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Face-Saving Strategies Between Timor-Leste and the Philippines Diplomatic Communication During the Arnolfo Teves Jr. Case

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Abstract:

This study analyses the face-saving strategies employed by the governments of Timor-Leste and the Philippines in their official communications during the 2024 Arnolfo Teves Jr. case. Drawing on Face Negotiation Theory, Goffman's face-work, and ASEAN diplomatic norms, the research adopts a qualitative case study approach using discourse analysis of government-issued statements, press releases, and joint declarations. The findings revealed that both countries employed symbolic reassurance, strategic ambiguity, and respect for sovereignty to preserve bilateral relations and manage domestic and international legitimacy. Timor-Leste emphasized legal neutrality and international obligations, while the Philippines adopted hedging language to signal cooperation without provoking confrontation. The study highlights how smaller Southeast Asian states use face-saving as a core diplomatic practice aligned with regional norms of consensus and non-escalation. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of communicative diplomacy and the sociopolitical construction of legitimacy in international affairs.

Keywords — **Face-saving, diplomacy, Timor-Leste, the Philippines, ASEAN, sovereignty, ambiguity.**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Diplomatic interactions involve not only the pursuit of state interests but also the careful management of public image identity and legitimacy. As a diplomacy operates merely through material power but also through symbols, narratives, and communication, the concept of "face"- one's social value on the eyes of others, it becomes central to how states conduct themselves on the international stage (Goffman 1955). In this context, face-saving has become a fundamental communication strategy that states employ to preserve national dignity and sustain constructive bilateral relations, particularly in politically sensitive or conflict-prone scenarios.

This phenomenon is especially visible in Southeast Asia, there diplomatic culture is strongly shaped by non-confrontation, mutual respect, and consensus-building, core principles rooted in ASEAN's historical development (Acharya 2009); Caballero-Anthony, 2005). In such a context, public image management and symbolic communications are not supplementary but essential to sustain regional legitimacy. Scholar have highlighted how ASEAN way, characterized by quiet diplomacy and informal dialogue, often relies on rhetorical subtlety to avoid open criticism or loss of face among members states (Jones, 2010; Nair, 2019).

The 2024 case of Arnolfo Teves Jr., a Philippine legislator arrested in Timor-Leste, underscore these dynamics. Teves, accused of serious crime

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in the Philippines, sought asylum in Timor-Leste, which led to a complex diplomatic episode between the two states. Both countries were confronted with a high-profile situation that could damage bilateral trust, attract media scrutiny, and potentially escalate into a reputational crisis. The government of Timor-Leste and the Philippines issued a series of official statements, press release, and diplomatic notes aimed not only at explaining their legal and political positions but also at managing public perception and mitigating reputational risk. This case provides a rare opportunity to study face-saving as deployed by two small and cooperative Southeast Asian states in real-time crisis communication.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study is situated at the intersection of face negotiation theory (FNT) (Toomey & Kurogi, 1998), Goffman's theory of face-work (Goffman 1955), and the Normative foundation of ASEAN diplomat culture. While much of the existing literature on face-saving in diplomacy focuses on major powers and crisis diplomacy at the global level (Krebs & Jackson 2007); Wendt (1999), fewer studies have examined how smaller states in regional contexts such as Southeast Asia navigate political sensitivities and assert sovereignty without escalating conflict. This study aims to fill that gap by analysing how Timor-Leste and the Philippines negotiated their diplomatic stance through communicative tools, particularly strategic ambiguity, symbolic reassurance, and appeals to sovereignty.

Moreover, this study speaks to the broader literature on legitimacy in International politics, where the ability of states to maintain both domestic and international credibility hinges on effective framing (Zarakol 2011). In the context of rising global scrutiny and democratic accountability, diplomatic language becomes not only a tool of policy but a stage for perception legitimacy, and one that this case encapsulates in the post-asylum negotiation period between the two states.

By closing examining the communications issued by Timor-Leste and the Philippines, this study offers new insights into the rhetorical architecture of regional diplomacy, demonstrating how smaller states perform agency not through confrontation, but through carefully calibrated communicative acts. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of research on face-saving diplomacy, legitimacy, and regional political culture in Southeast Asia.

