

The State of Community Media and Community Radio in Timor-Leste

General Country Introduction

Timor-Leste is the eastern part of the island of Timor, which lies between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. It is an island in the Indonesian archipelago, located about 400 miles northwest of Australia. The country occupies the somewhat narrower, eastern half of Timor Island, the exclave of Ambeno (or Oecussi) on the northwest coast of Timor, and offshore islands. Dili, on the north coast, is the capital and largest city, as well as the country's main port. Other large cities include Dare, outside Dili, and Baucau, on the northeast coast and the site of the main airport. The terrain is largely hilly and mountainous, reaching its highest point on Mt. Tatamailau (6,562 ft/2,963 m).

The origins of the majority of the people of Timor-Leste are Melanesian and Malayo-Polynesian, although some smaller groups can trace their roots to China or the Arab world. Timor-Leste declared its independence from Portugal on 28 November 1975 but was only independent for ten days until Indonesia invaded on 7 December 1975 and occupied the country for 24 years. During the Indonesian occupation, some 200,000 people are believed to have died from war and famine. In the months following the invasion, some 60,000 were killed and those first years saw the establishment of nearly 150 concentration camps.

In the 1990s, two events brought Timor-Leste firmly to the world's attention. The first was the 1991 massacre of nearly 300 people at the Santa Cruz Cemetery in the capital, Dili, which was captured on film. The second was the awarding of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize to the Archbishop of Dili, Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo, and to the exiled resistance leader, Jose Ramos Horta, who later served as the President of Timor-Leste between 20 May 2007 to 20 May 2012.

After 500 years of Portuguese colonial dominance and 24 years of Indonesian occupation, Timor-Leste regained independence on 20 May 2002 as the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste. Timor-Leste is a lower middle-income country with a population of 1.2 million and a landmass size of 15,410 km². The country belongs to the Small Island Developing States group.¹

Faced with the task of rebuilding public infrastructure – including roads, ports and airports, water and sanitation systems, government facilities – and institutional frameworks, Timor-Leste has made significant progress in key areas since independence. Meanwhile, fragility remains a challenge as the country contends with the legacies of past conflict.

Timor-Leste is a peaceful, democratic nation with a total population at the time of 2015 Timor-Leste Population Census at 1,167,242, a 9.46% increase from 2010. Majority of the population is of Malay-Polynesian and Papua origin with some Chinese, Arabs and Europeans. Tétum is

¹ Timor-Leste's Roadmap For The Implementation Of The 2030 Agenda And The SDGs
<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/51063-001-sd-02.pdf>

the national language and Portuguese is also spoken by the majority in the country. Apart from these, there are another 15 local dialects.²

While poverty levels remain high, progress has been made in improving living standards. The proportion of Timorese living in poverty, measured by the national poverty line, declined from 50% in 2007 to an estimated 42% in 2014.³

Timor-Leste's economy is highly dependent on revenues from oil and gas. The country has established a sovereign wealth fund – the Petroleum Fund – that currently has US\$17 billion in savings, which successive governments have utilized to meet annual public expenditure priorities and provide a cushion for future generations. Over the next few years, the country is expected to see a decline in oil and gas revenues from the offshore Bayu-Undan field, which is likely to see production end in 2022/23. Thereafter, the country is expecting to benefit from the Greater Sunrise field (expected to generate additional revenue from 2027/08), and there are possibilities for Timor-Leste to derive benefits from four other offshore fields in the next five to 10 years. During this period, however, withdrawals from the Petroleum Fund would likely continue to exceed the Estimated Sustainable Income, threatening fiscal sustainability.⁴

Timor-Leste's Human Development Index (HDI) ranking has nevertheless improved significantly. Between 2000 and 2017, the country's HDI value increased from 0.507 to 0.625, a total increase of 23.3%.⁵ Its value for 2019 is 0.626, which puts the country in the medium human development category, positioning it at 131 out of 189 countries and territories.⁵

