The Over-Politicization of The Health Sector in Timor Leste: Cause, Consequences and Solution

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Abstract

Since gaining independence in 2002, Timor-Leste has faced substantial challenges in developing effective governance and public services, particularly within the health sector. As a lower-middle-income country, it struggles with limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient healthcare personnel. These issues are exacerbated by the over-politicization of the health sector, where political agendas influence health policies, resource allocation, and operational decisions within health institutions. Over the past 22 years, political interference has significantly hindered the delivery of health services, leading to adverse public health outcomes.

This review explores the causes and consequences of this over-politicization, highlighting the misalignment between health planning and budgeting, policy instability, politically influenced resource allocation, and interference in health institutions. Political dynamics, particularly during election cycles, often dictate health policies and resource distribution, resulting in inefficiencies and health inequities. Frequent leadership changes and politically motivated appointments further undermine the effectiveness of health institutions.

The adverse impacts include reduced efficiency, increased health disparities, erosion of public trust, a brain drain of healthcare professionals, and poor health outcomes. Case studies from other countries, such as Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and India, illustrate similar issues, underscoring the global relevance of this phenomenon.

To mitigate these negative effects, the review proposes merit-based appointments, strengthening health institutions, depoliticizing health policies, ensuring equitable resource allocation, and building public trust. International support can also play a vital role in fostering resilient and equitable health systems. Addressing the over-politicization of Timor-Leste's health sector is crucial for improving public health outcomes and developing a robust healthcare system.

Key words; Over-politicization, Health sector, Timor-Leste, Political interference, Policy instability, Merit-based appointments.

Introduction

Timor-Leste, a Southeast Asian nation, has faced significant challenges in establishing effective governance and public services, including the health system, since gaining independence in 2002. The health sector has been heavily influenced by political dynamics, which have had profound implications for health service delivery and outcomes.

According to the World Bank's analytical income categories, a low-income country is defined as a nation with a gross national income (GNI) per capita of $1,085 or less in 2021 (World Bank, 2021), while lower-middle-income countries have a GNI per capita between $1,086 and $4,255 (World Bank, 2023). Timor-Leste is classified as a lower-middle-income country by the World Bank. This classification is based on its gross national income (GNI) per capita, which was $2,500 in 2022 (World Bank, 2023).

The health sector in low-income and lower-middle-income countries often faces numerous challenges, including limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient healthcare personnel. However, one of the most pressing issues exacerbating these challenges is the over-politicization of the health sector. This phenomenon manifests through the influence of political agendas on health policies, the allocation of resources based on political loyalty, and interference in the operational aspects of health institutions.

The over-politicization of the health sector in Timor-Leste over the past 22 years has significantly impacted the health system and the delivery of health services to its population. Political interference in health policy and management has led to several challenges that hinder the effective delivery of health services, resulting in adverse public health outcomes.

One key issue is the misalignment between health sector planning and budgeting processes, which are often influenced by political agendas rather than evidence-based needs. This misalignment can result in inefficient allocation of resources, with funds being diverted to politically motivated projects rather than essential health services. Therefore, we hypothesize that understanding the causes and consequences of over-politicization in the health sector can help develop strategies to mitigate its negative impact.

This review examines the causes and consequences of over-politicization in the health sector in Timor-Leste, drawing on various case studies and reports to highlight the pervasive impact of political dynamics on health service outcomes. It also proposes possible ways to mitigate the negative effects.

Causes

The health sector is often at the center of political maneuvering, especially during election cycles, due to its significance to the public and its substantial share of government spending. Political games in the health sector involve balancing public expectations, managing funding without overcommitting financially, and addressing public health challenges within a politically acceptable framework. This balancing act is critical as parties prepare for upcoming elections to secure votes. It can typically be observed by examining political agendas, resource allocation based on political loyalty, and interference in health institutions and decisions.

Political agendas and health policies

In Timor-Leste, health policies are often shaped by political agendas rather than public health needs. Politicians frequently use health programs as tools to garner support, leading to the implementation of policies that prioritize short-term political gains over long-term health benefits. Notable evidence shows that, for over 22 years, the health sector has been a principal agenda for politicians in election campaigns, with promises to prioritize delivering better health services to the population. However, the health sector continues to face numerous challenges in providing decent health services to the population. For example, a study by Greer and Méndez (2015) highlights how electoral cycles influence health policy decisions, with politicians implementing high-visibility projects to secure votes while neglecting essential but less visible health services. This misalignment between health policies and health needs results in inefficiencies and hinders the development of a robust healthcare system.

Policy instability

Frequent changes in political leadership can lead to constant shifts in health policies, undermining long-term health planning and consistent service delivery. In Timor-Leste, this issue

has become a political tradition, marked by egoism from political decision-makers. Timor-Leste has suffered from numerous instances of political and government instability over the past 22 years, posing a significant challenge for the health sector due to inconsistency in implementing essential health plans and programs.

