

Scott Ticknor

Chargé d'Affaires

U.S. Embassy Dili, Timor-Leste

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Protecting Press Freedom

In the United States, press freedom is a fundamental component of our democratic beliefs, enshrined in the First Amendment of our Constitution. Why is media freedom so important? As Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, *"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."* Information is power. Few people can make a living, hold their governments accountable, and educate their children without a healthy supply of free-flowing information. Citizens need accurate, timely, independent news they can trust. So do businesses and markets. And so do governments.

Media freedom keeps societies and economies vibrant, energetic, and healthy. When the free flow of news and information is restricted, individuals suffer. Societies suffer. Economies suffer. As President Obama has noted, "History shows that one of the ingredients of successful, prosperous, and stable societies is a free press where citizens can freely access information and hold their governments accountable."

Last month, the world celebrated World Press Freedom Day, and the United States called on all governments to take the steps necessary to create space for independent journalists to do their work without fear of violence or persecution. But press freedom is not something that should be celebrated and cherished on only one day each year – it is an each-and-every-day right - and we honor the role of free and independent media in creating sustainable democracies and open, healthy societies.

The role of a journalist is that of a watchdog, a guardian for the guardians. If a free press does not hold the powerful accountable, then citizens are often without recourse. One of America's greatest journalists, Edward R. Murrow, said, "We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty." We also must not confuse truth-telling with political opposition. The greatest patriots are sometimes the most critical citizens.

The United States appreciates Timor-Leste's strong international reputation for upholding democracy and respecting human rights. As Timor-Leste considers new media legislation, we stand with Timorese citizens who know and respect the role of a free press as fundamental to the democratic principles that both of our nations cherish.

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