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This Week in Asia / Politics

## Asia's youngest nation nears the end of its epic quest to belong

With East Timor finally poised to join the Asean family, its leaders and people are clear-eyed about the hard work ahead

**Anand Mathai**

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East Timorese activists hold a pro-independence protest in the capital of Dili in 1999. Photo: Reuters

As the streets of Dili thrum with anticipation, [East Timor](#) is preparing for a diplomatic victory decades in the making.

Next weekend, Asia's youngest nation is set to take its place as the 11th member of [Asean](#) – concluding a campaign for acceptance hard won through an unflinching belief in its own destiny.

For the country of some 1.4 million people on the eastern half of Timor island, it represents both a declaration of belonging and an affirmation that its future lies squarely within Southeast Asia.

“Asean accession has been East Timor’s major foreign policy ambition since the restoration of independence,” said Michael Leach, a professor of politics and international relations at Australia’s Swinburne University of Technology and a co-founder of the Timor-Leste Studies Association. “It unites all major parties and key political figures.”

The country, officially known as Timor-Leste, won its independence in May 2002 following centuries of Portuguese colonisation and a brutal Indonesian occupation that lasted more than 20 years.

In the decades since, it has built democratic institutions, nurtured civic life and strived to find its place in the world. But its economy, by far the smallest in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, remains highly dependent on oil and gas and has struggled to diversify.

Yet for Dili, joining the regional bloc is as much about political belonging as it is about economics.



### Our drive to Asean membership is a strategic choice

**East Timor's President Jose Ramos-Horta**

“Our drive to Asean membership is a strategic choice,” President Jose Ramos-Horta, one of the nation’s founding fathers and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, told the Asean Future Forum in February. “[It’s] a commitment to our future, and a recognition of our shared destiny with our Southeast Asian neighbours.”

Still, if the struggle for membership was long and arduous, the demands of belonging will be harder still. Being part of Asean requires not just symbolic alignment but active participation: implementing trade rules, attending dozens of meetings a year and holding its own among much larger peers.

For the bloc, integrating a new member without weakening internal cohesion will be a challenge, as will ensuring its inclusion pays economic and institutional dividends.



University students carry East Timor flags and banners during a protest last month against government plans to provide extra perks to lawmakers. Photo: Reuters

Few personify the generational stakes of this transition more vividly than Ivo Ribeiro, 23, who was born just a handful of months before independent East Timor came into being.

He forms part of a generation who have only ever known independence, experiencing their young nation's growing pains first hand.

The Timorese researcher recently published a strategy brief with the Washington-based National Bureau of Asian Research outlining how his country's government might extract the greatest benefit from Asean membership – and he is clear-eyed about what lies ahead.

“Joining Asean isn't a development guarantee,” Ribeiro, who is currently studying economics in the US, told *This Week in Asia*. “It's a way to develop East Timor, but we still have to do our part: build institutions, protect property rights, create a real business environment and invest in people.”

## 'Road to heaven'

East Timor first applied to join Asean in 2011, but its candidacy quickly became bogged down in questions about the country's readiness.

Behind closed doors, some member states doubted whether the young country had the administrative heft, human capital or institutional maturity to shoulder the bloc's obligations. Could Dili implement complex trade agreements? Did it have the capacity to keep up?

“The hesitation over East Timor's membership reflected real concerns,” said Joanne Lin, co-coordinator of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's Asean Studies Centre in Singapore and a former head of external relations at the Asean Secretariat.

“In hindsight, the delay did not undermine Asean's inclusiveness but rather underscored Asean's belief that membership should be meaningful and sustainable.”



East Timor's President Jose Ramos-Horta gives an interview in Dili on October 10. Photo: Kyodo

Despite the concerns, Dili pressed ahead – expanding its diplomatic presence, sending its civil servants to Asean-sponsored capacity-building programmes and steadily increasing its attendance at regional meetings, even as the timeline for entry receded further into the distance.

“Sometimes as a human being, I feel frustrated,” Ramos-Horta said at a forum in Jakarta in 2022. “It seems like the road to heaven, to reach the perfection of heaven, is easier than to reach the gates of Asean.”

The breakthrough finally came [a year later](#), when Asean’s largest economy and then chair, [Indonesia](#), championed a formal road map for East Timor’s membership, setting out phased milestones for building capacity and meeting the bloc’s commitments.

[Malaysia](#), this year’s Asean chair, later confirmed that full admission would come at this month’s summit in Kuala Lumpur.