The political crises in Timor-Leste over the past 22 years have underscored the challenges of nation-building and governance in a young democracy. While significant progress has been made, the country continues to face political instability that impacts its development and the well-being of its citizens, particularly affecting the health services provided to the population. For example, the political landscape of Timor-Leste since its independence in 2002 has been marked by a series of crises and challenges. These crises have often affected governance, stability, and development in the country. Key political crises in Timor-Leste since independence include:

- 2006 crisis:

In April 2006, a group of soldiers (known as the "petitioners") protested against alleged discrimination in the military, leading to widespread violence and civil unrest. The crisis resulted in the displacement of around 150,000 people and the resignation of then Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri (International Crisis Group, 2006).

- 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary elections:

The 2012 elections were crucial for consolidating democracy however incidents of violence and political tension were reported, although the elections were largely peaceful. The elections resulted in a change of leadership with Taur Matan Ruak becoming president and Xanana Gusmão's CNRT party winning the parliamentary majority (United Nations, 2012)

- 2017-2018 Political deadlock:

The 2017 parliamentary elections resulted in a hung parliament, with no party gaining a clear majority. The subsequent months saw a political deadlock and the failure to pass key legislation, leading to early elections in 2018. Impacting the political impasse highlighted the fragility of Timor-Leste's political institutions and the challenges of coalition governance (The Asia Foundation, 2018)

- 2020 COVID-19 and government instability:

The COVID-19 pandemic put additional strain on Timor-Leste's political and economic systems. In April 2020, Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak resigned due to a lack of parliamentary support but remained in office amid the pandemic. The crisis exposed weaknesses in the country's political stability and governance structures (Routers, 2020).

- 2023 Presidential elections and political tensions:

The 2023 presidential elections saw heightened political tensions, with disputes over electoral results and accusations of irregularities. These tensions reflected ongoing political divisions and the need for electoral reforms to strengthen democratic processes (Lowy Institute, 2023)

Resource allocation and political loyalty

The allocation of resources in the health sector of Timor Leste is often influenced by political considerations. For axample, personnel recruiting for any vacancy in government institutions is frequently based on political loyalty rather than merit-based recruitment. Resources are frequently distributed based on political loyalty rather than objective health needs, leading to inequities in healthcare access and outcomes. For instance, frequent changes in important positions such as directors and heads of departments, along with an increase in political appointments within health institutions, are often influenced by local philosophies like 'Bongkar-Pasang' and 'Sapu Rata.' These practices, commonly used by politicians, lead to inadequate health services due to the recruitment of inexperienced health professionals into important positions. This affects both the delivery and outcomes of health services.

A report by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2017) indicated that political interference led to the appointment of unqualified personnel to key positions, resulting in poor management and inefficiencies in health service delivery and can result in poor health outcomes for the community.

In addition, political meddling in procurement processes and budget allocations can lead to corruption and mismanagement of resources, further straining the already limited healthcare systems. For instance, research by Brinkerhoff and Bossert (2014) illustrates how political patronage affects the distribution of healthcare resources, with regions supporting the ruling party receiving more funding and better healthcare services compared to opposition strongholds. This

politicized resource allocation and recruitment undermines the principles of equity and justice in healthcare, exacerbating disparities in health outcomes.

Interference in health institutions

Political interference in the operational aspects of health institutions further complicates the health landscape in Timor Leste. Politicians often exert control over appointments and management decisions within health institutions, compromising their autonomy and effectiveness such as overseas patient referral cases by "Junta Medica" from Guido Valadares National Hospital (HNGV) for further investigation and management often face political interference and perspectives rather than clinical reason needs.

Examples and evidence;

In Timor-Leste, various reports and case studies have highlighted instances of political interference in the country's overseas referral system. One report by La'o Hamutuk, a Timorese non-governmental organization, detailed how political connections influenced patient referrals, often at the expense of those in dire need of medical care (La'o Hamutuk, 2012).

Furthermore, reports from international organizations and local NGOs have documented similar issues, emphasizing the need for reform to ensure a more transparent and equitable referral process (The Asia Foundation, 2016).

Moreover, the appointment of health officials in Timor-Leste often prioritizes political loyalty over professional qualifications. For instance, the Ministry of Health has seen several changes in leadership based on shifts in political power, leading to a lack of continuity and stability in health policies and programs (UNDP, 2017).

Additionally, health policy decisions are sometimes driven by political agendas rather than public health needs. During election periods, promises of new health facilities or services are often made to garner votes, regardless of whether these promises are feasible or aligned with the country's health priorities (WHO, 2018). Notable evidence was shown in the last parliamentary election campaign in 2023, where politicians from some political parties promised to build ten-floor hospitals if they won the election. However, despite winning the majority over other parties, this promise has still not been implemented.

A report by Australian Aid (2016) stated that funding and resource allocation based on political considerations can influence the distribution of health resources, with areas supporting the ruling party receiving preferential treatment. This leads to disparities in health service availability and quality, exacerbating health inequities (AusAID, 2016).

Examples of case studies regarding over-politization in the health sector from different countries

Several case studies illustrate the detrimental effects of over-politicization in the health sector. In Kenya, for example, political dynamics have significantly influenced the distribution of health resources, with areas supporting the government receiving disproportionate funding compared to opposition areas (Ministry of Health Kenya, 2019).

