

Indonesia's Immigration Policy in NTT Regarding the Handling of Undocumented East Timorese Immigrants at The Indonesia-East Timor Border, 2019–2024

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Keywords:

immigration policy;
handling of undocumented
immigrants; border
security; indonesia-timor-
leste.

Abstract

This study analyzed Indonesia's immigration policies and the challenges in managing undocumented East Timorese nationals at the Indonesia–East Timor border between 2019 and 2024. Employing a qualitative case study approach, this research utilized primary data obtained through observations and interviews at three border crossing points—Motaain, Motamasin, and Wini—as well as secondary data from official reports and statistical sources. The findings identified four main challenges: socio-historical factors rooted in cross-border kinship ties, Timor-Leste's economic dependence on Indonesian goods, the Timor-Leste government's suspension of Cross-Border Passes, and sectoral interests among border management agencies, including the TNI and POLRI. The study demonstrated that these challenges were interconnected, creating a cycle of vulnerability that weakened the effectiveness of immigration enforcement. The geographical proximity and enduring kinship networks between communities also provided opportunities for bilateral cooperation in socio-cultural, economic, political, and educational fields. This study contributed a novel multi-administration perspective on policy development and provided practical insights for integrated and community-sensitive border governance.

INTRODUCTION

In the field of International Relations, the concept of national security has undergone a fundamental transformation; it is no longer limited to military threats and territorial protection but has expanded to encompass non-traditional security issues, including economic instability, environmental degradation, global disease outbreaks, terrorism, and immigration, which may undermine national sovereignty. National sovereignty occupies a central position in the construction of the nation-state. Contemporary challenges to sovereignty arise not only from conventional military threats but also from more complex and subtle phenomena, such as the movement and presence of undocumented immigrants (Arnold, 2023; Kunwar, 2024; Petty, 2022).

According to Myron Weiner (1985), the issue of undocumented immigrants is not merely a procedural violation of immigration regulations but also a strategic challenge that may weaken a state's capacity to control its territorial borders, which represent a fundamental aspect of state sovereignty. As Weiner emphasized, "control over borders remains one of the most fundamental attributes of state sovereignty" (Weiner, 1996). This perspective highlights that border control is a core element of state sovereignty, reflecting a state's authority to regulate human mobility, including entry, exit, and residence within its territorial boundaries. From this perspective, borders function not only as geographical boundaries but also as instruments of national identity construction, mechanisms for protecting domestic security, and representations of a state's jurisdictional authority over its territory.

The issue of undocumented immigrants represents a complex global phenomenon arising from structural inequalities between countries and reflecting a global paradox in which both capital flows and human mobility across borders are subject to regulation and restriction. At the individual level, undocumented migration may represent a survival strategy to obtain better economic opportunities despite the absence of legal status. At the systemic level, undocumented immigrants constitute a vulnerable population that may participate in formal or informal economic activities while lacking adequate legal protection. This phenomenon demonstrates the tension between state policies concerning economic interests, security considerations, and political pressures in maintaining border sovereignty.

Within Weiner's (1996) analytical framework, a state's ability to regulate the entry and presence of individuals within its territory represents a fundamental sovereign function. He further stated that "the right to control entry is perhaps the most universally recognized attribute of state sovereignty" (Weiner, 1985). Security vulnerabilities associated with undocumented migration may create opportunities for exploitation by transnational organized crime networks, including human smuggling, human trafficking, and illicit trafficking of narcotics and weapons. Andreas (2003) argued that weaknesses in border management could challenge state authority, as states become increasingly vulnerable when national security stability and territorial integrity are affected by illegal activities occurring across borders.

The phenomenon of undocumented immigration generates multidimensional impacts that place economic, social, and political pressures on destination and transit countries. Weiner (1996), through the concept of the "migration security dilemma," argued that undocumented migration flows are not solely economic issues but may also contribute to socio-political tensions that affect national cohesion. From a security perspective, states must allocate significant resources to border surveillance, intelligence operations, and immigration enforcement processes, including detention and removal procedures, which may place pressure on public resources. Economically, undocumented migration may influence labor market dynamics and increase demands on public services. Socio-politically, it may contribute to community tensions, conflicts between social groups, challenges for law enforcement, and complexities in bilateral relations, as observed along borders such as the U.S.–Mexico, Indonesia–Malaysia, and Indonesia–Timor-Leste borders, where cross-border mobility remains a significant governance challenge.

Several previous studies have examined the management of undocumented immigrants in the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border region. Nicolas and Simamora (2021) found that the operational effectiveness of border security units in addressing illegal activities along the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border continued to face multidimensional challenges. These challenges involved both technical-operational aspects and interconnected socioeconomic factors. The study recommended a comprehensive approach that strengthens security capacity through community empowerment and welfare programs for border communities to achieve more effective and sustainable border management.

