THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
LEGAL PLURALISM AND THE RULE OF LAW
IN SOUTH AFRICA
AND TIMOR-LESTE

LAURA GRENFELL

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is exclusively the result of my own work.

Laura Grenfell
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ABSTRACT

The re/establishment of the ‘rule of law’ in transitional countries has become a mantra of the international community. At its core, the rule of law assumes that the state enjoys a monopoly of law. This thesis argues that the promotion of the rule of law in transitional countries gives insufficient attention to whether a strong level of legal pluralism exists, in that forms of non-state law, such as customary law, operate in parallel with state law and are preferred by a large proportion of the population. A strong level of legal pluralism is the norm in many regions of the world, particularly in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, where between 80 to 90 per cent of disputes are taken to non-state legal mechanisms for resolution.

This study examines two transitional countries, South Africa and Timor-Leste, which are attempting to re/establish the rule of law and where legal pluralism is strong. Both countries have adopted new constitutions after periods of conflict, occupation and apartheid. In these two constitutional frameworks, the rule of law has been inscribed as a central value with little consideration of the presence of legal pluralism. The case studies provide a useful contrast in that South Africa has a relatively robust economy and legal institutions, and has been attempting to address directly the relationship between legal pluralism and the rule of law. In contrast, Timor-Leste has a weak economy, few functioning legal institutions and its Constitution does not directly address the question of legal pluralism.

This thesis analyses the relationship between the rule of law and legal pluralism in these countries through two lines of inquiry: 1) by examining how these two concepts were negotiated in the process of drafting a new constitution, and; 2) by exploring the practical implications of these particular constitutional arrangements.

In regard to the first line of inquiry, this study shows that the rule of law is often entrenched into constitutions so as to assist the state in asserting its external, international legitimacy and its place among sovereign nations. In contrast, legal pluralism relates to the state’s internal legitimacy and how the state’s leaders understand this legitimacy.
In regard to the second line of inquiry, this study argues that the result of the relationship between the rule of law and a strong level of legal pluralism in the two countries is that both the rule of law and legal pluralism are balanced and compromised according to pragmatic dictates at various levels. In South Africa, state institutions are actively insulating the world of customary law from the rule of law, drawing the line only at the constitutional guarantee of equality. In Timor-Leste there is very little rule of state law because the weakness in the state’s legal institutions and the confusion regarding the applicable law is leading the population to rely heavily on non-state mechanisms to resolve disputes. Thus efforts to promote the rule of law in Timor-Leste that focus solely on state institutions are currently relevant to the lives of only a minority of the population.

This thesis argues that the rule-of-law enterprise needs rethinking so as to make it more germane and useful in the context of post-conflict states where legal pluralism is strong. It concludes by setting out five elements drawn from the case studies that can guide this rethinking exercise.
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