Similarly, in Nigeria, political interference in health institutions has led to frequent strikes and disruptions in healthcare services, adversely affecting health outcomes, for example, mismanagement of funds meant for public health emergency sucs as Ebola outbreak highlights detrimental effects of over-politicization (Akinola & Adebowel, 2019).

In Nigeria, political interference in health service delivery has been a persistent problem. Politicians often influence the appointment of health officials and the distribution of health resources, resulting in inefficiencies and inequities in the system (Eze, C., Ezenwa, P. 2014, Okonofua, F. E. 2018).

In Zimbabwe, the politicization of the health services has led to severe shortages of medical supplies and poorly maintained health facilities. Political patronage often determines the allocation of healthcare resources (Moyo, 2018) and during Robert Mugabe's rule, the health sector was heavily politicized, with resources being allocated to regions that supported his party. This led to a collapse of the healthcare system, with severe shortages of medicines and healthcare workers (Campbell, E. 2010, Meldrum, A. 2009).

In India, while not uniformly a developing country, certain states in India exhibit characteristics of over-politicization in health. Political consideration often influences the selection of sites for new health facilities, neglecting areas with greater need (Dasgupta, 2011)

Consequence of over political interference on the health sector

The over-politicization of the health sector in Timor-Leste has several adverse impacts on public health, namely reduced efficiency and effectiveness, health inequities, erosion of public trust, brain drain, and poor health outcomes.

Reduced efficiency and effectiveness: Political interference disrupts the management and implementation of health programs. Frequent changes in leadership and policy direction result in wasted resources and efforts, reducing the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the health system (World Bank, 2019).

Health inequities: Unequal distribution of resources and services based on political considerations leads to significant health disparities. Rural and opposition-supporting areas often receive fewer resources, resulting in poorer health outcomes for these populations (Amnesty International, 2020).

Erosion of public trust: When the health sector is perceived as politically biased, public trust in health institutions declines. This can lead to reduced utilization of health services and lower adherence to public health interventions, undermining efforts to improve health outcomes (UNICEF, 2019). For instance, lately, the public has been increasingly questioning and expressing regret about the provision of public health services throughout the territory. Some even state that the Guido Valadares National Hospital has become a place where lives are lost rather than saved. Furthermore, some say that when they go to the hospital, it is to die, not to survive. As a consequence, some patients prefer to stay at home and die there, while those with money prefer to consult private clinics rather than use public health facilities.

Brain drains: Healthcare professionals may become disillusioned with the politicized system and seek employment in more stable environments, exacerbating the shortage of skilled healthcare workers. **Poor health outcomes:** Misallocation of resources and lack of continuity in health policies can lead to poor health outcomes, including higher rates of morbidity and mortality.

Potential solutions

To mitigate the negative impact of over-politicization, the following key steps are proposed: merit-based appointments, depoliticizing health policies and decisions, equitable resource allocation, and building public trust.

Merit-based appointments: Ensure that health sector appointments are based on professional qualifications and experience rather than political affiliations. This can be achieved through transparent and merit-based selection processes (Transparency International, 2021).

Strengthening institutions: Building robust health institutions that are insulated from political interference is crucial. This includes establishing independent health commissions and watchdog bodies.

Depoliticizing health policies: Establish independent bodies to oversee health policy formulation and implementation, ensuring that decisions are based on evidence and public health needs rather than political agendas (WHO, 2020).

Equitable resource allocation: Develop mechanisms to ensure the fair and equitable distribution of health resources, prioritizing areas with the greatest need regardless of political considerations (UNDP, 2018). Ensuring transparency in health resource allocation and holding officials accountable for their actions can reduce corruption and favoritism.

Building public trust: Increase transparency and accountability in the health sector to build public trust. Engage communities in health planning and decision-making processes to ensure that their needs and concerns are addressed (World Bank, 2021).

International support: International organizations can play a role by providing technical assistance, funding, and oversight rather than pursuing particular interests and agendas. This support can help developing countries such as Timor-Leste build resilient and equitable health systems.

Conclusion

The over-politicization of the health sector in Timor-Leste presents significant challenges to public health and the overall efficacy of healthcare delivery. Political agendas, resource misallocation, and interference in health institutions have created inefficiencies, health inequities, and a decline in public trust. These issues are further compounded by frequent changes in political leadership and the prioritization of political loyalty over merit-based appointments, undermining long-term health planning and stability.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach: establishing merit-based appointment systems, depoliticizing health policy formulation and implementation, ensuring equitable distribution of resources, and strengthening health institutions to operate independently of political influence. Building public trust through transparency and accountability is also crucial. Additionally, international support can provide the necessary technical assistance, funding, and oversight to help Timor-Leste build a resilient and equitable health system.

By implementing these strategies, Timor-Leste can mitigate the negative impacts of over-politicization, improve health outcomes, and develop a more robust and effective healthcare system that serves the needs of its population. This shift is essential for fostering sustainable development and enhancing the well-being of all citizens.

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