



## Timor (Timor Leste)

Stable / Unchanged —

### Religion

### Population

### Area

- Christians : **87.9%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **7.4%**
- Muslims : **3.7%**
- Others : **1.0%**

1,211,000

15,410 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Constitutionally, the basic law of East Timor (Timor-Leste) is modelled on that of Portugal. It guarantees freedom of conscience, religion and worship, and enshrines the principle of separation between Church and state. The preamble of the constitution asserts the state's determination "to fight all forms of tyranny, oppression, social, cultural or religious domination and segregation, to defend national independence, to respect and guarantee human rights and the fundamental rights of the citizen".<sup>[1]</sup> Article 12 of the constitution stipulates: "The state shall recognise and respect the different religious denominations, which are free in their organisation and in the exercise of their own activities, to take place in due observance of the constitution and the law." It adds: "The state shall promote cooperation with the different religious denominations that contribute to the well-being of the people of East Timor." Article 16 of the constitution also stipulates that no one may be discriminated on the basis, among other things, of their religious affiliation. The country's penal code reflects these constitutional provisions. Article 124, for example, describes as crimes against humanity actions including "persecution, construed as deprivation of the exercise of fundamental rights contrary to international law against a group or a collective entity due to politics, race, nationality, ethnicity, culture, religion"<sup>[2]</sup>

However, in a country with one of the highest percentages of Catholics in the world, the preamble to the constitution also 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 elementary rights."<sup>[3]</sup> Article 11.2 of the constitution states: "The state acknowledges and values the participation of the Catholic Church in the process of national liberation of East Timor."

Relations between different faith communities are generally positive but there have been reports of violence. The US Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report for 2016 states: "Leaders of the Catholic Church and

longstanding Protestant and Muslim communities reported good cooperation and relationships among religious groups.” The report adds: “Some of the more recently arrived religious groups did not enjoy the same strong interfaith relations.”

The small number of Muslims who remained in East Timor after Indonesia’s withdrawal has steadily declined in recent years. It is not clear whether their emigration to Indonesia is due to hostility to Islam or to the country’s poverty and underemployment. The US State Department’s religious freedom report cited a few cases where religious minority groups in rural areas described physical threats against their church members and that a Seventh-day Adventists church in Lautem was a regular target of rock throwing. Also, court proceedings have arisen from the alleged “partial destruction in 2015 of a building being constructed by a Protestant group, reportedly at the instigation of a Catholic priest.” The US State Department report also cited a few cases in which students were expelled from their schools because of their religious beliefs. [4]

In a country where the Catholic Church is credited with a great deal of political and social influence (out of 14 statutory holidays, nine are Catholic), the concordat signed on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2015 between East Timor and the Holy See is gradually being implemented. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Holy See’s Secretary of State, who travelled to East Timor to mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Catholic Church’s presence in the country, said the concordat seeks to strengthen “mutual collaboration for the integral development of the people in justice, peace and the common good”. The cardinal said that central to the concordat were the values and principles of international law with regard to religious freedom, and the guarantee that the Catholic faith can be professed and practised publicly and freely. The concordat, he added, “also offers space and opportunities for the Catholic Church to act in society, in accordance with its mission of service to the people and in line with constitutional norms and local legislation”.[5]

In practice, the concordat sets out the extent to which the Church is free to provide its services, be it spiritual assistance in prisons, hospitals or orphanages, or in operating charities and organising educational activities. For its part, the state allocates subsidies to the Catholic Church. Each of the country’s three Catholic dioceses has received government aid worth US\$ 2 million.[6] In addition, the state budget includes a section dedicated to building and renovating places of worship, including US\$ 9 million that benefits mostly Catholic buildings.[7]

## Incidents

In East Timor, cases of religious freedom violations are rare and relatively minor.

Every civil society organisation – including religious bodies – can apply every year for grants from a US\$9 million government fund. According to the US State Department’s International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, the head of the Muslim community applied for funding, but without success.[8] But the report also notes that a Timorese Protestant Church applied for a grant to finance its General Assembly and received US\$ 0,000.[9]

In Parliament, a lawmaker blamed the Jehovah’s Witnesses for “buying” conversions, with money. He called for new legislation to control the actions of “new religions”. However, the Prime Minister rejected the demand and stressed that national institutions were committed to respecting religious freedom.[10]

## Prospects for freedom of religion

East Timor is a young state in a region where there are few democratic systems in place. The country has a large proportion of young people and, only achieving independence in 2002, it remains fragile. The presidential elections of March 2017 – the first without United Nations supervision – passed off peacefully and without any notable incident, as did the legislative elections the following July. However, the latter (based on proportional representation with a single-round of voting) did not result in a government majority. Since then, the country has been teetering on the verge of a political crisis. On 26<sup>th</sup> January 2018, President Francisco Guterres dissolved Parliament after opposition parties, which hold the balance of power, rejected the budget.[11] New parliamentary elections are now scheduled. Faced with the potential

threat of political instability, the Catholic Church has a role to play in maintaining East Timor's stability. At present, however, nothing appears to threaten freedom of religion in the country.

## Endnotes / Sources

[1] Government of Timor-Leste, Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, 20 May 2002, <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?cat=37&lang=en>, (accessed 9th February 2018).

[2] Penal Code (approved by Decree-Law No. 19/2009), World Intellectual Property Organization, <http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/details.jsp?id=10928>, (accessed 25th February 2018).

[3] 'Réactions internationales extrêmement favorables à l'attribution du Prix Nobel de la paix à Mgr Belo et à Jose Ramos Horta', *Églises d'Asie*, 16th October 1996 (accessed 9th February 2018).

[4] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 'Timor Leste', International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 9th February 2018).

[5] Siktus Harson and Ryan Dagur, 'Vatican, Timor-Leste sign bilateral agreement', *Ucanews*, 14th August 2015, <http://www.ucanews.com/news/vatican-timor-leste-sign-bilateral-agreement/74081>, (accessed 9th February 2018).

[6] Bureau of Democracy Human Rights, and Labor, *op. cit.*, (accessed 9th February 2018).

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Victoria Tassel, 'Crise politique au Timor-Oriental', *La Croix*, 31st January 2018, <https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Asie-et-Oceanie/Crise-politique-Timor-Oriental-2018-01-31-1200910188>, (accessed 9th February 2018).