Another study by DaCosta and Djuyandi (2022) revealed that border governance requires a holistic approach integrating both security and economic dimensions. The study emphasized that a purely militaristic security approach is insufficient to ensure long-term stability. Instead, inclusive economic development in border areas serves as a fundamental basis for achieving sustainable security. Therefore, economic development and community empowerment should be considered integral components of national security strategies, as these elements are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

The urgency of this research is highlighted by the persistent occurrence of immigration violations along the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border, including a significant increase to 725 cases in 2021. This situation has direct implications for national security, bilateral relations, and the welfare of border communities. Understanding the specific challenges and their

interconnections is essential for developing more effective and humane immigration policies that balance security priorities with the sociocultural realities of border communities. The novelty of this study lies in its integrated analytical framework, which combines historical-institutional analysis of policy development across administrations with empirical investigation of structural, economic, and bureaucratic challenges affecting immigration enforcement. By examining the period from 2019 to 2024 and utilizing primary and secondary data, this research provides a comprehensive contemporary analysis that addresses gaps in existing literature.

Based on the issues discussed above, this study formulates the following research question: What are Indonesia's immigration policies in NTT, and what challenges exist in managing undocumented East Timorese immigrants along the Indonesia–East Timor border from 2019 to 2024?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to examine immigration violations involving undocumented East Timorese nationals at the Indonesia–East Timor border. The study utilized primary data obtained from observations conducted at three border areas, namely Motaain, PLBN Motamasin, and PLBN Wini, including their surrounding areas, as well as interviews with Class II Immigration Office officers in Atambua, PLBN officers at Motaain, Motamasin, and Wini, the Border Security Task Force (Satgas Pamtas), border police, officials from the Directorate General of Immigration, and local residents. Secondary data were obtained from reports issued by the National Border Management Agency, the Directorate General of Immigration, the Atambua Class II Immigration Office, reports from Motaain, Motamasin, and Wini PLBNs, and statistical data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) for Belu, Malaka, and North Central Timor Regencies during the 2019–2024 period.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

History of Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste (East Timor), officially known as the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, has a long history of colonization and struggle. The island of Timor has been inhabited for 42,000 years and is known for its sandalwood production. In 1522, the Portuguese arrived and colonized the eastern part of the island, while the Dutch controlled the western part under the 1859 Treaty of Lisbon. Following the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974, FRETILIN declared East Timor's independence on November 28, 1975. However, just nine days later, Indonesia launched an invasion on December 7, 1975, and officially annexed East Timor as its 27th province on July 17, 1976—a move never recognized by the United Nations (Taylor, 1999; Kiernan, 2003).

Following the fall of President Suharto, President B.J. Habibie authorized a referendum held on August 30, 1999. As a result, 78.5% of the people of East Timor voted for independence, which triggered a wave of violence by anti-independence militias. An Australian-led peacekeeping force (INTERFET) arrived to restore security, and following a transitional period under the United Nations, Timor-Leste officially became an independent nation on May 20, 2002. The country adopted Portuguese and Tetun as its official languages, uses the U.S. dollar as its currency, and in 2022 was admitted as a member of ASEAN (Robinson, 2010; CAVR, 2005; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Timor-Leste, 2022).

The political crises that plagued Timor-Leste before and after independence have brought about profound social changes, one of which is the increasing emigration of citizens seeking refuge and security abroad, as well as the return migration of Timorese citizens following the conflict.

Population and Migration Profile of Timor-Leste

Population data for Timor-Leste from 1990 to 2025 show trends that are heavily influenced by political and social conditions. The population increased from 760,345 in 1990 to 868,146 in 1995, but then dropped sharply to 745,088 in 2000 due to the post-referendum political crisis that triggered a massive wave of displacement. After independence, the population recovered rapidly, reaching 948,311 in 2005 and continuing to grow steadily to 1,418,517 by 2025, with an average growth rate of approximately 2.3% per year. This trend reflects the success of post-conflict recovery, demographic stability, and a high birth rate, which are the main factors driving Timor-Leste's population growth.

The number of immigrants in Timor-Leste from 2018 to 2024 showed significant fluctuations, with a sharp decline in 2020–2021 due to restrictive policies, followed by a gradual recovery beginning in 2022. Indonesia has consistently been the largest source country for immigrants, with the highest number recorded in 2018 (15,523 people) and a resurgence in 2024 (12,358 people). Other major source countries include Australia, Portugal, and China, which followed a similar pattern: a sharp decline during the pandemic, followed by a recovery to near-pre-pandemic levels by 2024.

On the other hand, some countries of origin showed a gradual downward trend, such as the Philippines, Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore, whose immigrant numbers in 2024 remained well below the 2018 figures. Overall, this reflects the dynamics of population mobility to Timor-Leste, which is influenced by economic factors, bilateral relations, and global conditions—particularly the health crisis that disrupted migration flows on a massive scale at the beginning of this decade.

The number of immigrants from Timor-Leste in various destination countries during the period 1990–2024. In general, Indonesia was the primary destination country, accounting for a very dominant share of the total, showing a rapid increase from 729 people (1990) to 71,378 people (1995), then peaking at 142,028 in 2000, before experiencing a drastic decline to 23,681 in 2020, but subsequently surging sharply to 95,603 in 2024. This fluctuating pattern reflects the dynamics of bilateral relations as well as economic factors and migration policies between the two countries. Another important destination country is Australia, which—despite recording zero migrants in 2000 and experiencing significant fluctuations in subsequent years—showed an upward trend in the most recent period, reaching 11,546 people in 2024. Meanwhile, Portugal has also been a fairly consistent destination, with relatively stable numbers reaching 2,215 people in 2024—a trend closely tied to the historical and cultural ties between Timor-Leste and Portugal.