Malaysia’s Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (centre, right) waves from an open-top car with East Timor’s Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao (centre, left) in Dili last month. Photo: AFP

## A painful past

The symbolism of former occupier Indonesia acting as the linchpin welcoming East Timor into the Asean fold was profound. The two now enjoy “a sound diplomatic relationship”, Damien Kingsbury, an international politics professor at Australia’s Deakin University, told This Week in Asia.

“East Timor benefits from having the support of Asean’s pivotal country and Indonesia benefits from having a large part of its ugly history effectively expunged,” said Kingsbury, who has led numerous election observer missions to East Timor.

The journey from subjugation to sovereignty was a long and painful one. Dili first declared independence after the collapse of Portuguese rule in 1975, only to be invaded by Indonesia days later.

The occupation that followed resulted in more than 100,000 deaths from violence, hunger and disease, a truth and reconciliation commission would later find. Some studies placed the toll far higher.



An East Timorese student wearing the then outlawed flag in the form of a shirt is evicted from a government building in Jakarta by Indonesian soldiers during a protest in 1998. Photo: AP

A United Nations-backed referendum in 1999 delivered an overwhelming mandate for independence, but also triggered a final fit of violence before a transitional UN administration shepherded the country to full sovereignty in 2002.

Since then, East Timor has expanded its international presence and embraced reconciliation.

“Despite their fraught history, Indonesia remains East Timor’s largest source of imports and could physically isolate it should there be a decline in diplomatic relations,” Kingsbury said. “East Timor has gone out of its way to cultivate good relations with its large near neighbour.”

Asean now offers a platform to turn that uneasy past into a constructive partnership, built on shared interests in infrastructure, energy, connectivity and trade.



A UN military observer ducks for cover as Indonesian troops fire warning shots to disperse the crowd at a border crossing with East Timor in 2000. Photo: Reuters

## Diplomatic dance

For as long as it has existed as an independent nation, diplomacy for East Timor has been an exercise in carefully navigating relations with partners old and new. Now, as it prepares to take its seat at the Asean table, that balancing act gains new urgency.

Membership of the bloc gives Dili a regional platform from which to manage its two most consequential external relationships – with [Australia](#) and [China](#) – through a multilateral framework.

Australia is the Southeast Asian nation's largest donor, pledging nearly A\$100 million (US\$65 million) in development aid for 2025–26. It is also a key defence ally, with the two signing a bilateral security agreement in 2022 that formalised training, logistics and joint exercises between their militaries.

Meanwhile, China's influence is also expanding. A Chinese construction company built Tibar Bay Port, East Timor's largest-ever infrastructure project, and in July last year the two countries signed a cooperation plan encompassing agriculture, green energy, digital technology and aviation under Beijing's [Belt and Road Initiative](#).



## China has been playing an increasingly important role, particularly in infrastructure

**Damien Kingsbury, international politics professor**

“China has been playing an increasingly important role, particularly in infrastructure,” Kingsbury said. “But East Timor is aware of the possibility of being ‘captured’ by China should it come too much into its orbit.”

In this context, membership of Asean acts as a hedge against overdependence.

“East Timor's inclusion in Asean is a key part of its support for multilateral engagement,” Kingsbury added. “It allows Dili to balance countries that might seek to influence or control its affairs. Not only China, but also Australia and, by extension, the US.”

Lin, the former Asean official, agreed. “Dili's membership strengthens rather than shifts the bloc's external balance,” she said. “Anchoring East Timor within the Asean family ensures that it is firmly rooted in the region, rather than drifting under the influence of any external major power.”

Maintaining such an equilibrium depends on something more fundamental, however: economic self-sufficiency. And on that front, the clock is ticking.



An oil platform is seen in the Timor Sea between East Timor and Australia in 2004. Photo: AFP

## Beyond oil and gas

East Timor's economy runs on hydrocarbons. Oil and gas revenues funnelled through the country's sovereign wealth fund, worth about US\$18.74 billion as of August, underwrite the lion's share of public spending. But the wells are running dry – and withdrawals from the fund have soared as offshore production tails off.

The [International Monetary Fund](#) has warned that the wealth fund could be completely exhausted by the end of the 2030s without tighter financial discipline and diversified growth.

Dili has pinned its hopes on the long-delayed Greater Sunrise project, which holds an estimated 5.1 trillion cubic feet (144.4 billion cubic metres) of gas reserves and straddles the maritime border with Australia.

Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao has repeatedly called the project “critical” and his government is adamant that onshore processing must take place in East Timor, a stance that has long stalled negotiations.



## Oil is running out ... that's why diversifying is essential

Ivo Ribeiro, Dili-based economics student

But such a single-minded focus carries major risks, according to Charles Scheiner, who has tracked the country's energy sector for more than two decades.

