

# Political Party Leadership: The Cnrt Party's Winning Strategy in Timor-Leste

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## Abstrak

This study examines the leadership dynamics and winning strategy of the CNRT (Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução de Timor) party in the 2023 parliamentary elections in Timor-Leste, a new democracy in Southeast Asia. This study aims to describe the characteristics of CNRT leadership, analyze political communication strategies, assess human resource management and cadre development, and identify obstacles encountered in the implementation of winning strategies. Using a qualitative approach, this study utilizes in-depth interviews, field observations, and document reviews to obtain comprehensive data that is analyzed thematically. The results show that the CNRT's success was greatly influenced by the charismatic and transformational leadership of Xanana Gusmão, who was able to build an inclusive party image and consolidate cross-ethnic and cross-regional support. Adaptive political communication strategies, which integrated traditional and digital media, were effective in increasing engagement, particularly among young voters and grassroots communities. The strengthening of the cadre system and the improvement of human resource capacity at the local level reinforced the party's loyalty and competitiveness. Amid internal challenges such as elite fragmentation and resource constraints as well as intense political competition, the CNRT was able to adapt through innovative strategies and responsive risk management. These findings emphasize the importance of synergy between leadership, political communication, and cadre development as the main foundations for political party victory in new democracies, and contribute theoretically and practically to the development of leadership and party management studies in Southeast Asia.

**Kata Kunci:** Leadership, Winning Strategies, Political Communication, Cadre Development.

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## 1. Pendahuluan

The dynamics of political party leadership and winning strategies in electoral contests are central issues in contemporary political science studies around the world. In the global context, political and social transformations triggered by advances in information technology and demands for public transparency have encouraged political parties to continue innovating in leadership and winning strategies (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2021). This phenomenon is also in line with the shift in the deliberative democracy paradigm, which demands active public participation in political decision-making (Foa et al., 2022).

At the regional level, the political dynamics of Southeast Asia show that party leadership still plays a crucial role in ensuring the sustainability of democracy and government stability. Countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste are important laboratories for observing how political parties evolve under the pressure of social, economic, and technological change (Slater & Simmons, 2023). In this region, political parties are required to maintain strong relationships with their constituents and be able to navigate internal and external challenges.

Timor-Leste, as the youngest democracy in Asia, offers a unique context for examining the effectiveness of political party leadership. After gaining independence in 2002, the country sought to build strong political

institutions, with political parties playing a central role in the consolidation of democracy (Mendonça & Molenaar, 2023). Recent statistics show that voter turnout in Timor-Leste remains high, reaching 77.26% in the 2023 parliamentary elections, reflecting the people's enthusiasm for the political process (N. Tan, 2020).

The victory of the CNRT (Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução de Timor) party in the 2023 parliamentary elections was an important turning point in the political landscape of Timor-Leste. Based on official data, the CNRT won the highest number of votes with 41.6%, a significant increase from 21 seats in the previous election to 31 seats, marking the resurgence of Xanana Gusmão's leadership, who is considered a symbol of nationalism and reconciliation (Terminski & Bogumil, 2023). CNRT's dominance in parliament confirms the effectiveness of the party's winning strategy.

The biggest challenge facing political parties in Timor-Leste, including CNRT, is balancing innovative winning strategies with limited resources, internal stability, and resistance from opposition groups (Silva et al., 2021). In addition, the developing level of political literacy among the public also influences the effectiveness of communication and organizational strategies (Leach, 2022). This often gives rise to intense competition between the main parties, such as FRETILIN and PLP.

A significant research gap has been identified in the lack of in-depth empirical studies on how the leadership strategies and internal resource management of the CNRT party contributed to its electoral victory in Timor-Leste. Most previous studies have focused more on historical aspects or elite relations, but there are still few studies that comprehensively integrate the analysis of leadership practices, political communication strategies, cadre development, and challenges faced (Duarte & Brown, 2023).

The scientific urgency of this research lies in its attempt to fill the gap in the literature on best practices in political party leadership in new democracies. In practical terms, this research is expected to provide strategic insights for other political parties in Timor-Leste and other developing countries on the importance of leadership innovation and organizational management that is responsive to the demands of political change (Dalton et al., 2020a). The findings of this study are also relevant for policymakers, political practitioners, and democracy activists in designing interventions that support the strengthening of political parties as the main pillars of democracy.