Most other destination countries show relatively small numbers of immigrants, even approaching zero—such as Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Iceland, Romania, and Sweden—which indicates low attractiveness or limited migration access for East Timorese citizens to Central and Northern Europe. Countries such as Greece and Italy have shown a moderate increase over the past two decades, with Greece reaching 217 people (2020) and Italy 77 people (2020), although the most recent data for 2024 is not available for most countries.

Overall, these data illustrate that migration by East Timorese citizens is highly concentrated in a few key destination countries—primarily Indonesia, Australia, and Portugal—while other countries contribute very little to the total number of international migrants from East Timor.

The Dynamics of Handling Undocumented East Timorese Immigrants at the Indonesia-East Timor Border

During the Presidency of B.J. Habibie (1998–1999)

During President B.J. Habibie's administration, the management of population movements between Indonesia and East Timor following the 1999 referendum became a complex humanitarian crisis. The hundreds of thousands of people who fled to East Nusa Tenggara are more accurately described as conflict refugees rather than illegal immigrants. After the referendum results were announced, approximately 200,000–290,000 East Timorese moved or were displaced to West Timor and other parts of Indonesia due to post-referendum violence. Amid intense domestic and international pressure, the Habibie administration prioritized an emergency response by establishing refugee camps and collaborating with UNHCR to provide humanitarian aid and facilitate the repatriation of refugees. The policies adopted were of an emergency nature because Indonesia did not yet have a national legal framework specifically governing refugees; consequently, the government issued Presidential Instruction No. 11 of 1999 on the Handling of Refugees Following the East Timor Referendum. The government's primary focus was on maintaining security and providing humanitarian aid, although at the same time it faced a dilemma between its humanitarian responsibilities and political pressure from pro-integration groups that rejected the results of the East Timor referendum. (UNHCR, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 1999).

The situation was particularly dire due to the ambiguous status of the refugees: some were forced to flee by pro-integration militias, some fled out of fear of post-referendum violence, and others chose to remain Indonesian citizens (Robinson, 2003; UNHCR, 2000). A UN report noted that the border between East Timor and West Timor in the early post-referendum period was practically impossible to control effectively, resulting in large-scale population movements without adequate oversight (UN, 2000).

The Era of President Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001)

President Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) inherited the unresolved East Timor refugee crisis from the previous administration. Approximately 250,000 refugees remained in camps in East Nusa Tenggara with unclear legal status, while the border remained porous and prone to smuggling (Cribb, 2000; UNHCR, 2000). To address this issue, Gus Dur resolved the humanitarian crisis by establishing diplomatic relations with the country of Timor-Leste. Gus Dur adopted a balanced approach that integrated security, law, and diplomacy (Kingsbury, 2003).

Gus Dur prioritized humanitarian diplomacy and reconciliation; his visit to Dili in February 2000 was a crucial step in easing tensions and opening bilateral communication regarding the refugee issue (Antara, 2000; UNHCR, 2000). The main policy was to expedite voluntary repatriation and verify the status of those wishing to settle in Indonesia. However, this process was hampered by local political dynamics in NTT, where some pro-integration refugees were used as leverage by elites and former military personnel.

The Era of President Megawati Soekarnoputri (2001–2004)

The era of President Megawati Soekarnoputri marked a crucial transition from humanitarian reconciliation toward the institutionalization of bilateral relations with Timor-Leste. The issue of illegal immigration violations emerged in two forms: resolving the legal status of approximately 28,000 former East Timorese refugees in Indonesia (NTT), and controlling the increasing flow of unofficial cross-border movements as relations between the two countries improved. Megawati inherited a situation in which Gus Dur's political approach had eased tensions, yet the legal and institutional frameworks remained extremely weak. She faced the challenge of transforming reconciliation agreements into administrative structures capable of regulating relations between the two countries in a normal manner (Taylor, 2003).

Megawati's policy centered on asserting sovereignty through law enforcement and formal diplomacy. She strengthened immigration posts at the border and initiated a Presidential Regulation to permanently resolve the status of former refugees. In April 2002, the Indonesia-Timor-Leste Joint Commission was established as a permanent forum to discuss border issues. Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda emphasized the need to shift from crisis management to building neighborly relations based on shared laws and norms. However, implementation on the ground faced cultural resistance from border communities that had long engaged in traditional cross-border activities. The greatest legacy of this era was the transformation of policy from a reactive to an institutional approach." (UNTAET, 2002; Sari & Fernades, 2024).

The Era of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014)

During his first term, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono continued the bilateral framework established during Megawati's era, with the task of definitively resolving the issue of illegal immigrants. Early in his administration, Presidential Regulation No. 55/2005 was issued, providing a legal basis for approximately 28,000 former East Timorese refugees to choose to become Indonesian citizens, return to Timor-Leste, or obtain a limited-stay permit, thereby ending their six-year status as undocumented immigrants. The SBY administration also pursued a cooperative approach through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Immigration with Timor-Leste in 2006, covering repatriation, data exchange, joint border patrols, and training for officials. Although many former refugees struggled to prove their identities due to lost documents, by the end of 2008 more than 90% had resolved their status, with the majority choosing to become Indonesian citizens (Presidential Regulation No. 55 of 2005; Gatra, 2005; Antara, 2006; Sutisna & Handoyo, 2006).