“The obsession with Greater Sunrise is at the heart of East Timor's failure to diversify,” said the researcher at Dili-based NGO La'o Hamutuk.

“Oil is running out,” Ribeiro concurred. “And Greater Sunrise will take time even if agreed. That's why diversifying now is essential.”

Against this backdrop, Dili's leaders see Asean as a gateway to new investment, deeper integration with regional markets and the tools to build a more balanced economy.



East Timorese villagers process coffee beans during harvest time in 2020. Coffee is one of the country's largest non-oil exports. Photo: EPA-EFE

The bloc also offers practical support such as capacity building for officials and businesses, policy coordination through sectoral bodies and targeted aid – tools that have helped other low-income members close the development gap.

Farming forms the backbone of the country's rural economy, with around 80 per cent of poor households dependent on it for their livelihoods.

“Agriculture is the heart of our economy,” Ribeiro said. “Asean is our chance to lift productivity with better technology, access to markets and private-sector partnerships.”

He told *This Week in Asia* there was value in learning from regional peers and implementing guidelines on food safety and sustainable agriculture.



People work on a farm in Topu Honis, East Timor, in 2009. Agriculture forms the backbone of the country's rural economy. Photo: Ian Neubauer

Tourism is another sector with much untapped potential. Despite its picturesque landscapes and rich culture, East Timor is one of the least visited countries on Earth. Ribeiro believes that even a fraction of nearby Bali's visitors could transform the national economy.

"If Bali gets 6 million visitors, 5 per cent of that is 300,000," he said. "Keep them four nights at US\$100 a day and that's US\$120 million – enough to create jobs for ordinary Timorese, not just those with degrees."

Luis da Costa Ximenes, director of the Dili-based civil society group Belun, said hopes were high that Asean membership would deliver "pathways to jobs, training and rural development".

"Youth unemployment is high. Many rely on seasonal work overseas," he said. "If Asean helps create work at home, that would be a real change."

Not everyone is convinced of the benefits of membership, however. "Domestic producers [already] struggle to compete with imports," Scheiner said. "I don't see how joining Asean can help."



A youth holds a candle near an artwork calling for peace during East Timor's presidential election in 2007. Photo: Reuters

## Moral authority

East Timor's accession comes at a difficult time for Asean, with US President [Donald Trump's](#) return to the White House and imposition of punitive tariffs upending regional trade amid internal divisions [over how best to respond](#).

The bloc has also struggled to contain the fallout of Myanmar's military coup [in 2021](#), with the junta still barred from its high-level meetings.

Into this turmoil was stepping a new member "regularly ranked the most democratic country in Southeast Asia", said politics professor Leach.



Electoral workers empty a ballot box as votes are counted during the parliamentary election in Dili in 2017. Photo: AP

East Timor is the only Southeast Asian nation that US-based democracy watchdog Freedom House rates as "free" based on assessments of political rights and civil liberties, giving it a unique moral standing.

Leach noted that East Timor's leadership had in the past been openly critical of Myanmar's military regime, a stance that, even if moderated in recent months, "suggests its potential to add value to Asean as a significant voice for human rights and democratic accountability within the bloc".

Dili has already shown how it might play this role. While backing Myanmar's pro-democracy opposition, it has also sought dialogue with the junta – a pragmatic move aimed at avoiding any last-minute objections to its Asean accession.

East Timor held several meetings with Myanmar opposition figures in 2023, upsetting the generals who retaliated by [expelling Dili's chargé d'affaires](#).

The two sides have reportedly [patched things up since](#), as part of a dual-track strategy on Dili's part seemingly designed to uphold democratic principles without undermining Asean consensus.



## East Timor has shown itself to be extremely cooperative and sensitive to Asean's dynamics

Joanne Lin, Asean studies coordinator

"East Timor has shown itself to be extremely cooperative and sensitive to Asean's dynamics," said Lin of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

Timorese civil society leaders say their country's own history of repression and reconciliation equips them well to foster dialogue, even in the most challenging of circumstances.

"We don't believe in interference, but we do believe in bringing parties to the table," Ximenes said. "Our history gives us a voice."

That credibility may yet prove to be East Timor's greatest strength. It cannot single-handedly resolve the Myanmar crisis, nor can it remake Asean in its image, but its presence does serve as a reminder of the bloc's founding vision: peace, freedom and prosperity through friendship and cooperation.

For East Timor, membership of the Asean bloc offers a chance to turn endurance into influence and aspiration into opportunity.

For Asean, the arrival of its newest member brings with it an invitation to imagine a region defined as much by hope as by history.

