

Guest Column

Ready and Willing: The Case for Timor-Leste

By Julia Lau

Timor-Leste's democratic credentials, commitment to international law, and youthful population position it as ASEAN's most democratic member, bringing normative strengths that could reinvigorate the regional organisation. The country's willingness to challenge fellow members on issues like Myanmar and human rights may prove uncomfortable but necessary for ASEAN's evolution.

Two Burning Questions. In answering the question, “Is ASEAN ready for Timor-Leste?”, we can consider its opposite, “Is Timor-Leste ready for ASEAN?”. This was the tricky question that had occupied ASEAN’s capitals, diplomats and bureaucrats in the past fourteen years of Timor-Leste’s journey towards full accession. As a researcher, I first made the case for Timor-Leste’s membership, unprompted by any Timorese or other element, in [July 2022](#).

Back then, as someone who had not yet visited Timor-Leste, I cited a laundry list of pluses, arguing from first principles. To me, Timor-Leste’s democratic nature as a polity, its undeniable proximity and geographical situation in Southeast Asia, and other factors that showed its ability and willingness to fulfil the [prerequisites](#) of membership listed in A.6



of the ASEAN Charter, made the case for accession difficult to deny or delay. It was also a question of equity: if in the mid- to late 1990s, ASEAN had taken on four less developed nation-states as full members, how long more can ASEAN deny membership to one more, who in some ways already outperformed those four, in the present day?

Since that entreaty, I have had the privilege to interview Timor-Leste’s ambassador to Singapore HE Alex Tilman for a [podcast](#), visited Timor-Leste’s capital city Dili twice in three years for two of the Timor-Leste Studies Association’s [conferences](#), and interacted with several Timorese academics and ASEAN nationals who live and work in Dili. These varied experiences have further convinced me that Timor-Leste is ready for ASEAN, whatever naysayers might think. Its bureaucrats and leaders have put in the work although the learning curve has been steep and the learning process is still ongoing.

Entering ASEAN can only benefit Timor-Leste, even if the initial adjustment may prove challenging—for the existing ten members as well as the newcomer. As my colleague Sharon Seah and I argued in a [piece](#) in mid-August, Timor-Leste’s accession might just be the shot in the arm a beleaguered ASEAN needs. The eleventh member state brings with it a firm belief in the normative power of international law and norms, its [youthful promise](#) (provided its current leaders graciously plan for peaceful succession), and its unique vision of “[inclusive sustainability](#),” equitable justice and peaceful co-existence in a turbulent world.

To the point on the belief in international law and most inspiringly, perhaps, this tiny developing island nation-state of 1.4 million is what I called in a conference presentation given in Dili this past July “the living embodiment of the concept of [self-determination](#).” When I was a law undergraduate in the mid-1990s, the then province of East Timor in Indonesia was one of the cases we studied when we considered what “[recognition](#)” and “self-determination” truly meant, for a separatist entity seeking its own future. Just a few years after that, it was exhilarating to witness [history](#) being made after the August 30, 1999 [referendum](#)—and the ensuing violence followed by the reclamation of nationhood, supported by an international [peacekeeping](#) mission—when Timor-Leste regained its independence on May 20, 2002. Now, Timor-Leste is an outspoken supporter of fellow SIDS (small island developing states) and a firm believer in

multilateralism and the rule of international law.

If we turn to the question of whether ASEAN is ready for Timor-Leste, then potential sources of tension might be when issues like human rights and the Myanmar crisis are discussed at ASEAN forums. Is ASEAN ready to have tough conversations about democracy and human rights, including at the heads of state level? My expectation is that in time, the newest ASEAN entrant will prod its fellow members on how to improve the grouping’s showing on a range of tricky topics, not least on Myanmar, a topic on which Timorese leaders—President Ramos-Horta in particular—have been [consistent](#) and outspoken [critics](#). This will not be comfortable for many of the other AMS but an honest, even blunt, discussion may be more productive than the status quo.

Is ASEAN ready to adjust to its most democratic member? Interestingly, tiny Timor-Leste punches way above its weight if we consider all eleven ASEAN member states’ rankings in global indices on democratic freedoms. Freedom House gives Timor-Leste a score of [seventy-two](#) out of a possible hundred (“Free”). This is the highest among the AMS, even though Timor-Leste’s fledgling democratic institutions and uneven practices in upholding and promoting diversity and gender equality are still works in progress.

Is ASEAN ready to absorb one of the most youthful populations in the world? Timor-Leste’s youthful population, who comprise

almost half of the country, face a yet uncertain future. They have far to go in terms of levelling up with the region's educational and health standards, just as their country has a long developmental journey ahead. The recent university student demonstrations against legislators in Dili also showed that there is serious inequality which triggers resentment against the elite or pits 'haves' against 'have-nots' in Timor-Leste. What was interesting, however, was the national government's willingness to cancel its decision to gift cars to legislators so as to defuse these tensions.

An unknown is whether Timor-Leste's youth will stay on in their home country or seek greener pastures elsewhere in ASEAN. The brain drain that could result if the latter becomes the more popular option would be akin to what neighbouring Indonesia is now experiencing with its "Kabur Aja Dulu" ("Just Escape First") phenomenon. This would be disastrous for a small country like Timor-Leste.

Finally, is ASEAN ready for a tolerant new neighbour? Timor-Leste, while overwhelmingly Catholic in its belief, is a country that holds an annual, small-scale Pride celebration and parade, although SOGIE protections are uneven. This is not to say that discrimination or homophobia do not exist in the newest AMS, but Timor-Leste's tolerance for diversity and welcoming of difference will likely make it a bright spot in our region.

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