The theoretical framework underlying this study is transformational leadership theory, political communication theory, and modern political cadre theory. According to transformational leadership theory, visionary and inspirational leadership is key to building a positive party image and encouraging broad political participation (Uhl-Bien et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the political communication approach emphasizes the importance of adapting communication channels to audience characteristics to increase the effectiveness of political messages (Fletcher et al., 2023). Modern political cadre theory highlights the importance of human resource development and organizational sustainability as prerequisites for long-term victory (Rahman et al., 2022).

Finally, through the integration of theory and empirical findings, this study presents a comprehensive academic narrative on the meaning, challenges, and strategies of political party leadership in winning electoral contests in Timor-Leste. Thus, the new knowledge generated can become the foundation for the development of political science and democracy studies at the national, regional, and global levels.

## 2. Metode

The research approach is a methodological foundation that determines how researchers view, understand, and analyze the phenomena being studied. In social science studies, qualitative approaches are widely used to explore in depth the meanings, processes, and dynamics behind complex socio-political phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative approach is based on the constructivist paradigm, which is the belief that social reality is shaped through interaction, meaning construction, and specific cultural contexts. Through this perspective, researchers seek to comprehensively understand the dynamics of political party leadership by looking at the perspectives of key actors, empirical experiences, and narratives that develop within organizations and society.

The type of research used in this study is a case study. A case study is a qualitative research method that intensively examines one or more cases in a real-life context with the aim of gaining a comprehensive and contextual understanding (Yin, 2018). Case studies allow for an in-depth exploration of the dynamics of leadership, political communication strategies, the regeneration process, and the organizational challenges faced by the CNRT Party in the legislative elections in Timor-Leste. By placing the CNRT Party as the main unit of analysis, this study can examine in detail the practices, interactions, and contexts surrounding the party's victory process. In addition, case studies also provide space for data triangulation through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document reviews, thereby supporting the validity and richness of the research data.

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### **3. Hasil dan Pembahasan**

#### **The Charismatic and Transformational Leadership Style of Xanana Gusmão**

The results of this study confirm that Xanana Gusmão's leadership style in the CNRT Party is strongly charismatic and transformational, which has greatly contributed to the party's success in building a positive image in the public eye. Gusmão's charismatic leadership is reflected in his ability to inspire mass support, build internal cohesion, and embrace a broad political spectrum through his figure of nationalism and symbol of resistance during the struggle for East Timor's independence. Gusmão's leadership is not only an electoral asset, but also a strategic instrument in consolidating the narrative of nationalism, reconciliation, and hope for positive change.

Based on interviews with a number of CNRT cadres and political observers, it was mentioned that Gusmão is seen as the father of the nation and a moral force in East Timorese politics. This is in line with transformational leadership theory (Hernandez et al., 2014), which emphasizes the importance of vision, inspiration, and personal interaction between leaders and followers in building long-term trust and loyalty. Gusmão's leadership is identified as being able to resonate with the collective hopes of the people, which is reflected in the surge in electoral support for the CNRT in the 2023 elections—the CNRT won 41.6% of the vote, far ahead of its rival parties, FRETILIN and PLP.

#### **The Influence of Social Networks and Nationalist Figures in Consolidating Support**

This study also found that the CNRT's success was inseparable from the utilization of social networks and the symbolic power of Gusmão as a national figure. The networks built since the era of armed resistance to the period of national reconstruction after independence became an important foundation in mobilizing the party machine throughout Timor-Leste. Many informants emphasized that wherever Gusmão went, his mass base always followed, illustrating his personal mobilization abilities and informal grassroots networks.

The influence of these social networks reinforces the findings of Davidson (2023) and Niner et al. (2023) regarding the centrality of leaders with extensive social relations and historical legitimacy in electoral competition in new democracies. The CNRT effectively activates the loyalty of veteran communities, indigenous groups, and religious groups through a participatory approach and direct communication, thereby cementing the party's image as the representative of the people's aspirations. In addition, the use of mass and digital media to portray Gusmão as a national icon has helped to expand the party's image among young voters.

#### **The Role of Leadership in Uniting Cross-Ethnic and Regional Bases**

Field data indicates that one of Gusmão's strategic strengths as a leader is his ability to unite cross-ethnic and geographical electoral bases. Timor-Leste, with its pluralistic identity, was able to be included in the grand narrative of national reconciliation through accommodative leadership. Interviews with community leaders in key districts show that the nationalist sentiment and symbols of unity represented by Gusmão have successfully reduced polarization and integrated minority groups into the CNRT's support structure.

