

## FEATURES

## East Timor leaders eye media curbs

Draft law would restrict who can be a journalist and punish ethical transgressions.

Tom Benner Last Modified: 17 Oct 2013 11:52



The Timor Post newspaper reports in Tetum, Portuguese, and English [Pei Ting Wong/Al Jazeera]

**Dili, East Timor** - Media in this young democracy in Southeast Asia suffer from a lack of professionalism, accuracy, and ethics, argue proponents of new legislation that would punish journalistic transgressions.

But critics worry that such a law, expected to be taken up by East Timor's parliament, could impose onerous restrictions, such as spelling out who may work as a journalist, and how breaches of journalistic ethics should be addressed.

Politicians such as former prime minister Mari Alkatiri are advocates of such a system, alarming free speech advocates in the country.

"Media is a power. Every power has to have some limits," Alkatiri said in an interview at his office in Dili, the nation's capital.

"If the politician made a mistake, he has to respond to his mistake. If a company makes a mistake, they have to respond to the mistake. But the journalist, no. They are free to have mistakes, because they are journalists."

In recent weeks Nelio Isaac Sarmento, East Timor's state secretary for communications, visited his counterparts in Indonesia and Portugal to discuss ways to strengthen his country's media industry.

"Almost all journalists are young and many [started their jobs] after high school. They directly entered professional journalism with only one or two weeks' training. That's not enough," Sarmento was **quoted** as saying last month to *The Jakarta Post*.

Sarmento was also quoted by *Diario Nacional* as saying there should be consequences for those practicing journalism without proper credentials. "Sanction will be given to people who say they are journalists. The media law and code of ethics will be used for sanctioning those who violate the law," he said.

### Threat to freedom?

But in the era of citizen journalism, the prospect of a statutory media council for licensing reporters - with the power to revoke licenses and fine journalists - is considered by some to be a threat to press freedom.



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Toby Mendel of the Canadian-based Centre for Law and Democracy has written extensively on draft media laws that have circulated in East Timor.

"It is important to put in place systems to promote professionalism in the media, including through complaints systems for members of the public," Mendel said.

"Under international law, self-regulatory systems run by the media themselves are considered to be more appropriate than statutory systems."

Others say a media law is unnecessary, and the right to sue already amounts to adequate protection against libel, or other possible wrongs committed by the media.

While East Timor's journalists have been consulted on what should go into a media law, the version that was **approved** by the country's Council of Ministers on August 6 and is expected to go before parliament in the near future has not been made public, said Tatiana Almeida, executive advisor for the Secretary of State for Social Communication.

### Journalism challenges

Complaints about media performance are widespread in East Timor. Journalists, who are mostly young in a country where more than 60 percent of the population is under 18, complain of a lack of training and mentoring. As a result, basic rules of journalism - such as confirming information, separating fact from opinion, and telling all sides of the story - are not uniformly followed.

Complicating matters is an illiteracy rate above 40 percent, and a multiplicity of languages in which to report and write.

Portuguese and Tetum are the country's official languages, but about two dozen other languages and dialects are also spoken. Several international NGOs and journalist groups have held instructional workshops with members of the local media, but overcoming language and cultural differences can be challenging.

"The readers, they don't speak a common language," 23-year-old Mariano Martins, who writes for the website Timoroman, said with the help of a friend who translated. "Sometimes in the districts, people don't know how to speak Tetum, they just know how to speak the local language."

*It's very difficult for the journalists to know what they can say, what they can't say. Someone from the government tells them what to say, they might just write it verbatim, word for word.*

- Amanda Wimetal, former UN translator

The shift to online news sources and social websites has yet to happen in earnest. Internet service is sporadically available in Dili, but most of the country remains cut off. Because electricity is often either unreliable or unavailable, battery-powered radio remains the preferred medium for many.

East Timor's past is filled with media intimidation and violence, including the killing of the "**Balibo Five**" - five Australian television journalists covering the impending 1975 Indonesian invasion, as well as a sixth journalist who tried to investigate their fate.

Indonesia occupied the country for 25 years until 1999, a period in which the UN says more than 100,000 people were killed.

Press freedom has improved since the enactment of a penal code in 2009 that decriminalised defamation. Cases of reporters being harassed or attacked, once common, are now rare.

But serious systemic problems remain. The government influences what the media report by spending heavily on public notices and official announcements in favoured newspapers, and buying newspapers in bulk quantities for distribution - which serves as a

financial incentive for a compliant media and self-censoring journalists.

Meanwhile, a poorly developed private sector limits potential revenue sources outside of the government.

Rosa Garcia, an editor and senior reporter at the *Timor Post* - which reports news in Tetum, Portuguese, and

English - said journalists tend to use their positions to find better-paying jobs in government.

Some in the media accept payments from government officials in exchange for coverage, she said. The practice affects not only news coverage, but media credibility. "Sometimes we approach them and say this is not good, we remind them not to receive payment," Garcia said.

Amanda Wimetal, an Australian who previously translated newspaper articles for the United Nations, and now works for a health training group in Dili, said Timorese journalists frequently fail to separate fact and opinion, and often report on government without critical context.

"It's very difficult for the journalists to know what they can say, what they can't say," she said. "Someone from the government tells them what to say, they might just write it verbatim, word for word."

The US-based NGO Freedom House **rates** East Timor's media as "partly free", citing a tendency by the press to be timid and deferential to authority, and to print verbatim accounts recorded at press conferences.

Also known as Timor-Leste, the country was **ranked** 90 out of 179 countries in Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index 2013.

**'Tightly controlled'**

For their part, Timorese journalists have complained about the government and what they say is lack of access to information that should be publicly available. In a lengthy July commentary by the *The Dili Weekly's* Meagan Weymes, the paper complained of frequently being denied access to public documents.

"In the experience of journalists at *TDW*, information on company registrations, public tenders, single-source tender justifications and other official documents are tightly controlled. This starts at the lower level of the public service and continues right up to the ministerial level."



Critics say law would reduce press freedom [Pei Ting Wong]

The commentary added: "When it comes to reporting on corruption with any depth, this tightly controlled environment makes it very difficult for journalists. As a result, the media coverage of corruption in Timor-Leste is mixed. Some media outlets choose to avoid corruption stories. Others report on it sensationally, often without all the evidence."

Against those odds, some Timorese still enter journalism with their idealism intact.

Teodosia Ximenes, 21, grew up in rural Baucau hearing people talk on the radio about news and issues, and wants to make that her career. "Journalists are the people who help the people without a voice," she said.

Source: Al Jazeera

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