

ABC Radio Australia

East Timor's draft press law under fire

Updated 4 March 2014, 13:31 AEST

Journalists and civil rights groups in East Timor have criticised the government's planned media law.

They say the proposed law is an attempt to control the media and violates the country's constitution by limiting access to information.

Correspondent: Karon Snowden

Speakers: Jose Belo, President, East Timor Journalist Union; Charles Scheiner, Researcher La'o Hamutuk

SNOWDON: The government says its draft Press Law aims to ensure the freedom of the press.

It says it will "guarantee, protect and regulate journalistic activities in East Timor".

The law was drafted last August and is now with a Parliamentary Committee which is hearing professional and community comments.

A provision for a press council to decide who can be a journalist has attracted particular criticism.

Jose Belo, the President of the East Timor Journalists Union says the draft law is dangerous.

BELO: According to us its a very dangerous law because the law gives excessive power to a media council to control journalists and the media in East Timor.

SNOWDON: Charles Scheiner from, La'o Hamutuk - the institute for development and analysis agrees and says the law recognises the need to protect rights on the one hand and limits those rights on the other.

He thinks the law could breach the constitution by denying access to official information to people or institutions deemed not to be journalists.

SCHEINER: This law would by implication say that only designated people, full time professional journalists for a commercial media outlets who are certified by a body called the Press Council, that only those people would have access.

SNOWDON: Is it also an attempt and maybe in a good sense in seeking to professionalise the journalist industry within East Timor? Hasn't there been a problem of a lack of education and training, or experience simply, that can lead to problems?

SCHEINER: The problems in the media are structural largely and passing a law that says you have to be on a list but not raising the salaries, not changing the economic dynamics of the newspapers most of whose money comes from paid public announcements by the government, then its not going to be changed by a fact of law.

SNOWDON: The Press Council can impose fines for breaches of the press law. Attacks on the freedom of the press, including by a public official can result in prison terms.

The Council's seven members will include three journalists.

It will be funded by the government but be independent.

Its powers extend to stipulating the education standards necessary to be licensed as a journalist.

It defines and limits a journalist as someone employed by a media organisation, which ignores the contribution of freelancers, student publications and leaves out the question of social media.

Article 6 adds journalists must be citizens of East Timor.

Charles Scheiner is concerned that excludes foreign journalists.

SCHEINER: Given the long history of foreign journalists who have even lost their lives here, including the Balibo Five but there are others, then its a denial of East Timor history and in a way a downgrading of the value of free journalism. I mean journalism was used also by the leaders of this country, the current leaders Jose Ramos Horta and Xanana Gusmao among them, advocating for independence from Portugal. Those kind of things would not be permitted any more because they're not full time professional journalists employed by commercial organisations and approved by a government supported council.

SNOWDON: Charles Scheiner concedes that the head of the Parliamentary Committee, Carmelita Muniz maintained the clause did not mean foreign journalists would be banned.

Attempts for over a week to contact Ms Muniz and two other government representatives for clarification were unsuccessful.

Topics:

[Asia](#) [East Timor](#) [Indonesia](#)



Australia Plus

[Australia Network](#) [Radio Australia](#) [ABC News](#) [ABC International Development](#)

[ABC Home](#) | [About the ABC](#) | [Careers](#) | [ABC Services](#) | [Help](#) | [ABC Contacts](#)

© 2014 ABC | [Conditions of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