During his second term, SBY continued the institutional approach by consolidating border governance, shifting the focus from post-1999 refugees to regular challenges such as illegal workers and human trafficking. The 2010–2014 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) prioritized strengthening territorial sovereignty, accompanied by the launch of a national program integrating the Immigration Service, Customs, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), and the Indonesian National Police (Polri). In 2012, a more modern Directorate General of Immigration was established under Law No. 6/2011, accompanied by database modernization and a Land Border Agreement with Timor-Leste in 2013 covering 96% of the border line. The main challenge remains the economic disparity in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), but a significant legacy of this period is the establishment of an integrated immigration system that meets international standards (Ministry of National Development Planning/Bappenas, 2010; Law No. 6 of 2011).

The Era of President Joko Widodo (2014–2024)

President Joko Widodo's era was marked by a proactive approach to border infrastructure development as the primary strategy for addressing illegal immigration. Jokowi shifted the paradigm from mere law enforcement to strengthening sovereignty through physical and economic development along the NTT border. During his visit to Atambua in 2015, he emphasized that the border must be a symbol of tangible sovereignty, not a neglected region. The government built modern border posts (PLBN) in Mota'ain, Motamasin, and Wini, equipped with e-gates and an integrated database. The "United in Building the Border" program was also launched to improve connectivity and surveillance of the region (Antara, 2015; Ministry of Public Works and Public Housing, 2024).

In the area of law enforcement, Jokowi intensified joint operations involving Immigration, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), the Indonesian National Police (Polri), and the community. In 2017, a Special Task Force for Handling Illegal Immigrants was formed specifically for the East Timor border region to conduct routine patrols and apprehend smugglers. Operation "Batas Negeri 2018" successfully apprehended 47 illegal immigrants and 8 smugglers over a three-month period. Bilateral cooperation with Timor-Leste continues to deepen through the Joint Commission, though relations briefly soured due to a firearms smuggling incident in 2017. Minister Retno Marsudi emphasized that border security cooperation must be in line with the principle of mutual respect for sovereignty (Tribratanews Belu, 2017; Okezone, 2017).

Table 1. Trends in the Handling of Undocumented East Timorese Immigrants by Administration

No	Era of Leadership	Category
1	President B.J. Habibie Era (1998–1999)	Conflict Refugees
2	President Abdurrahman Wahid Era (1999–2001)	Handling illegal immigrants while resolving humanitarian issues and building new diplomatic relations with Timor-Leste
3	President Megawati Soekarnoputri Era (2001–2004)	Resolution of the legal status of 28,000 former East Timorese refugees residing in Nusa Tenggara Timur province and control of unofficial cross-border flows
4	President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono Era (2004–2009)	Finalization of legal status resolution through the issuance of Presidential Regulation (Perpres) No. 55 of 2005 concerning the Settlement of Status and Livelihoods of Former East Timorese Refugees in Indonesia
5	President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono Era (2009–2014)	Consolidation of border governance and resolution through institutional and infrastructure strengthening
6	President Joko Widodo Era (2014–2019)	Proactive development of border infrastructure as the main strategy to address illegal immigration. Jokowi shifted the paradigm from mere immigration law enforcement to

	strengthening sovereignty through physical and economic development in the NTT border area
7 President Joko Widodo Era (2019–2024)	Continuation of strategic priorities for sustainable border infrastructure development with a new emphasis on digitalization of the immigration system

Source: Compiled by the researcher, 2026

Indonesia’s Immigration Policy on the Handling of Undocumented East Timorese Immigrants at the Indonesia–East Timor Border

To support immigration management in Indonesia, the government established the legal framework comprising Law No. 6/2011 on Immigration, along with Government Regulation No. 31/2013 as amended by Government Regulation No. 40/2023. These regulations serve as the basis for surveillance, prevention, and deportation. This integrated legal framework is expected to make the process of handling immigration violations more effective, accountable, and humane, while providing legal certainty for all parties (Law No. 6/2011; Government Regulation No. 31/2013 as amended by Government Regulation No. 40/2023).

In implementing these regulations to address the issue of undocumented immigrants, the government, together with law enforcement agencies, relevant institutions, and the public, is conducting cross-sectoral coordination to identify, register, and take action against foreign nationals who violate immigration regulations. These follow-up measures are carried out through covert/intelligence operations, overt/independent operations, and interagency joint operations at borders and entry points for foreign nationals.

Covert operations, which are intelligence-driven enforcement actions, serve as one of the strategies for monitoring foreign nationals (*Timpora*) in border areas. These actions involve collaboration among various cross-sectoral intelligence agencies, namely the National Police’s Intelligence and Security Agency (*Baintelkam*), the Indonesian National Armed Forces’ Strategic Intelligence Agency (*BAIS*), the State Intelligence Agency (*BIN*), and the Immigration Intelligence Unit (*Inteldakim*) of the Directorate General of Immigration at the border. This interagency synergy is intended to enable covert monitoring of the movements of foreign nationals entering and exiting Indonesian territory through unofficial or illegal routes. The data and information obtained from these intelligence activities are then used as the basis for enforcement actions, such as prevention, arrest, or deportation.