Theoretical framework: This study is anchored in face negotiation theory (FNT), Goffman's face-work, and broader normative literature on Southeast Asian diplomacy. These theories together offer a robust framework for understanding how states, particularly smaller and cooperative one like Timor-Leste and the Philippines, manage their public image, legitimacy, and diplomatic agency through communications during politically sensitives events.

Face negotiation theory (FNT), developed by Toomey 1998, posits that "face", a person's claimed sense of positive social value, and it is central to intercultural communication. While face is a universal concern, its management is culturally contingent and deeply shaped by social norms, power relations, and context-specific dynamics. FNT delineates two primary strategies: face-saving, which employed when individual or group seeks to preserve their projected image in the face of perceived threat, and face-restoration, which focuses on reclaiming dignity and authority after damage has occurred (Toomey & Kurogi 1998). In diplomacy, these strategies are often visible in the symbolic choices embedded in public statements, including rhetorical ambiguity, appeals to mutual respect, and emphasis on institutional neutrality.

FNT is particularly well-suited to analysing diplomatic discourse in Southeast Asia, where communicative behaviour is highly attuned to indirectness, defense, and non-confrontation. In such environments, governments often employ

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strategic ambiguity, intentionally vague or coded language, and to signal flexibility and avoid public conflict. By using vague terms like "removal from national territory" or awaiting official communication," states create discursive space that minimize the risk of offending others while safeguarding national interest. These strategies not only fulfil the instrumental function of crisis management but also serve a symbolic function, projecting adherence to norms like sovereignty and rule of law while quietly preserving face.

At the core of FNT lies Goffman (1955) sociological concepts of face-work, which describes the ritual strategies individuals use to maintain their social identity during interaction. Goffman argued that all social actors are motivated to preserve a positive image in the eyes of others, especially in public of norms situations. In the international sphere, the logic extends to state actors who, as representatives of national identity, are compelled to engage in face-preserving behaviour to uphold sovereignty and legitimacy. Goffman's insights help illuminate how diplomatic communication is not only about information exchange but also about performance, where states enact their desired identity through narrative control and tone.

The applications of face-work diplomacy become even more nuanced in regional contexts governed by shared norms and historical ties. In Southeast Asia, diplomacy is influenced by ASEAN way, a set of informal but deeply rooted principles that prioritize consensus, mutual respect, and non-interreference (Acharya 2009). These norms reflect a cultural preference for harmony and avoidance of public confrontation, making face-saving a core ingredient in regional interaction. ASEAN member states, and aspirants like Timor-Leste, engage in a form of normative performativity, whereby adherence to diplomatic decorum and symbolic reassurance becomes essential for sustaining legitimacy within the region (aballero-Anthony, 2005; Jones, 2010; Nair, 2019).

The importance of face-saving in Southeast Asia is not merely cultural but also strategic. Smaller states that lack the hard power of major powers often rely on discursive power, the ability to shape narratives and meanings, to assert agency and protect national interest (Krebs & Jackson 2007). By carefully framing their actions in terms of international law, human right, or regional harmony, these states can navigate political sensitivities without provoking escalation. This aligns with constructivist insights in international relations, particularly those advanced by Wendt (1999), who emphasized the role of shared ideas, norms, and identities in shaping international behaviour. In this view, diplomacy is not just material bargaining but also an ongoing construction of meaning and legitimacy.

The case of Arnolfo Teves Jr. exemplifies how these theoretical elements come together in practice. As Timor-Leste balanced its obligations under international law with its desire to maintain warm relations with the Philippines, its communicative strategy reflected face-saving at multiple level, domestic, bilateral, and regional. Meanwhile, the Philippines also employed hedging and courteous tone to avoid damaging its bilateral ties or appearing confrontational, thus preserving its regional credibility. These dynamics illustrate how states use communication as a tool of diplomacy, not only to articulate policy but also to perform legitimacy.

Zarakol (2011) works further expand this framework by showing how postcolonial or "defeated" states often develop a heightened sensitivity to status and recognition in the international system. In such contexts, face-saving becomes a mechanism not only of diplomacy but also of postcolonial self-positioning, wherein states assert modernity, legal rationality, and moral agency. This is particularly relevant to Timor-Leste, relatively new state whose diplomatic identity is still in formation and whose

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aspiration to join ASEAN hinges in part on its perceived conformity with regional norms.