Timor-Leste is a multiparty, parliamentary republic. After the May 2018 parliamentary elections, which were free, fair, and peaceful, Taur Matan Ruak became prime minister, leading a three-party coalition government. The 2017 presidential and parliamentary elections were also free and fair. In contrast with previous years, these elections were conducted without extensive assistance from the international community.⁶

Timor-Leste remains one of East Asia's poorest countries and is heavily dependent on foreign aid. Economic liberalization has largely stalled. Oil and gas account for more than 95 percent of government revenue, which is consigned to a Petroleum Fund that at the end of February 2019 had assets of \$16.6 billion, an amount that the IMF forecasts will decline rapidly in the coming years. The technology-intensive oil industry has done little to create jobs.⁷

² <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=547&lang=en>

³ Poverty In Timor-Leste 2014

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/25269/108735-REVISED-PUBLIC-012-TL-REPORT-R02.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁴ UNSDCF Timor-Leste 2021-2025

⁵ UNDP (2019) Beyond Income, Beyond Averages, Beyond Today: Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st Century. Timor-Leste National Human Development Report

⁶ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/timor-leste/>

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<https://www.heritage.org/index/country/timorleste#:~:text=Oil%20and%20gas%20account%20for,done%20lit%20to%20create%20jobs.>

Status of Human Rights and Freedom of Speech

Timor-Leste restored its independence on 20 May 2002. Its 2002 Constitution provides the legal foundation for the establishment of the needed State institutions. But as a young country, Timor-Leste is still in the process of devising and building these institutions. And those that already exist are still weak and fragile, despite international assistance in their establishment.

The 2002 Constitution created the Ombudsman, as part of the chapter on "Fundamental Rights, Duties, Freedoms and Guarantees." A subsequent law established the Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights and Justice (Provedor de Direitos Humanos e Justica) pursuant to this constitutional provision.⁸

The Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights and Justice is an independent institution that operates outside the government and reports to the National Parliament. Its establishment took a long process. The Law No. 7/2004 "Approving the Statute of the Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights and Justice" was enacted by the National Parliament in April 2004, and came into force on 26 May 2004.

As a society that has suffered from massive human right violations and corrupted public institutions, Timor-Leste commits to avoid having these experiences again under the era of independence. Being a new nation, Timor-Leste faces a lot of problems ranging from the public administration legacy of the Portuguese colonization and military occupation, weak judicial system, and other institutional problems. These are the problems that exist in the current situation.

Timor Leste Constitution's article 40 and article 41 guarantees Freedom of Expression and Information and Freedom of the Press and Means of Social Communication respectively. The 5th Constitutional Government established in 2012 the office of the Secretario Estado Komunikaun Sosial (Secretary of State for Social Communication or SECOM) as its arm responsible for the media.⁹

While no journalist has been jailed for their work, press freedom and journalist safety in Timor-Leste are constantly under threat, mostly from politicians – both government officials and parliamentarians.

For example, in 2013, two journalists were sued, convicted and fined because of their reports about corruption by a state prosecutor. In the months of March and April 2015, there were four cases of beatings of journalists, mainly by police officers who were not satisfied with stories in the news publications and who misunderstood the role of journalists.

While media freedom is constitutionally protected, domestic media outlets are vulnerable to political pressure due to their reliance on government financial support, in a small media market with limited nongovernmental sources of support. Journalists are often treated with

⁸ <https://www.hurights.or.jp/archives/focus/section2/2007/03/ombudsman-for-human-rights-the-case-of-timor-leste.html>

⁹ <https://ifex.org/media-freedom-and-regulation-in-timor-leste/>

suspicion, particularly by government officials, and self-censor. However, in recent years, journalists have been more willing to produce articles critical of the government.

In June 2020, the government proposed the criminalization of defamation. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) called for the proposal's withdrawal later that month. The Timor-Leste Press Union also voiced its opposition that month. The proposal to introduce a law of criminal defamation to Timor-Leste's penal code (Articles 187-A to 187-F) stipulates that any person who publicly states and publishes through social media 'facts' or 'opinions' that may offend the honour, good name and reputation of a current or previous member of government, church official or any public official can be prosecuted and punished with up to three years in prison.