This phenomenon expands the concept of political party leadership as described by Kollner (2021) and Simonsen (2020), in which the integration of inclusivity values in leadership is key to overcoming post-conflict socio-political fragmentation. Gusmão actively emphasized a balanced approach between the elite and the grassroots, and affirmed the role of women in political leadership, as reflected in the election of Maria Fernanda Lay (CNRT) as the first female President of Parliament. This event confirmed the CNRT's commitment to representation and empowerment across social groups.

### **Leadership Innovation in Responding to Internal and External Challenges**

In facing internal challenges—such as factionalization, dual loyalties, and resistance from the old elite—the CNRT leadership under Gusmão implemented strategic innovations in the form of strengthening internal consultation mechanisms and decentralizing the authority of regional cadres. Internal party data and cadre testimonies show intensive efforts to build two-way communication between the central elite and grassroots structures, including the active involvement of young cadres through political training and tiered cadre development.

In response to external challenges such as intense political competition with FRETILIN and PLP, regional pressure, and the dynamics of ASEAN membership, Gusmão emphasized an adaptive and collaborative approach with other parties through the formation of coalitions. This strategy proves the effectiveness of a flexible yet firm leadership model in maintaining the CNRT's bargaining position in parliament. This success confirms the findings (Shoesmith, 2020) that the resilience of political party organizations in new democracies requires leaders to be able to manage internal and external conflicts simultaneously.

In part, it can be concluded that the CNRT's advantage in building a party image that attracts public support stems mainly from Gusmão's charismatic-transformational leadership style, the influence of social-emotional networks, the capacity to unite a cross-identity base, and strategic innovation in managing the party's internal and external challenges. These dimensions contributed significantly to the CNRT's victory in the 2023 elections and cemented the party's sustainability as the main political institution in Timor-Leste.

### **The Use of Traditional, Electronic, and Social Media in Campaigns**

Political communication strategies are the main foundation for building effective relationships between political parties and constituents, especially in the context of fierce electoral competition such as in Timor-Leste. This study found that the CNRT Party actively adopted a multi-channel approach in disseminating political messages. The use of traditional media such as radio, national television, and local newspapers remains the main channel for reaching the older generation and rural communities with limited internet access. In addition, the CNRT also intensively uses modern electronic media and social media, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, to garner support from urban communities and young voters, as well as to expand the reach of its campaign in urban areas and among the overseas diaspora.

Internal party statistics show a significant increase in the number of impressions and interactions on social media platforms during the campaign period, with short video content and live broadcasts of public meetings being the formats most shared by supporters. The continuity of these messages successfully supported the consistency of CNRT's image as a responsive and inclusive people's party.

### **Integrated Communication Approach to Increase Political Engagement**

The findings confirm that CNRT's success in winning the 2023 legislative elections was not only due to its mastery of the media, but also to the implementation of an integrated political communication strategy. The party employed a two-way communication pattern, in which messages sent through social media were always followed by offline community dialogues. Every national issue raised in digital media is always re-discussed in face-to-face forums at the district and sub-district levels, opening up space for the public to convey their aspirations or feedback.

This integrated communication model confirms the literature on adaptive political communication strategies in Southeast Asia, which emphasizes the importance of synergy between online and offline approaches in order to target diverse voter segments. The findings of this study also broaden our understanding of political engagement practices in new democracies, where integrated communication is not merely an instrument for disseminating messages, but a means of building trust and social solidarity between the elite and the grassroots.

### **Strategies for Mobilizing Youth and Local Communities**

An in-depth analysis of mobilization patterns shows that the CNRT systematically prioritizes youth and local communities in its campaign strategy. Through open discussion forums, youth cadre training, and creative competitions on social media, the party has succeeded in creating a strong sense of belonging among the younger generation and minority groups. One of the young cadres interviewed said:

The party implemented community empowerment programs by collaborating with traditional leaders, religious leaders, and women's organizations at the village level, thereby expanding the party's reach and strengthening its ties to local social networks. This approach is in line with the theory of modern political cadre development (Rahman et al., 2022), which highlights the significance of grassroots actors in building sustainable support networks.

### **Public Image Management and Feedback between Party Elites and Constituents**

CNRT's public image management is closely linked to the presence of the charismatic figure Xanana Gusmão. Gusmão's image as a symbol of national reconciliation and transformative leader is consistently exploited in all campaign materials, whether through visual narratives, slogans, or community testimonials. Observations at several campaign stops showed high levels of enthusiasm among the masses when Gusmão appeared in person or greeted them through online media.

