



Timor-Leste: States must call on the government to protect civic freedoms

Media Releases / 25 January 2022

International human rights groups raise the alarm about the state of civic rights in Timor-Leste ahead of the country's review at the United Nations Human Rights Council on 25 January 2022.

Human rights groups CIVICUS, La'o Hamutuk, Judicial System Monitoring Program (JSMP) and FORUM-ASIA call on UN member states to urge the government of Timor-Leste to protect civic freedoms as its human rights record is examined by the UN Human Rights Council on **27 January 2022** as part of the 40th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). We also urge the government of Timor-Leste to continue and expand its respect for the human rights of its people.

At the country's second UPR in October 2016, UN member states made eight recommendations directly related to civic space. Timor-Leste subsequently accepted all eight of these recommendations, committing to taking concrete measures to, among others, "recognise the legitimacy of the work of human rights defenders", "adopt measures to prevent arbitrary detention and to avoid excessive use of force by security forces," and to ensure that the Media Law of 2014 "would not be translated into limitations on freedom of expression and the press."

In a [joint submission](#) to the Human Rights Council this UPR cycle, our organisations assessed the implementation of these recommendations and compliance with international human rights law and standards over the last five years. The submission found that since then, while the government has primarily respected and protected the freedom of association and human rights defenders, it has also attempted to introduce or has imposed restrictions in law and practice on civic space relating to the freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression.

We are particularly concerned by the government attempt last year to reintroduce criminal defamation provisions into its penal code, which was removed in 2009, proposing "Cybercrime" Law, and the failure to revise the Media Law to bring it into line with international human rights law and standards. We are further alarmed by reports of restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly and the arbitrary arrests of protesters, including students.

"The enabling environment for civil society in Timor-Leste has allowed it to play a critical role in strengthening democracy and human rights. But there is significant room for improvement regarding freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. States must take this opportunity to call on the Timor-Leste government to ensure that all laws and practices are consistent with its human rights obligations," said the organisations.

Our organisations urge states to make recommendations to Timor-Leste, which, if implemented, would build on progress made by the government and guarantee the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, and the state's duty to protect. We also encourage the government of Timor-Leste to respect and protect these rights and to ensure that they will not be violated in the future.

Key recommendations should include:

- Adopt a specific law to ensure the protection of HRDs in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 27/31 and the UN Human Rights Defenders Declaration.
- Refrain from introducing new laws or provisions limiting offline or online expression.
- Revise the Media Law to ensure it is in line with international standards and best practices related to the exercise of the right to the freedom of expression by everyone, not only by accredited journalists.
- Amend the Law on Freedom of Assembly and Demonstration (No. 1/2006), particularly Articles 5, 6, 7 and 15, to fully guarantee the right to the freedom of peaceful assembly in line with international law and standards.
- Ensure that the Universal Identifier (UID) system currently being implemented cannot be used to violate individual rights.
- Ensure that all citizens are treated equally in the legal process.

The examination of Timor-Leste will occur during the 40th Session of the UPR. The UPR is a process, in operation since 2008, which examines the human rights records of all 193 UN Member States every four and a half years. The review is an interactive dialogue between the State delegation and members of the Council and addresses a broad range of human rights topics. 11 other countries will also have their rights record reviewed, including Haiti, Syria and Zimbabwe. Following the review, a report and recommendations are prepared, discussed and adopted at the following session of the Human Rights Council (June 2022).

Civic space in Timor-Leste is rated as 'OBSTRUCTED' by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#).

