's emphasis on human development. By addressing these internal challenges and fostering regional cooperation, Timor-Leste can improve its prospects for ASEAN accession, with the potential to achieve full accession by 2025

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