In conclusion, this theoretical framework integrates FNT, face-work, and ASEAN normative culture to offer a multi-layered lens for understanding how states like Timor-Leste and the Philippines manage reputation and legitimacy through diplomatic discourse. It allows us to see diplomacy as both a strategic practice and a cultural performance, grounded in regional expectations, institutional scripts, and the universal human desire to save-"face."

II. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach utilizing discourse analysis to examine face-saving strategy in the official communications of the Timor-Leste and Philippines governments during the Arnolfo Teves Jr. case in Timor-Leste in 2024. The analysis focuses on diplomatic communications from the time of Teves's arrest in Timor-Leste through the developments leading to his deportation, emphasizing how both states managed reputational sensitivity and regional diplomatic norms.

Data were collected through purposive sampling of publicly available, state-issued texts, including official press releases, joint statements, public remarks by senior officials, and relevant regional news coverage for contextual triangulation. Only communications formally released or endorsed by government bodies were analysed to ensure authenticity and credibility. As all documents are publicly available and issued by official sources, no human subjects were involved and no ethical clearance was required.

This analysis is guided by face negotiation theory (Toomey & Kurogi 1998), Goffman's concepts of face work (Goffman 1955), and ASEAN diplomatic norms (Acharya, 2009; Nair, 2019). Thematic discourse analysis was employed to identify strategies such as rhetorical ambiguity, appeals to sovereignty and regional solidarity, and symbolic reassurance. The analysis employed deductive and inductive thematic coding, guided by theoretical constructs from Face Negotiation Theory, Goffman's face work, and ASEAN norms. The thematic matrix was developed to organize findings, aligning coded communication strategies with the core themes of sovereignty, diplomatic tone, strategic ambiguity, and face-saving practices.

To ensure rigor, the study employed triangulation, peer debriefing, and contextual validation against ASEAN diplomatic practices. This approach enables a culturally grounded understanding of how Southeast Asian states use communicative strategies to navigate politically sensitive events while preserving bilateral legitimacy.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TABLE 1:
SUMMARY OF MAIN THEMES FROM OFFICIAL COMMUNICATIONS REGARDING THE ARNOLFO TEVES JR. CASE

Country	Theme	Finding
Philippines	Diplomatic Tone	The Philippine government used courteous and non-confrontational communication, such as "we note" and "we welcome," to acknowledge developments, reflecting a respectful diplomatic posture.
Philippines	Strategic ambiguity	The statement allowed room for interpretation by presenting both deportation and extradition as possibilities without taking a confrontational stance.
Philippines	Face-saving	The blame for the delays was attributed to procedural ambiguity, with the government stating that it had not received official documents, thereby allowing the Philippines to save face.
Philippines	Sovereignty and Due Process	The Philippines deferred to Timor-Leste's internal process while expressing its readiness to cooperate, aligning with the norms of sovereignty and international law.
Philippines	International law/ cooperation	Emphasis on the rule of law and international cooperation served to frame the Philippine stance within a global legal framework, enhancing legitimacy.
Philippines	Hedging	Uncertainty about the Timor-Leste decision was managed through cautious communications, which allowed

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		diplomatic flexibility.
Timor-Leste	Sovereignty assertation	Timor-Leste framed its decision in terms of its national legal framework, reinforcing its sovereign right to process asylum and deportation.
Timor-Leste	Face-Saving Legitimacy	Timor-Leste highlighted its adherence to international obligations and human rights norms to preserve its global image
Timor-Leste	Strategic ambiguity	Use terms like "removal from the national territory" allowed flexibility without explicitly committing extradition.
Timor-Leste	Bilateral Cooperation	Direct mention of good relations with the Philippines and ASEAN identity indicates intent to preserve regional harmony.
Timor-Leste	Institutional neutrality	Delegation of competent authorities helped depoliticize the issue and project institutional credibility.
Timor-Leste	Diplomatic tone	Statements were couched in cooperative and formal communication, avoiding confrontation and reinforcing bilateral respect.