Communications Landscape

Timor-Leste's media sector is in the early stages of development and, given the context of a newly developing nation, is financially precarious. There are two major daily newspapers, two weeklies, a number of occasional periodicals, a public radio station and television broadcaster, community radio stations and some Internet access. There is also access to satellite television, foreign DVDs and music, as well as some overseas periodicals and literature. These are, however, out of the financial reach of the bulk of the population.¹⁰

It is considered that the media sector started "virtually from scratch" in 2000, when the community radios started being established (Kalathil 2006, p.3). Notably, not only were there clandestine media before, but they also played a major role in East Timorese history. To be sure, between 1976 and 1978 East Timorese party Fretilin used radio sets left behind by the Portuguese troops and started Radio Maubere until they were intercepted (Museu da Resistência 2005, p.48).

Similarly, Timorese and Australian sympathizers used low-power radios to communicate with Timor-Leste from northern Australia until the Australian government prohibited their licenses and confiscated their transmitters (Krishna and Hill 2000, p.100).

Nevertheless, with equipment offered by solidarity organizations like Australian CIET, such as mobile phones and a receiver-transmitter radio, the guerrilla forces Falintil started Radio Falintil, in order to re-establish contact with the outside in 1984. In this way, they could report the atrocities East Timor was victim of and appeal to the heads of Portuguese speaking African countries as well as the United Nations (Museu da Resistencia: 2005, p.50; Krishna and Hill 2000, p.112). In addition to that, radio was a vehicle used to organize resistance activities and raise morale within the country even though people did not know where broadcasts came from. Given East Timor's borders were closed until the beginning of 1989, when aid agencies, NGOs and foreigners were allowed to enter some districts of East Timor (Magalhães 1997, p.16; Museu da Resistência 2005, p.52), the radio was the only channel of communication with the outside during the resistance period.

Timor Leste's fledgling national public radio and TV services began broadcasting in May 2002, replacing the interim broadcasting services operated by the UN.

¹⁰ Freedom of Expression and the Media in Timor-Leste December 2005

Timor Leste's information and communication industry has seen the highest growth rates compared to other sectors as the sector grew by 19.6% in 2012. However, despite this growth, media in general tends to be small and underdeveloped. Most media in Timor Leste are owned by Timorese politicians and business elites.

Public radio services are said to reach some 90% of the population; public TV has a smaller coverage.

Timor Leste's handful of community radio stations play a key role in the process of national reconstruction. Many of the stations receive funding, training and equipment from international agencies and organisations.

The country has only three daily newspapers with an average circulation of 1,000 each and are mainly concentrated in Dili, the capital city. Three tabloids, with similar circulation numbers, too are solely concentrated in the capital.

RTTL (Rádio-Televisão Timor-Leste) is the only public radio and TV broadcaster, while there are more than 20 community radio stations and one political party radio. Two online news websites serve the increasing number of internet users, comprising around 27% of the population. The use of social media too is growing in Timor Leste with Facebook and blogs serving as a medium for discussion and debates.

Some of the media in the country include:

- Suara Timor Lorosae - daily
- Diario Nacional - daily
- Timor Post - daily
- Jornal Independente - daily
- The Dili Weekly - pages in English
- Tempo Semanal - weekly
- Business Timor - weekly
- Televisao de Timor-Leste - public
- Radio Timor-Leste (RTL) - public
- Radio Maubere - run by Fretilin party
- Radio Timor Kmanek (RTK) - Catholic Church radio

Media Law and Regulation

The freedom of press and freedom of expression has been guaranteed under Timor Leste Constitution's Article 40 and Article 41. In 2012, the 5th Constitutional Government established the office of the Secretario Estado Komunikaun Sosial (Secretary of State for Social Communication or SECOM) as its arm responsible for the media.