# East Timor's ASEAN membership a win for Asia's youngest nation



People stand on the hill near Cristo Rei, a statue depicting Jesus Christ, in Dili, East Timor, September 11, 2024. REUTERS/Willy Kurniawan  
© Thomson Reuters

By Stanley Widiyanto 22 Oct. 2025

JAKARTA (Reuters) -Asia's youngest nation East Timor is set to achieve a decades-long dream when it becomes the 11th member of ASEAN this weekend, which analysts say is a win politically although the economic benefits remain to be seen.

East Timor, Southeast Asia's poorest nation with 1.4 million people and slightly bigger than Qatar, applied to join the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 2011 and was granted observer status in 2022.

The nation gained independence in 2002 from neighbouring Indonesia, following a 1999 referendum overseen by the United Nations, and shares a border with the Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara.

Two of its independence heroes now lead the country: President Jose Ramos-Horta, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 for his efforts, and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao.

Decades after Ramos-Horta raised the idea of joining ASEAN in the 1970s when East Timor was still a colony of Portugal, the country will be formalised as a member at the October 26-28 ASEAN leaders summit, which Malaysia chairs.

Commonly known as Timor-Leste, East Timor is trying to diversify its nearly \$2 billion economy away from its heavy reliance on dwindling oil and gas reserves.

Analysts say the accession to ASEAN will benefit its newest member but they worry about how it will fare as the group's smallest economy. ASEAN's collective gross domestic product is \$3.8 trillion, with Indonesia alone making up \$1.4 trillion of that.

Ahead of the summit, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim recalled other members were also poor when the bloc was first formed.

"I'm very optimistic that ASEAN as a community can continue to engage more and assist, as we have benefited from the assistance of many countries (including) the West and China," he told reporters on Wednesday.

ASEAN Secretary General Kao Kim Hourn has said joining ASEAN will amplify East Timor's "voice in international forums while securing its strategic interests through an established network of diplomatic and economic support."

Ramos-Horta has called the membership a long-held dream.

"The road to ASEAN is more difficult than the road to heaven," he said in a speech at the group's headquarters in August.

Parker Novak, an East Timor expert at the International Republican Institute, said the country's leadership sees ASEAN "as giving them additional political legitimacy in the region."

Marty Natalegawa, a former Indonesian foreign minister who oversaw East Timor's ASEAN application, said the bloc would shield East Timor against the geopolitical push-and-pull among major powers such as the United States and China.

"It provides assurances that Timor-Leste's position and future development and outlook will be akin to ASEAN's own," Marty said.

However, Guteriano Neves, an economic development researcher in East Timor's capital Dili, worries the country's low productivity and lower-quality governance will limit the economic benefits of membership.

Neves said membership may pressure East Timor's government to enact institutional reforms to attract foreign investment.

"Economically speaking, that is the hard question that I think we haven't really found the answer to," Neves said. "It's very hard for Timor-Leste to compete in the ASEAN market."

(Reporting by Stanley Widiyanto; Editing by Christian Schmollinger)

## **Partidos timorenses satisfeitos com adesão à Associação das Nações do Sudeste Asiático. Oposição adverte para o setor económico**

### **Timorese parties pleased with ASEAN membership. Opposition warns about economic sector**

The parties are pleased with the accession, considering that it brings "new hope", but warn of the need for laws to protect the country from the inevitably more dynamic economy.

*Agência Lusa* October 22, 2025, 10:52 AM

The five Timorese parties with seats in parliament expressed satisfaction with Timor-Leste's accession to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a "national interest", but the opposition warned of the need to continue strengthening the economic sector.

"Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN has been a national interest since the struggle for self-determination between 1974 and 1975," Lídia Norberta, a member of the Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor-Leste (Fretilin), told Lusa.

The deputy emphasized that Fretilin has always supported the process through legislative discussions in parliament, but argued that certain situations that require prudence must be taken into account, particularly those of an economic nature and market competitiveness. "We hope that, even by joining ASEAN, the government will create all the conditions, especially in the economic sector, **so that our economy does not depend on foreign sources**," said Lídia Norberta.

In turn, Democratic Party (PD) representative Maria Teresa Gusmão expressed her great satisfaction that the process had finally been completed and Timor-Leste had become a member of ASEAN. "It was a long and difficult struggle. The process of registering and joining ASEAN was not at all easy, due to the existing legal and regulatory requirements," said the representative from the ruling party.

Representative Patrocínio Fernandes, of the ruling National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT), emphasized that the accession represents a major step forward for Timor-Leste's diplomacy and international and regional cooperation. "We believe that this participation will bring **new hope to Timor-Leste**, contributing to economic development and enabling the country's greater integration into international markets," the representative stated.