Open operations are preventive and repressive measures carried out directly by law enforcement and security agencies in border areas. These operations involve personnel from the Immigration Service, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (*TNI*), and the Indonesian National Police (*Polri*), who are tasked with conducting regular monitoring along the border, both on official and unofficial routes. The primary focus of these operations is to monitor the movement of foreign nationals entering and exiting Indonesian territory to detect potential immigration violations. When suspicious activity or violations are detected, field officers can immediately conduct identity checks, make arrests, or carry out deportations. Thus, open

operations serve as the frontline defense in safeguarding territorial sovereignty while directly and sustainably reducing the number of illegal border crossers.

Joint operations are a tangible manifestation of interagency synergy that unites various agencies with different authorities under a single, integrated command. Their implementation integrates the capabilities of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), the Indonesian National Police (POLRI), Immigration, and the National Border Management Agency (BNPP) to strengthen surveillance and enforcement against cross-border violations. The primary objectives include preventing the entry of undocumented immigrants, the smuggling of goods, and various other illegal activities that have the potential to disrupt security and stability in border areas.

Enhanced immigration surveillance and the enforcement of administrative and criminal sanctions in accordance with applicable laws and regulations. Technically, this is carried out through three main stages: the first stage (immigration surveillance and inspection), the second stage (enforcement, including immigration administrative actions and criminal proceedings), and the third stage (detention and deportation):

Initial Stage: Search, Identification, and Surveillance—the handling of undocumented immigrants by immigration officers begins with searching for data and photographs of the subject in the immigration database to identify their identity, entry and exit history, and residence permit status. Once the data is found, officers conduct further identification to determine whether the foreign national still holds a valid residence permit, has exceeded the permitted stay period, or entered the country illegally. Next, officers carry out administrative monitoring, which includes covert field monitoring (monitoring via data and systems) and overt field monitoring (patrols, surprise inspections, or on-site checks), with the results of the monitoring entered into the system as material for evaluation and follow-up.

In the second stage (Law Enforcement and Immigration Administrative Actions), if the monitoring results indicate immigration violations, officers convene a case review through an internal coordination forum to discuss and analyze the findings, determine the nature of the violation, and formulate the legal or administrative steps to be taken against the subject. Based on the results of the case review, officers impose Immigration Administrative Actions (TAK) as stipulated in Law No. 6 of 2011, which may include placement on a prevention or denial list, revocation or modification of a residence permit, imposition of fines, or deportation.

Final Stage: Detention and Deportation. If the foreign national must undergo further legal proceedings or await repatriation, officials place them in detention at an Immigration Detention Center (Rudenim) or a detention facility, with records covering admission to detention, authorized detention, and release from detention. The final stage of this roadmap is deportation, which involves the forced return of the foreign national to their country of origin through coordination with the embassy of the country of origin, the provision of temporary travel documents, and escorting the individual through the departure process; the results are then entered into the system as a final report.

From 2019 to 2024, the implementation of Indonesia's immigration policies in NTT regarding the handling of undocumented East Timorese nationals along the Indonesia-East Timor border showed fluctuating figures.

Immigration administrative actions taken against East Timorese nationals during the 2018–2024 period. Overall, the number of cases showed significant fluctuations from year to

year. At the beginning of the period, the number of cases was relatively low, with only 4 cases in 2018 and 23 cases in 2019, then increased moderately to 31 cases in 2020. An extreme spike occurred in 2021, when the number of cases surged dramatically to 725—the highest figure throughout the observation period.

After peaking in 2021, the number of cases dropped sharply to 127 in 2022 and continued to decline, reaching 53 cases in 2023 and 54 cases in 2024. Nevertheless, the figures for 2023–2024 remain significantly higher than those for the 2018–2020 period, indicating that immigration violations by East Timorese nationals remain an issue requiring attention. All recorded cases were subject to sanctions under Law No. 6 of 2011 on Immigration, with no specific types of violations listed in the table. The surge in cases in 2021 warrants further scrutiny, as it may indicate the presence of specific triggering factors, such as changes in border policies, increased post-pandemic mobility, or intensified surveillance by immigration authorities in the Indonesia-Timor-Leste border region.

Of the total immigration cases involving East Timorese nationals categorized as undocumented immigrants between 2019 and 2024, those involving overstay—including students pursuing higher education at universities in NTT—and illegal crossings by East Timorese nationals into Indonesian territory through the border between the two countries were subject to immigration administrative measures (TAK) in the form of deportation to East Timor.

Challenges

In addressing violations by undocumented immigrants in the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border region, the government has demonstrated a serious commitment through various efforts, such as the development of facilities and infrastructure in the border region and the establishment of inter-agency cooperation at both the national and international levels. However, there are challenges that hinder the effectiveness of efforts to address border violations.

