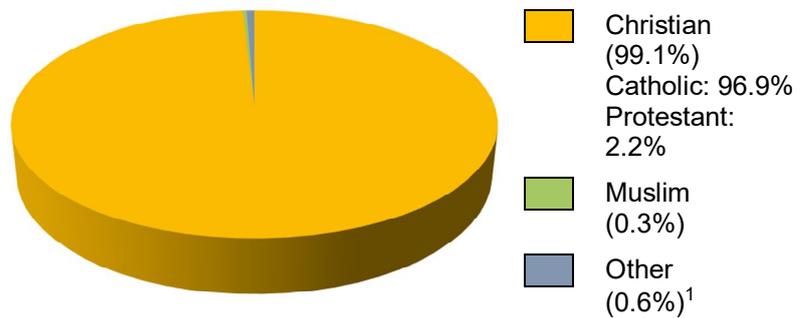
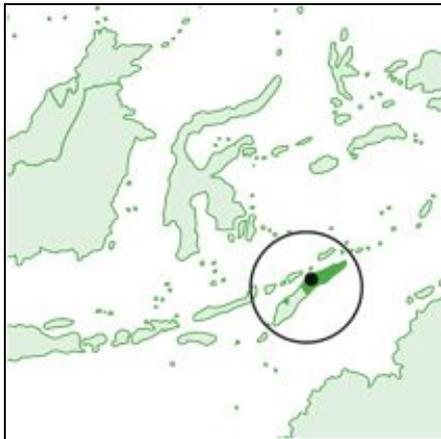


EAST TIMOR



Area: 15,410 km ²	Population: 1.2 million	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): Tetum, Portuguese
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Legal background on Religious Freedom and actual application

The end of a chapter in the history of this young nation took place on 6th February 2015. On that day, 'Xanana' Gusmao resigned as prime minister, a position he had occupied since 2007.² Already, in March 2012, the other great national figure, Jose Ramos Horta, had announced his resignation from politics, following his defeat in the presidential elections. But, with the resignation of Xanana Gusmao, it became clear that the epoch of the heroes of independence was coming to an end and that the destiny of this country, would now pass into the hands of a new generation of leaders.

Gusmao's government had declined in popularity, and accusations of corruption and nepotism had increased. Several ministers were accused of accepting bribes. The presidential elections of 2017 will therefore be a test of the strength of this young East Timorese democracy.

The basic law of East Timor has been built on the model of the Portuguese constitution. It guarantees freedom of conscience, religion and worship and is established on the principle of separation of Church and state. The constitution also guarantees freedom of religious education. That said, the preamble to the constitution makes special reference to the Catholic Church in a country which, along with Malta, has the highest proportion of Catholics of any nation in the world. The preamble states: "In its cultural and humane perspective, the Catholic Church in East Timor has always been able to take on the suffering of all the People with dignity, placing itself on their side in the defence of their most fundamental rights."³ Section 11, paragraph 2: states: "The State acknowledges and values the participation of the Catholic Church in the process of national liberation of East Timor."

There are no restraints on religious freedom. The small Muslim minority, which has remained in the country since the retreat by Indonesia, has continued to dwindle. That said, it is not clear whether the Muslims have migrated to Indonesia because of an environment seen as hostile to Islam or in response to the poverty and unemployment that affect all of East Timor. The 2014 US State Department Report on World Religious Freedom notes some isolated cases of Protestant communities facing difficulties in obtaining land on which to build churches, and refers to pupils expelled from their schools on account of their religious beliefs.⁴ However, again it is difficult to obtain confirmation from independent sources.

The state may occasionally provide financial support for religious institutions. This was the case notably in the capital, Dili, where the government subsidised the renovation of the Catholic Church and provided help for the principal mosque in Dili. In both cases, the state's support came in response to a request from the religious communities concerned.

However, in this country, where the Catholic Church has a very strong political and social influence (for example, of the 14 national holidays in the country today, nine are festivals in the Catholic liturgical calendar), the principal topic of news regarding religion was the signing of a concordat between the Holy See and East Timor on 15th August 2015.

It is a sign of the attention that the Vatican pays to this small Catholic country that the concordat was signed in Dili by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican Secretary of State. As well as signing the concordat, Cardinal Parolin came to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the presence of the Catholic Church on the island. The agreement between the two states, as the cardinal underlined, aims to boost "mutual collaboration for the integral development of the people in justice, peace and the common good." According to the cardinal, the concordat rests on two foundations — the values and principles of international law with regard to religious freedom and the guarantee of the freedom to profess and practise the Catholic faith freely and publicly. Cardinal Parolin added that the concordat "also offers space and opportunities for the Catholic Church to act in society, in accord with its mission of service to the people and in line with constitutional norms and local legislation."⁵

The Prime Minister, Rui Maria de Araujo, said the concordat was a sign of the "special relationship" between the Vatican and East Timor. He said the document acknowledged that the Catholic faith and the Portuguese language were "two elements which have shaped our identity as a nation, and this [is] a good thing". He said East Timor's embassy with the Holy See was the most important of the 17 such diplomatic presences the former has around the world.⁶

Incidents

There were no incidents recorded during the period under review.

Prospects for Religious Freedom

According to Father Julio Crispim Ximenes Belo, lecturer in law at the National University of Timor Lorosae and director of the justice and peace commission of Baucau diocese (one of the three dioceses in the country), the concordat will help to protect religious freedom and provide a legal framework for the Church to help to pursue its work also in education and healthcare.⁷

¹ Data from the census of 2010. A more recent census was conducted in 2015, but the results are not yet available. *Population and Housing Census of Timor-Leste, 2010. Timor-Leste Ministry of Finance : Population Distribution by Administrative Areas (pdf)* p. 21.

² *The Sydney Morning Herald* : « As Xanana Gusmao departs, Timor must prepare for when the oil runs dry », 13 February 2015 (<http://www.smh.com.au/world/as-xanana-gusmao-departs-timor-must-prepare-for-when-the-oil-runs-dry-20150212-13des2.html>)

³ Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste : http://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Constitution_RDTL_ENG.pdf

⁴ US State Department : « Timor Leste 2014 - International Religious Freedom Report » : <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/238550.pdf>

⁵ *Ucanews* : « Vatican, Timor-Leste sign bilateral agreement », 14 August 2015 (<http://www.ucanews.com/news/vatican-timor-leste-sign-bilateral-agreement/74081>)

⁶ *Ucanews* : « Timor-Leste to sign historic treaty with the Vatican », 6 August 2015 (<http://www.ucanews.com/news/timor-leste-to-sign-historic-treaty-with-the-vatican/74035>)

⁷ *Ucanews* : « Vatican, Timor-Leste sign bilateral agreement », 14 August 2015 (<http://www.ucanews.com/news/vatican-timor-leste-sign-bilateral-agreement/74081>)