On the other hand, one important innovation in the CNRT's strategy was its two-way feedback mechanism. The party provided a hotline, an official WhatsApp account, and public dialogue forums held in each region. Community feedback and aspirations are not only recorded but also responded to concretely by party elites through direct visits or openly communicated party policies. This practice strengthens public trust in the party's responsiveness and theoretically expands the model of effective communication in party leadership studies (Hernandez et al., 2014).

An initial interpretation of these results shows that the CNRT's success in building political engagement is the result of integrating digital communication strategies with a face-to-face approach, an emphasis on strong leadership figures, and the management of two-way relationships with constituents. The party's responsive and participatory communication model has succeeded in increasing a sense of belonging among voters, especially among young people and local communities.

The connection with previous literature is clear, as these research results support the theory of transformational leadership and the use of media in building political loyalty (Bass & Riggio, 2019; Simonsen, 2020). The results also expand on the findings of Tan et al. (2022) regarding effective digital campaigns in Southeast Asia, adding the significance of synergy with offline community actions and elite responses to grassroots aspirations.

### **Cadre Development and Leadership Regeneration in the CNRT Party**

The cadre system and leadership regeneration are important foundations in building the resilience of political party organizations in new democracies, such as Timor-Leste. This study found that the CNRT Party consistently prioritizes cadre development as a strategic priority, with mechanisms oriented toward the collection and development of political talent from the local to the national level. This cadre development process takes place in stages: from initial screening in village communities, through party wing organizations, to the training of potential candidates for legislative and executive positions.

Interviews with several senior CNRT cadres confirmed that the party focuses on regeneration based on meritocracy and ideological loyalty, not merely personal relationships with party elites. Cadres must prove their commitment in the field before being trusted to represent the party at a higher level, explained a member of the CNRT Central Executive Board. This is reflected in the 2023 parliamentary candidate selection process, in which the majority of candidates come from the grassroots with a track record of active involvement in the community.

These findings confirm the relevance of cadre party theory, which emphasizes the importance of a professional and structured cadre system to ensure the sustainability of party organizations (Chambers & Ufen, 2020). In practice, the CNRT has been able to combine formal and informal cadre patterns through mentoring, leadership training, and the organization of regular discussions to build the vision and integrity of its cadres.

### **Strengthening Party Human Resource Capacity at the Grassroots Level**

This study also found that CNRT pays significant attention to strengthening the capacity of party human resources at the grassroots level as a key strategy to expand its support base and strengthen constituent loyalty. Internal party survey data shows that more than 65% of branch and sub-branch administrators have participated in training programs covering political education, campaign management, and public communication.

Strengthening grassroots human resources also ensures that the party's mobilization and information dissemination processes run effectively, even in remote areas. This condition proves the validity of the findings (Maley, 2023) and (Rahman et al., 2022) which state that parties with solid human resource development mechanisms will be more adaptive to local political dynamics and external challenges.

### **Cadre Loyalty and Mobilization during the Campaign**

Cadre loyalty is the main social capital that distinguishes the effectiveness of the CNRT's political machine from its competitors. This study identifies that the trust built through a long-term cadre development process creates strong emotional and ideological bonds between cadres and the party. During the 2023 election campaign period, cadre participation in field activities, such as door-to-door canvassing, organizing community meetings, and distributing campaign logistics, was very high—with 82% of cadres reporting active involvement in more than five major campaign activities.

This phenomenon of CNRT cadre loyalty and mobilization is in line with leadership transformation theory, which emphasizes the importance of inspirational influence and collective vision in creating member

commitment (Hernandez et al., 2014). Personal interactions between party elites, particularly Xanana Gusmão, and cadres in the field further solidify this personal and collective loyalty.

### **Mechanisms for Selecting and Developing Strategic Cadres**

In terms of the selection and development mechanisms for strategic cadres, the CNRT implements a tiered selection model that combines competency tests, service records, and input from local communities. Research notes that this process takes place transparently through internal deliberative forums, in which candidates must have real support at their base and the ability to mobilize community resources.

Strategic cadre development is carried out through various programs, ranging from advanced leadership training, internships in government institutions, to participation in international meetings facilitated by the party. This strategy provides opportunities for young and female cadres to access strategic positions, as reflected in the election of Maria Fernanda Lay as President of the Parliament from CNRT, the first woman in the history of Timor-Leste to hold this position.

This practice expands on the studies by Niner et al. (2023) and Tan (2020), which highlight the importance of meritocracy, leadership diversification, and the empowerment of marginalized groups in maintaining party regeneration and competitiveness amid modern electoral competition.