Socio-Historical Factors (Cross-Border Kinship)

The geographical and sociocultural conditions in the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border region are determining factors that increase vulnerability to immigration violations. According to data from the Ministry of Defense (2012), this border region spans 268.8 kilometers and features significant topographical diversity, ranging from lowlands to mountains. According to Yeheskial Djami (a staff member of the Indonesian Directorate General of Immigration and former head of the Atambua Immigration Intelligence Unit, in an interview, 2026), the vastness of the area, the rugged terrain, and the absence of a physical border fence between the two countries are factors that contribute to immigration violations, specifically the illegal entry of East Timorese nationals into Indonesian territory. Meanwhile, limited personnel also hinder effective border surveillance. R****, a member of the Border Security Task Force (Interview, 2026), noted that the small number of personnel deployed to monitor the border area has weakened efforts to prevent the entry of East Timorese nationals. This situation was evident in August 2021, when there was a surge in arrivals, with 705 East Timorese nationals illegally entering Indonesia.

The kinship ties between the border communities of Indonesia and Timor-Leste have existed since the pre-colonial era, during which social, cultural, and trade interactions among communities in the region developed naturally. Geographical proximity and shared ethnic roots

have fostered kinship ties that extend beyond the political elite, permeating down to the grassroots level in the border regions of both countries. As Siburian (2011) noted, “although West Timor (Indonesia) and East Timor (Timor-Leste) are geographically distinct, there are many similarities between the two regions in terms of cultural values, and both border communities share the common understanding that they share a common ancestry.”

These cross-border kinship ties, as emphasized by community leader Tomas Dacosta (2026), serve as the motivation for East Timorese citizens to enter Indonesia—such as to visit family on the Indonesian side. This phenomenon, referred to by experts as “transnational kinship networks,” creates a dilemma for law enforcement officials: if they take strict action, they are seen as inhumane; if they turn a blind eye, national sovereignty is eroded. This finding reinforces Siburian’s (2011) argument that the cultural identity of border communities is stronger than formal national identity. In terms of policy implications, a security-only approach will not be effective; an approach that accommodates social realities—a socio-cultural approach—is necessary. On the other hand, the socio-cultural traditions of communities on both sides of the border—particularly the momentum of traditional and religious rituals, such as traditional ceremonies and celebrations like “Bakar Lilin” every November—encourage East Timorese citizens to enter Indonesia without following proper procedures. These annual rituals, rich in spirituality and a sense of community, create an urgent need to cross the border to reunite with family in Indonesia, even if it means disregarding official documentation requirements.

Referring to the table above, it was found that communities in the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border region share socio-cultural similarities. Several ethnic groups, such as the Tetun, Bunak, Kemak, and Dawan, were found on both sides of the border. The presence of the same ethnic groups in both Indonesia and Timor-Leste fosters strong transnational kinship ties. This shared ethnic identity serves as a unifying factor that transcends administrative territorial boundaries, while simultaneously fostering close social and cultural ties between communities in both countries. This phenomenon has a direct impact on the dynamics of cross-border interactions, including aspects of population movement and immigration control.

In the context of international politics, the state faces a dilemma between national interests and transnational kinship ties. On the one hand, national interests demand the enforcement of sovereignty and strict control over cross-border mobility; on the other hand, the humanitarian aspect—namely, the transnational kinship ties that have been deeply rooted for centuries between communities on both sides of the border—cannot simply be ignored. This social reality creates a tug-of-war between the state’s administrative obligations and the emotional needs of the people. Consequently, any law enforcement policy implemented has the potential to provoke social resistance if it does not fully take into account the complexity of cultural relationships that have been formed over generations in border regions.

Economic Dependency

The significant disparity in commodity prices between Timor-Leste and Indonesia—where prices in Timor-Leste tend to be higher than those along the Indonesian border—is a key factor driving border communities to shop in Indonesia for various basic necessities, such as rice, corn, beans, and sugar, which are available at more affordable prices. Geographical factors further reinforce this behavior, as the distance between the two regions is relatively short.

Residents need only cross the river that serves as the natural border between the two countries, allowing for routine and efficient cross-border mobility to meet their economic needs.

The economic dependence of Timor-Leste citizens on Indonesia in the border region is very evident and reflected in the dominance of Indonesian products in that country's market. Approximately 70% of the products circulating in Timor-Leste originate from Indonesia, with export value reaching Rp5.9 trillion through the Motaain Border Crossing Point (PLBN) for commodities such as jet fuel, construction materials, basic foodstuffs, and furniture. Total trade between the two countries in 2024 reached USD391.36 million, with a surplus of USD381.64 million for Indonesia, while Timor-Leste remains dependent on the oil and gas sector, with an unemployment rate of 20 percent (Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). As a result, East Timorese residents along the border heavily rely on traditional border markets to meet their daily needs.

The presence of the Motaain, Motamasin, and Wini National Border Crossing Points (PLBN) reinforces East Timor's dependence, as they serve not only as entry points into the country but also as facilitators of regional economic growth. In addition, several State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs)—such as Bank Mandiri, BRI, Telkomsel, and Pertamina—have been operating in Timor-Leste, supported by the expedited issuance of investment permits through the Bilateral Investment Treaty. The Traditional Border Crossings and Regulated Markets Agreement, which has been in effect for 21 years, also regulates cross-border trade to meet the daily needs of the population amid the striking economic disparity between the two sides of the border, where the people of Belu enjoy a better standard of living than their Timor-Leste counterparts along the border.