Source: (Timor-Leste, 2024; Department of Foreign Affairs, 2024)

The analysis presented in Table 1 illustrates how the government of Timor-Leste and the Philippines employed face-saving strategies to navigate the diplomatic challenges posed by the Arnolfo Teves Jr Case. Key themes such as the diplomatic tone, strategic ambiguity, sovereignty assertion, and institutional neutrality emerged across their official communications. These themes were identified through a structured deductive and inductive coding process, drawing on Face Negotiation Theory (Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Goffman's theory of face-work (Goffman, 1955) and ASEAN norms of mutual respect and non-confrontation (Acharya, 2009; Nair, 2019).

The Philippines' official statements emphasized readiness to cooperate, respect for due process, and adherence to international standards. Phrases such as "we remain ready" and "we await their action" served to project diplomatic courtesy while subtly shifting responsibility. Timor-Leste, in contrast, emphasized its national legal procedures, employing terms like "removal from the national territory" to maintain flexibility and avoid overt legal commitment. Both governments employed rhetorical strategies that preserved face, upheld legitimacy, and reflected Southeast Asian diplomat norms grounded in harmony, non-escalation, and symbolic reassurance.

Discussion: The finding of this study resonates with other analyses of diplomatic behaviour among ASEAN member states, particularly in case where normative frameworks like non-interferences and face-saving have shaped public discourse. For instance, during the Myanmar military coup in 2021, ASEAN countries such as Malaysia and Thailand adopted a cautious rhetorical approach and emphasizing dialogue and regional unity while avoiding direct confrontation. As discussed by Iannone et al. (2024) this strategy was intended to uphold ASEAN cohesion by balancing human right concerns with bloc's long-standing principle on non-interference. Similarly, this study finds that diplomatic communications between Timor-Leste and the Philippines demonstrates how face-saving strategies are used to maintain legitimacy and stability without escalating tensions, reflecting a broader pattern of symbolic diplomacy common in Southeast Asian regional affairs.

This case illustrates how smaller states and often perceived as constrained actors, nonetheless exercise agency through symbolic communication. Face-saving here is not merely about avoiding embarrassment, but about perceiving legitimacy, managing domestic expectations, and contributing to regional stability.

These findings also supported the applicability of the Face Negotiation Theory (FNT) in state-level analysis, particularly when paired with Goffman's face-work and ASEAN diplomatic culture. They show how diplomatic communication is not just a reflection of power asymmetries but also of cultural scripts and normative expectation within regional communities.

Despite these insights, it's necessary to recognize certain limitations and alternatives perspectives

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that may influence the interpretation of the findings.

Although this study presents strong evidence that face-saving strategies contribute to maintaining diplomatic legitimacy and regional stability, it is important to consider possible alternative interpretations. In some contexts, particularly within democratic societies, the use of ambiguous diplomatic language may be perceived not as a tool for flexibility, but as a lack of transparency or decisiveness. Additionally, while such communication may ease tensions at the surface level, it does not necessarily address deeper political or structural issues that may exist beneath diplomatic exchanges.

The scope of this study is also limited by its exclusive focus on publicly available government communications. While these sources offer insights into official interactions, including informal negotiations or public responses. Future studies could enhance this research by incorporating perspectives from media analysis, civil society discourse, or interviews with policy stakeholders, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the communicative dynamics in regional diplomacy.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study examined how the governments of Timor-Leste and Philippines employed face-saving strategies in their official communications during the 2024 Arnolfo Teves Jr. case. By applying Face Negotiation Theory, Goffman's face-work, and ASEAN diplomat norms, the study highlighted how both states use diplomatic tone, strategic ambiguity, and appeals to legal sovereignty and cooperation to manage reputational risk and uphold bilateral legitimacy.

The analysis revealed that in Southeast Asia, where public diplomacy is deeply embedded in norms of respect and consensus, states rely heavily on symbolic reassurance and indirect communication to navigate political tensions. Far from being passive, these face-saving strategies represent sophisticated diplomatic tools that enable states to assert agency while preserving regional cohesion.

Future research might explore how these practices vary across different ASEAN member states or in cases involving multilateral tensions. Additionally, expanding analysis to include media discourse and public reception would deepen understanding of how face-saving strategies resonate beyond official channels.

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