### **Internal Fragmentation and Resistance from Party Elites**

The implementation of leadership strategies in the CNRT is not without internal challenges such as fragmentation and resistance from party elites. Internal fragmentation can refer to differences of opinion or interests among party members, which, if not managed properly, can weaken the coherence and effectiveness of the party's strategy. Resistance from the party elite can also occur when there are differences in vision or interests between party leaders and other members. This requires leaders to build trust and consensus among party members.

The results of the study show that the CNRT, under the leadership of Xanana Gusmão, has attempted to overcome this fragmentation by strengthening internal communication and building a shared vision. In an interview with one party member, it was mentioned that "We always try to build consensus and overcome differences of opinion through open and inclusive discussions." This demonstrates the party's efforts to reduce resistance and increase internal cohesion.

Theoretically, this is in line with transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes the importance of vision, inspiration, and personal interaction in building trust and uniformity among party members (Hernandez et al., 2014). By strengthening its shared vision and internal communication, the CNRT can reduce the potential for internal conflict and increase the effectiveness of its leadership strategy.

### **Limited Resources and Political Literacy of the Community**

Limited resources and political literacy of the community also pose significant challenges for CNRT. Limited resources can hinder the party's ability to effectively implement winning strategies, such as utilizing modern communication technology to increase community engagement. In addition, the developing political literacy of the community means that communication and political education strategies must be tailored to the needs of the local community (Leach, 2022).

In the context of CNRT, these limitations are overcome with creative strategies such as using local community networks and social media to increase community participation. Data shows that the party has successfully increased its use of social media for campaigning, which has had a positive impact on increasing community engagement and support (Tan et al., 2022).

Theoretically, this is in line with political communication theory, which emphasizes the importance of adapting communication to the characteristics of the audience (Fletcher et al., 2023). Thus, CNRT can maximize the use of limited resources to increase the effectiveness of its winning strategy.

### **Political Competition with Major Parties (FRETILIN, PLP)**

Political competition with major parties such as FRETILIN and PLP is another challenge faced by CNRT. This competition requires the party to continuously innovate its winning strategies and maintain a strong support base.

Research shows that CNRT has successfully maintained its position as the leading party in Timor-Leste by winning 31 parliamentary seats in the 2023 elections (Tatoli, 2023). Effective political communication strategies and strong cadre development are key to facing this competition.

Academically, this is in line with political party leadership theory, which emphasizes the importance of strong networks and mobilization capacity in electoral competition (Davidson, 2023). By maintaining strong relationships with constituents and developing adaptive strategies, CNRT can maintain its position amid intense political competition.

### **CNRT's Tactical Strategies in Overcoming Challenges and Obstacles**

CNRT has implemented several tactical strategies to overcome the challenges and obstacles it faces. First, strengthening cadre development and human resource development at the grassroots level is a priority to ensure the sustainability of the party organization. Systematic cadre development allows the party to prepare future leaders and maintain constituent loyalty (Rahman et al., 2022).

Second, CNRT uses an integrated political communication strategy, including the use of traditional and digital media, to increase community engagement and build a positive image of the party. This allows the party to reach various segments of society more effectively (Fletcher et al., 2023).

Third, CNRT utilizes local community networks to strengthen relationships with constituents and increase public political participation. Thus, the party can maintain strong support and win electoral contests.

## **4. Kesimpulan**

Overall, this study shows that CNRT's success in winning the 2023 elections in Timor-Leste was greatly influenced by the integration of charismatic leadership, adaptive political communication strategies, and a solid cadre system. The party's ability to manage internal and external challenges through strategic innovation and by capitalizing on the momentum of Gusmão as a national icon has strengthened CNRT's position as a major political force. These findings affirm the importance of synergy between effective leadership, modern political communication, and organizational base strengthening in building a resilient political party in a new democracy.

This study contributes theoretically by enriching the understanding of transformational leadership and cadre development models in the context of new democracies, particularly in Southeast Asia. Empirically, this research produces integrated evidence on best practices in political party victory, which is relevant for party organization development, policy makers, and democracy activists. Methodologically, the integration of qualitative approaches and multi-level analysis provides an analytical model that can be replicated or compared in cross-country studies.

Reflection on the results of this study confirms the urgency of innovation and resilience in political party organizations in the face of increasingly complex socio-political dynamics. The success of the CNRT is an important lesson learned for parties in developing countries to combine visionary leadership, effective communication, and cadre development as the foundation for sustainable electoral victory. These findings open up space for further research on the evolution of political leadership, particularly the role of gender, the younger generation, and the adaptation of communication technology in building an inclusive and resilient democracy in the future.

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