Based on per capita GDP data for 2024, Indonesia's per capita GDP stood at \$4,958, while Timor-Leste's reached only \$1,341—indicating that the average income of Indonesians is nearly four times higher than that of Timor-Leste residents. Reflecting structural vulnerabilities, Timor-Leste has actually experienced a sharp economic contraction, with its GDP per capita falling from \$2,708 in 2021 to just \$1,341 in 2024. In contrast, Indonesia has shown a consistent growth trend, rising from \$3,919 to \$4,958 over the same period. These conditions have prompted East Timorese citizens living along the border to purchase daily necessities in Indonesia, a practice facilitated by the porous nature of the border between the two countries and cross-border kinship ties rooted in shared cultural similarities (<https://countryeconomy.com>, 2026).

The widening income disparity between the two countries directly reinforces East Timor's economic dependence on Indonesia. With a relatively low level of purchasing power and still-limited domestic production capacity, Timor-Leste lacks an adequate economic foundation to develop its industrial sector independently. In contrast, Indonesia, with an economy 3.7 times larger, holds a comparative advantage in producing essential goods efficiently and at competitive prices. In line with the downward trend in Timor-Leste's GDP per capita, meeting the basic needs of its population has become heavily dependent on relatively affordable imports from Indonesia. Thus, GDP per capita data alone sufficiently reflects that the widening income disparity places Timor-Leste in a vulnerable economic position and structurally ties it to Indonesia as the primary pillar supporting its economy.

This dependence is influenced by Timor-Leste's domestic production. Silvi, a staff member at the Motaain Border Post (interview, 2026), noted that residents along the Timor-

Leste border are heavily reliant on supplies from Indonesia to meet their daily basic needs. This dependence arises from insufficient local agricultural production. Additionally, the exchange rate of the U.S. dollar (Timor-Leste's official currency) also influences residents' purchasing behavior. The exchange rate difference between the U.S. dollar (US\$) and the rupiah (IDR) encourages border residents (in Timor-Leste) to purchase larger quantities of staple goods in Indonesia rather than in their own country, as prices for these products in Timor-Leste are higher than those on the Indonesian side.

The agricultural sector's production capacity in Timor-Leste is relatively low; from 2022 to 2023, the country was only able to produce 86,000 metric tons of rice (MAP, 2023). Meanwhile, the total national rice demand reaches 130,000 metric tons to meet the consumption needs of the entire population, which numbers approximately 1.3 million people (FAO, 2023). The gap between production and demand is significant. As a result, the people of Timor-Leste cannot fully rely on domestic supplies. They are forced to seek alternative food sources to meet their daily needs. One of the easiest and most common solutions is to purchase rice and other basic necessities from Indonesia.

The volume of Indonesia's exports from NTT to foreign countries shows that NTT's exports to Timor-Leste are significantly higher than those to other countries. There are three interrelated layers of reality. The first layer is economic: differences in the dollar exchange rate and commodity prices give Timor-Leste residents 30–40% greater purchasing power when shopping in Indonesia. The second layer is geographic: transportation costs from Dili to the border are higher than from Atambua to the border, creating inefficiencies in Timor-Leste's internal distribution. The third layer is cultural: traditional trade patterns that have existed for centuries create a "lock-in effect" in which supply chains are already informally integrated.

Suspension of Cross-Border Pass Documents in 2021

The Timor-Leste government's decision to suspend Cross-Border Passes (PLB) since 2020 has actually triggered a counterproductive effect in the form of increased illegal crossings by its citizens into Indonesia. Although these documents—which previously served as a bridge for the socioeconomic mobility of border communities—have been suspended, fundamental needs must still be met. The geographical conditions—with the two countries separated only by a small river and minimal surveillance—have created a loophole that residents exploit to continue crossing the border illegally. Their motivations vary: visiting family, shopping for basic necessities, and carrying out local traditions that have been deeply rooted across generations.

The paradox of this policy is evident when the suspended legal instrument actually fuels illegal practices that were previously carried out legally. Bria (interview, 2026), a Timor-Leste resident in the border region, revealed that the policy has become a stumbling block, especially when family emergencies force them to cross immediately. Rather than ensuring order, the suspension of the Border Crossing Permit (PLB) has actually opened new avenues for unregulated alternative practices. The public, despite all their limitations, continues to find ways to meet social and economic needs that cannot be postponed. The decision to fully transition from the Border Crossing Pass (PLB) to a passport has also contributed to an increase in immigration violations. This is due to the limited availability of passport blank forms, restricted access to passport issuance, and the high costs associated with processing them in

the capital city of Dili—factors that align with the rising number of immigration violations involving the entry of East Timorese nationals into Indonesia.

Sectoral Egos Between Institutions: TNI vs. POLRI

Sectoral egos in efforts to monitor and secure border areas reflect weak coordination, both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, policies established by the central government often cannot be fully implemented by local governments. Horizontally, the lack of well-integrated division of authority between institutions (TNI and POLRI) actually complicates the situation. Each institution operates according to its own logic. The TNI prioritizes security stability, while the POLRI focuses on maintaining order and enforcing the law. Differences in standard procedures and benchmarks for success create a gray area. According to Jones (2016), “border traffic management is often caught in sectoral conflicts of interest, which ultimately undermine the effectiveness of surveillance and prolong the cycle of illegality.”

