

Timor Leste: Challenges of a young nation

As Indonesia assumes the chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2011, included in the agenda is the application for membership of Timor Leste.

Timor Leste is not only the smallest and the youngest but also the poorest country in the region. Ironically, it has enormous oil and natural gas reserves being eyed not only by Indonesia but China, Australia, the US, UK and even Spain.

Kavi Chongkittavorn, a veteran Thai journalist who is also an authority on matters ASEAN, said that Timor Leste's entry into the regional organization might depend on ASEAN's policy of dealing with China's growing influence. The regional powerhouse, he noted, has made inroads not only in Southeast Asia but even among former Portuguese colonies, one of which is Timor Leste. China recently funded the construction of major infrastructure projects in the country, like the presidential palace, ministry of foreign affairs building and national defense headquarters, not to mention schoolhouses and roads.

After its independence from Indonesia and the subsequent civil war, full recovery remains to be seen in Timor Leste, although its government insists that the country is slowly getting back on its feet.

In a statement released in August 2010, the Xanana Gusmão government claimed that after three years at the helm, it has helped the country take initial strides to development.

The country's economy initially driven mainly by foreign donations, the statement said that "non-oil per capita incomes [rose] from \$398 in 2007 to \$599 in 2010." The private sector is also apparently showing good signs as the statement noted that "companies' registrations steadily increased from 171 (2007) to 1,799 (2009) and micro business registration increased from 1,212 (2007) to 5,232 (2009)."

Media outlets

It is against this backdrop that the current state of Timor Leste's media should be examined. Radio remains as the medium with the widest reach, followed by television. There is one national, three commercial, and more than 15 community radio stations across the country, and one national and one private TV station.

Timor-Leste has one weekly and three daily newspapers, however, the low purchasing power of the population hamper any increase in their respective circulation.

Other institutions such as Catholic churches, universities, and NGOs host radio stations and publish regular publications.

Internet penetration rate remains at a very low 0.2% or just 2,100 users as of June 2010, influenced mainly by a lack of IT infrastructure and the resulting prohibitive costs.

Challenges

Self-censorship is also a problem. According to the Asia Foundation, which supports efforts at strengthening the rule of law and governance and observance of human rights in the country, "[t]he root of the problem is lodged within cultural norms that tend to adhere to hierarchy coupled with the government's interest in limiting media access to information scripted by the government. As a result, all news reported out of Dili features similar news angles that journalists recorded verbatim during organized press conferences and at official events."

A Timorese journalist interviewed by SEAPA in 2009 explained that for many of his colleagues, self-censorship is acceptable in the interest of nation-building.

The Timorese government removed defamation from its criminal code in October 2009. In the same year, parliament agreed to revise with the help of the UN Development Program (UNDP) several media legislative bills which included drafts for an overall media law, a media law council, a community radio law, a journalists stature and a right to information law.

Media advocacy groups, however, complained that there were no adequate consultations with stakeholders during the drafting of the said legislative bills. As a result, they claimed that some provisions of these draft laws could have a chilling effect on the media once they are passed into law.

Controversial provisions of the bills include proposals to legislate ethics, license journalists, establish a parliament-appointed media council and impose fines on media workers that range from USD500 to USD2,500.

As of press time, the bills are still pending.

SEAPA noted these during a fact-finding mission it undertook along with UNDP in 2009. Aside from the draft laws, SEAPA also observed that the young country's justice system is still inadequately equipped to handle media-related cases.

Outlook

The Timor Leste government claims that it is moving forward economically, albeit with small steps. Its bid for ASEAN membership in 2011 is also a major milestone and once accepted in the regional body will further bind Timor Leste in the affairs of its Southeast Asian neighbors.

Much is left to be desired, however, in the field of media, as communications outlets continue to struggle for financial survival, as journalists' ideas of freedom of expression and censorship are intertwined with the imperatives of nation-building, and as government attempts to enact laws meant to bolster its continuing survival impact the Fourth Estate negatively.