The Media Act, which parliament passed at the government's request on May 6, 2014, raises serious questions about the government's commitment to freedom of expression by unnecessarily extending government control over the media. The Timor Leste Press Law was approved by the President and implemented since the beginning of 2015.

The new law establishes a Press Council as an independent body for media self-regulation. The Press Council is composed of two representatives from the journalistic community, one representative of media owners, and two representatives from the public. The National Parliament will endorse the two public figures that will be representing the public in the council.¹¹

There are two main issues regarding the legislative environment for community radios in Timor-Leste. First, the law is unclear (Scamary 2004, p.6; Kalathil 2006, p.10). That lack of clarity is already affecting the community radios' functioning as there is no complaints mechanism when problems arise. On the other hand, the lack of clarity leaves room for threats to the community radios' work.

On 5 June 2020, the Minister of Justice of Timor-Leste published a draft law proposing to re-introduce criminal defamation law into the country. This is an especially troubling development, since, alone among Southeast Asian nations, Timor-Leste abolished its criminal defamation law when its new Press Code was adopted in 2014.¹²

Criminal Defamation is a relic of the colonial era which was replicated from the colonizers legal systems.

Furthermore, broadcast regulation controls over-lap of radio frequency signals i.e. interference disrupting primarily the effectiveness of emergency and military communications services, as well the impact of successful operations of commercial, public and community telecommunication services including broadcasters. On 29 July 2003 the Ministry of Transport, Communication and Public Works passed Decree-Law No 12/2003, "Statutes for the Authority for the Regulation of Communications and its constitution" establishing the communications regulatory body called ARCOM, which is still in the set up process. ARCOM's roles are:

- Telecommunications regulation
- Satellite regulation
- Radio Frequency spectrum allocation and regulation

Community Broadcasting

In a country with only an estimated 60 % literacy rate and few able to afford access to television, newspapers, telephone and no access to internet outside Dili, community radio has been an essential means of communication between the capital and the districts, linking or even reuniting politically or geographically isolated communities, a vital source of local news and information, and a vehicle for free speech in a previously coercive state dominated media sector. Community radio has also proven to be an important tool for development work internationally, in educating the public and changing community attitudes.

Community radio in Timor Leste is still a work in progress. Many of the problems it faces are faced by the country as a whole: lack of education, lack of experience in leadership or in funds management, and lack of an economic support base, raising questions of long-term sustainability.

¹¹ <https://ifex.org/media-freedom-and-regulation-in-timor-leste/>

¹² <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/will-timor-leste-be-region-s-latest-press-freedom-casualty>

The community radios emerged in tandem with the rest of the media sector. Before 1999 there were only two official independent media along with the Indonesian public television and radio channel: Catholic Radio Timor Kmanek (Radio Beautiful Timor - RTK) and the newspaper Suara Timor-Timur.

Community broadcasting in Timor Leste is completely managed by volunteers while the Secretary of State for Social Communication (SECOM) provides financial support to media companies.

There are two groups of community radio stations in Timor Leste. There are 8 “CEP” stations established with World Bank assistance through the CEP (Timor-Leste Community Empowerment and Local Governance Project) programme, and 8 other “independent” stations which are the main focus of Internews support and which are grouped together in ARKTL, the Association of Community Radios of Timor Leste.

The CEP stations have been equipped through World Bank financial support however this has created a structural problem since the equipment assets are technically government assets. The CEP stations have been receiving a subsidy of around 200 USD per month per station. Some stations offer a small production incentive to programme producers of around 15 USD per month. This would not be considered a wage but assists the stations to obtain and retain volunteer producers. Since the CEP programme has come to an end there is a concern about the sustainability of the CEP stations.

The CEP stations were: Radio Café (Ermera), Radio Atoni Lifau (Oecusse), Radio Rai Husar (Aileu), Radio Ili-uai (Manatuto), Radio Cova Taroman (Suai), Radio Lian Matebian (Baucau), Radio Lian Tatamailau (Ainaro), Radio Boaventura 1912 (Same).