On the political level, he added, membership "will strengthen Timor-Leste's diplomatic relations with many countries, especially with the major groups in Southeast Asia and ASEAN itself, allowing a better contribution to peace and unity in the region."

Luís Roberto, a representative of the Klibur Halibur Nasional Timor Oan (KHUNTO), said the expectation is that accession "**will serve to consolidate political stability**," emphasizing that "peace and stability are key to development." "Becoming a full member of ASEAN will bring greater movement of people and foreign capital and a more dynamic economy. Therefore, we need to create **appropriate laws that offer good protection**," Luís Roberto stated, adding that the success of accession belongs to everyone.

The vice-president of the Popular Liberation Party (PLP), Hélder Freitas, known as "Kamarudin", stated that Timor-Leste must be united and must also "prepare the economy to be able to compete with other countries".

Timor-Leste will become ASEAN's 11th member state on Sunday, during the summit of heads of state and government of this Southeast Asian organization, which will be held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 14 years after submitting its application for membership.

ASEAN was created in 1967 by Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines and later integrated by Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

# Partidos timorenses satisfeitos com adesão à ASEAN, oposição adverte para o setor económico

História de Domingos Freitas •

Díli, 22 out 2025 (Lusa) — Os cinco partidos timorenses com assento parlamentar manifestaram satisfação com a adesão de Timor-Leste à Associação das Nações do Sudeste Asiático (ASEAN), um “interesse nacional”, mas a oposição alertou para a necessidade de continuar a fortalecer o setor económico.

“A adesão de Timor-Leste à ASEAN é um interesse nacional desde a luta pela autodeterminação, entre 1974 e 1975”, disse à Lusa a deputada da Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente (Fretilin), Lídia Norberta.

A deputada sublinhou que a Fretilin sempre apoiou o processo através das discussões legislativas no parlamento, mas defendeu que é preciso ter em conta determinadas situações que exigem prudência, nomeadamente as de natureza económica e de competitividade no mercado.

“Esperamos que, mesmo aderindo à ASEAN, o Governo crie todas as condições, sobretudo no setor económico, para que a nossa economia não dependa do exterior”, afirmou Lídia Norberta.

Por seu lado, a deputada do Partido Democrático (PD) Maria Teresa Gusmão manifestou a sua grande satisfação pelo facto de o processo ter finalmente sido concluído e Timor-Leste se tornar membro da ASEAN.

“Foi uma luta longa e difícil. O processo de registo e adesão à ASEAN não foi nada fácil, devido às exigências legais e regulamentares existentes”, afirmou a deputada da bancada do Governo.

O deputado Patrocínio Fernandes, do Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução Timorense (CNRT, no poder), destacou que a adesão representa um grande avanço para a diplomacia e a cooperação internacional e regional de Timor-Leste.

“Pensamos que esta participação trará novas esperanças para Timor-Leste, contribuindo para o desenvolvimento económico e permitindo uma maior integração do país nos mercados internacionais”, declarou o deputado.

No plano político, acrescentou, a adesão “reforçará as relações diplomáticas de Timor-Leste com muitos países, especialmente com os grandes grupos do Sudeste Asiático e da própria ASEAN, permitindo uma melhor contribuição para a paz e unidade na região”.

O deputado do Klibur Halibur Nasional Timor Oan (KHUNTO), Luís Roberto, disse que a expectativa é que a adesão “sirva para consolidar a estabilidade política”, salientando que a “chave para o desenvolvimento é a paz e a estabilidade”.

“Tornar-se membro pleno da ASEAN trará maior circulação de pessoas e de capital estrangeiro, e uma economia mais dinâmica. Por isso, precisamos de criar leis adequadas que ofereçam boa proteção”, afirmou Luís Roberto, acrescentando que o sucesso da adesão pertence a todos.

O vice-presidente da bancada do Partido de Libertação Popular (PLP), Hélder Freitas, conhecido por “Kamarudin”, afirmou que Timor-Leste deve estar unido e deve também “preparar a economia para poder competir com os outros países”.

Timor-Leste vai tornar-se no domingo o 11.º Estado-membro da ASEAN, durante a cimeira de chefes de Estado e de Governo desta organização do sudeste asiático, que se vai realizar em Kuala Lumpur, na Malásia, 14 anos depois de ter apresentado o pedido de admissão.

A ASEAN foi criada em 1967 pela Indonésia, Singapura, Tailândia, Malásia e Filipinas, e integrada mais tarde pelo Brunei Darussalam, Camboja, Laos, Myanmar e Vietname.