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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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East Timor

[East Timor](#)[Freedom of the Press 2013](#)

The media environment in East Timor remained stable in 2012. Freedom of the press and expression are protected under Articles 40 and 41 of the constitution. The debate over five draft media laws proposed by the UN Development Programme remained at an impasse, as Timorese and regional press organizations argued that the laws would place new restrictions on journalists. One of the issues under discussion was the creation of a media council, which would resolve press disputes outside of the court system. At the end of the year, however, details about the composition, operation, and funding of such a council remained unclear and the draft laws had not yet been approved by either the Council of Ministers or passed by the National Parliament. Where domestic laws currently do not exist, the 1999 Indonesian Press Law governs media issues.

The implementation of East Timor's new penal code in 2009 decriminalized defamation. However, misuse of the "defamatory false information" clause still threatens journalists. In March 2012, the national police commissioner, Longinhos Monteiro, said the police would arrest journalists who published news stories

considered to be inaccurate. In October, the public prosecutor in Dili, the capital, placed two reporters, Raimundo Oki and Oscar Salsinha, under house arrest on criminal charges for an article critical of the judicial process following a fatal traffic accident.

A culture of deference and respect for hierarchy continues to pervade journalism in East Timor, and most news reported out of Dili features verbatim accounts recorded during organized press conferences. While most public officials pay lip service to freedom of the press, not all are comfortable with its actual practice, and there is a sense among many—including some international advisers—that journalism should ideally be linked with the process of nation-building. However, journalists are able to cover the news freely, and there are few cases of reporters being harassed or attacked. In August 2012, radio broadcaster Leoneto da Cruz Goncalves of Radio Rakambia was stabbed by two unidentified individuals riding on motorcycles in front of East Timor's Anti-Corruption Commission office; police were still investigating at year's end if the attack was connected to his work as a journalist.

Four weekly and four daily newspapers operate on a regular schedule in East Timor, and several more appear sporadically. Circulations are very small, and are hampered by the high price of papers relative to low consumer purchasing power, illiteracy, and a lack of distribution outside Dili. After the country gained independence in 2002, broadcast media became dominated by public radio and television outlets, but community radio stations—many with international funding—also play an important role in the media landscape. According to a 2009 Southeast Asian Press Alliance fact-finding mission, there are more than 15 community radio stations across the country, along with one national and three commercial stations. There is one national and one private television station. However, technical difficulties limit the reach of many broadcast media outlets in rural areas, leaving an estimated 16 percent without access to any media. A 2011 nationwide media survey commissioned by the UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste found that radio still has the highest reach of any communication medium (a weekly reach of 55 percent), with television trailing not far behind (a weekly reach of 48 percent).

The presence of internationally funded media-assistance organizations has had mixed effects on journalism in East Timor. These organizations have made significant financial contributions, thereby decreasing the importance of funding

from the state and arguably increasing journalistic independence. At the same time, evidence suggests that their presence has contributed to what some Timorese journalists call a “project mentality,” in which news organizations become dependent on grants from nonstate actors and find it difficult to be independently sustainable.

Internet access was limited to just 0.91 percent of the population in 2012 due to poverty and inadequate infrastructure. Nonetheless, the government does not censor websites or restrict users’ access to diverse content. More households have mobile phones, and they are becoming an important communication tool, especially in Dili, where 90 percent of the households surveyed owned a mobile phone.

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