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Proposed media law in East Timor 'a threat to freedom of the press'

A proposed media law under consideration in East Timor is regarded as a threat to press freedom, reports Human Rights Watch (HRW).

The country's appeal court is now reviewing the law's constitutionality in response to a request by the president, Taur Matan Ruak.

The law would create a licensing system for journalists administered by a five-member government-funded press council. Media organisations would be prohibited from employing uncertified journalists.

The licensing system would apply to domestic and foreign media outlets, giving the press council the power to deny access to East Timor (aka Timor-Leste) to foreign correspondents.

Several provisions in the law allow the government to impose severe constraints on reporting. It obliges journalists to "promote the national culture" and to "encourage and support high quality economic policies and services."

It is feared that such provisions will be used to prevent media outlets from being critical of the government.

HRW is calling on the president to refuse to sign the law. Its deputy Asia director, Phelim Kine, said: "The media played a crucial role in East Timor's long struggle for independence.

"The president should tell parliament that a media law that stifles free expression won't get his signature.

"An official press council, a licensing requirement for journalists, and undefined 'national culture' and 'public interest' obligations are the hallmark of undemocratic governments that want to repress media freedom."

Source: HRW