In handling cases involving undocumented East Timorese immigrants at the border, sectoral egos frequently surface, as demonstrated by the TNI and Polri at the border. The Border Security Task Force (TNI) claims that its operational area is off-limits to the Indonesian National Police (Polri) when they seek to enforce the law against border violators who recklessly enter Indonesian territory; conversely, the Indonesian National Police (border police) claims that Border Security Task Force personnel are prohibited from apprehending border violators who have already entered Indonesian territory. Tlonaen, in an interview in Belu (January 2026), revealed that a power struggle exists between the TNI and the Polri regarding the handling of illegal border crossers at the border. Meanwhile, in an interview with “Ri**,” a member of the Border Security Task Force in Atambua (January 2026), acknowledged that there is a power struggle—particularly regarding areas of jurisdiction—between the TNI and the Indonesian National Police.

Opportunities

Relations between Indonesia—particularly the border communities in NTT and Timor-Leste—which are rooted in geographical proximity and cross-border kinship ties, offer significant opportunities for the progress of both nations in the social, cultural, economic, political, and educational spheres, provided they are managed effectively. On the socio-cultural front, the kinship ties among border communities—which have been passed down through generations—can serve as an effective instrument of local diplomacy in defusing tensions arising from territorial boundary issues, which often trigger conflicts. In the economic sector, Timor-Leste’s dependence on Indonesia to meet its daily needs has a positive impact on economic growth in the border regions of both countries. This situation fosters the formation of a common market and facilitates the flow of commodity trade, which in turn provides tangible benefits to the border communities of both nations.

From a political perspective, the harmonious relationship between Indonesia (NTT) and Timor-Leste has significant positive implications. Security stability in the border region is increasingly assured thanks to intensive political communication between the two countries. Furthermore, territorial boundary disputes can be resolved through diplomatic channels and consultation, thereby preventing armed conflict. These close political ties also open opportunities for the development of people-centered border policies, while simultaneously strengthening Indonesia’s position as a strategic partner of Timor-Leste on the regional and international stages. Meanwhile, in the field of education, the relationship between Indonesia

(NTT) and Timor-Leste has a significant positive impact on border communities. Access to education has become more widespread, both through cross-border schools and student and teacher exchange programs. These educational interactions not only improve the quality of human resources but also foster tolerance and cross-cultural understanding among the younger generation. Furthermore, academic and research collaboration between universities in both countries helps drive innovation and science-based policies that benefit the development of the border region.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, it was concluded that Indonesia's immigration policy regarding the management of undocumented East Timorese nationals at the Indonesia–East Timor border from 2019 to 2024 faced challenges arising from historical and social factors (cross-border kinship ties), the suspension of Cross-Border Passes (PLB), economic dependence, and institutional interests among border security agencies, including the TNI and POLRI.

These historical and social conditions represented a sociocultural reality in which transnational kinship ties, established since the pre-colonial period through shared ethnic identities such as Tetun, Bunak, Kemak, and Dawan, created social and emotional bonds that extended beyond administrative territorial boundaries. Consequently, border communities often prioritized cultural identity and kinship relationships over compliance with formal immigration regulations, as reflected in transnational kinship networks that facilitated undocumented cross-border mobility, particularly during traditional and religious events such as the “Bakar Lilin” celebration. Furthermore, the Timor-Leste government's suspension of the Cross-Border Pass (PLB) since 2020 produced unintended consequences by increasing undocumented crossings into Indonesia. The document, which previously functioned as a legal mechanism supporting the socioeconomic mobility of border communities, became unavailable, while essential activities, such as visiting relatives, purchasing daily necessities, and participating in local traditions, continued to require cross-border movement. Geographic conditions, in which some border areas are separated only by narrow rivers with limited surveillance capacity, further created opportunities for undocumented crossings. Thus, policies intended to strengthen border regulation inadvertently contributed to the persistence of informal mobility practices. The transition to passport-based requirements also intensified violations due to limited passport availability, restricted access, and high processing costs in Dili, causing mobility patterns to shift from formal channels toward informal pathways.

Timor-Leste's economic dependence on Indonesia in border areas was influenced by price differences, limited domestic production capacity, and geographical proximity. Timor-Leste's GDP per capita was projected to decline from 2,708 U.S. dollars in 2021 to 1,508 U.S. dollars in 2025, while unemployment was expected to reach 20 percent, weakening household purchasing power. Consequently, residents preferred to obtain basic necessities, such as rice, corn, and sugar, from Indonesia, where prices were comparatively lower. This tendency was further strengthened by exchange rate differences between the U.S. dollar and the Indonesian rupiah, which increased purchasing power advantages. A significant proportion of products consumed in Timor-Leste originated from Indonesia, with trade flows passing through border crossing points such as Motaain. Limited domestic rice production, which remained below

national demand, also encouraged communities to rely on border markets, including Wini, Motaain, and Haumeniana. These interconnected economic, geographic, and cultural factors created a dependency structure that was difficult to eliminate. Meanwhile, institutional interests and coordination challenges in managing the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border reflected weaknesses in both vertical and horizontal governance mechanisms. Vertically, national policies were not always implemented effectively at the local level. Horizontally, overlapping authorities and differences in institutional priorities between the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and the Indonesian National Police (Polri) complicated border management. The TNI emphasized security and territorial stability, whereas Polri focused on law enforcement, creating coordination challenges due to differences in operational procedures and performance indicators.

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