© Radio Rakambia

There are 8 “community radio” stations grouped together in ARKTL and supported by Internews and other donors. These include:

- **Radio Comunidade Tokodede (RCL):** Set up by UNESCO in May 2000 to serve the information and educational needs of the people of Lautem District.
- **Radio Timor Kmanek (RTK):** RTK was founded by the Catholic Church in 1994, and until recently was funded by Paix and Development, a Canadian NGO, by Radio Portugal until December 2000, and Caritas Australia.
- **Radio Comunidade Maliana (RCM):** RCM was set up with support from USAID and UNESCO and first went to air in April 2000.
- **Radio Comunidade Tokodede (RCT):** RCT first went to air in December 2001. It was set up by a former clandestine students group, the Grupo Juventude Liquica, with support from Usaid, Internews, and the Japanese mission.
- **Radio Rakambia (Dili):** Radio Rakambia were set up in 2001 with assistance from APHEDA. Until recently they were one of the strongest community radio stations in Timor.
- **Radio Viqueque(Viqueque):** The Dutch-based NGO ‘Friends of Viqueque’ established this station, which began broadcasting in July this year after about four years set up period.
- **Radio Falintil (Dili):** Until 2000, Radio Falintil was a clandestine mobile broadcasting operation under Indonesian rule. USAID then funded the establishment of a permanent facility and again funded its move in 2002 with support from VOA.
- **Radio Loricu Lian (Dili):** Radio Loricu Lian was set up by Sahe Institute for Liberation, Yayasan Hak, Fokupers and the student group RENETIL in 2001, when they made a number of experimental mobile transmissions. Equipment was first installed at Loriku Lian in November 2003 with support from Association of Men Against Violence.

Challenges Faced by Media

Much like the experience in other developing democracies, the Timor-Leste media community has to deal with limited resources and training. In remote areas, internet communication and transportation are especially difficult. Journalists can only use phones to report back to the office. Small media outlets might not be able to support the high cost of communication for their reporters. Media owners are also keen to invest more in more profitable content than the quality of news content. Journalists are poorly-paid and not well-equipped, logistically and professionally, to provide good quality reporting.

The imposition of the Timor-Leste Press Law, despite calls to review the draft, threatens freedom of the press and the safety of journalists in Timor-Leste. The law would require all journalists to be certified, including bloggers. Foreign journalists would require government permission to report in the country. It would also require the media to “promote the national culture, values and identity” and would create a five-member Press Council that could exercise disciplinary authority, among other tasks.

Similar to other countries, the rise of social media has also disrupted traditional journalism in Timor-Leste where social media giant, Facebook is the preferred platform by many including journalists. Nevertheless, the platform is very much an unregulated space in the country which poses serious questions linked to ethics and disinformation.

Another major concern for the media community is a possible repeat of the violence in the 2007 elections among supporters and security forces of contending parties. Media workers, who are neither well-informed on the ground situation nor prepared for conflict reporting, could risk their safety. They might not be equipped to handle crisis situations, not only compromising their security but also the public's right to know and information.

Self-censorship is a problem for journalists. The root of the problem is lodged within cultural norms that tend to adhere to hierarchy coupled with the government's interest in limiting media access to information scripted by the government. As a result, all news reported out of Dili features similar news angles that journalists recorded verbatim during organized press conferences and at official events. Passage of an Access to Information Law is a critical step to improving this problem.

In addition, Timor-Leste's print media face major challenges with readership and printing costs. With an average income of 50 cents a day and nearly half of the population illiterate, less than 2 percent of the national public say they prefer their information through written form. Publishers' expectations are understandably low. Also, private media must compete with government-sponsored outlets that have the capacity to publish in high volume, with the resources necessary to access a broader audience. Without a higher education system dedicated to journalism training, most of the journalists lack sufficient skills to report.

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