

In Southeast Asia's youngest nation, leaders are defending clergymen mired in child abuse scandals

In deeply Catholic Timor-Leste, high-profile clergymen involved in child sex abuse scandals are supported by some of the country's most powerful politicians while victims who come forward are labelled as 'church haters'.

Content warning: This story discusses themes of sexual abuse of children

Nobel Prize winner Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo was once the most powerful figure of the Roman Catholic church in Timor-Leste.

But in 2022, a Dutch newspaper report accused Belo of multiple rapes and sexual assaults on young boys dating back to the time he was a priest in the early 1980s.

In 2002, when the first allegations against him were raised, the Vatican discretely moved Bishop Belo to Mozambique, and then to Portugal, saying he was suffering "physical and mental fatigue".

Then in 2020, Belo was secretly sanctioned by the Vatican and banned from living in his home country and coming into contact with minors.

Despite the allegations against him, Belo still receives the support of the nation for his role in campaigning for the human rights and self-determination of the Timorese people during the Indonesian occupation from 1975 to 1999.



Timorese spiritual leader and Nobel peace laureate Bishop Carlos Belo (left) meets Pope John Paul II in his summer residence at Castelgandolfo in September 1999. Source: Getty / Vatican Pool/ AFP

Belo's portrait is prominently displayed at the entrance of the Timor-Leste resistance museum — an ever-present reminder of his reputation as a fearless fighter for Timorese independence.

The president of Timor-Leste, Jose Ramos Horta, is a long-time friend of Bishop Belo. The two shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 for their advocacy work and were the international faces of the Timorese during the occupation.

Ramos-Horta continues to speak highly of Belo, despite the Vatican exiling Belo from Timor-Leste due to the child sex abuse allegations against him.



The president of Timor-Leste, Jose Ramos Horta, is a long-time friend of Bishop Belo (right). The two shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 for their advocacy work and were the international faces of the Timorese during the occupation. Source: SBS / Dateline

"We were surprised, but that's life, these things happen," he said in an interview for a documentary first broadcast on European public broadcaster ARTE. "It was very hard for us, for the Timorese people."

"He represented the church, but also all the people of Timor."

Asked whether he hoped for Belo's return to his homeland one day, Horta replied, "Absolutely."

"That's a matter for the Vatican, for the Holy See, to decide whether he can return to Timor," he said. "Yes, of course, people would love to welcome him back here."

However, he declined to comment on the accusations against Belo.

The documentary makers made several attempts to contact Belo, seeking a response to the allegations raised in the program. He did not reply.

The church and the fight for independence

The topic of child sexual abuse in Timor-Leste is shrouded in a code of silence. The Timorese people revere the Catholic church as an institution that helped and offered them protection in the country's darkest days.

Located north of Australia, Timor-Leste is a former Portuguese colony. After declaring independence in 1975, the nation was quickly invaded by Indonesia and for 24 years Timor-Leste endured a violent occupation. It formally became independent in 2002.

More than 150,000 people were killed in the fight for independence — almost a quarter of the country's population — making it one of the deadliest conflicts of the 20th century.

During the occupation, priests sheltered and cared for the Timorese independence fighters, with the church loyal supporters of the resistance.

Today Timor-Leste is considered the second most Catholic country in the world, behind only the Vatican, with 97 per cent of the population practicing Catholicism.

This deep connection between the church and the fight for Timorese independence has fostered an environment where it's difficult for victims to speak up as to speak ill of the church in Timor-Leste means to undermine the pain the nation has suffered through for its sovereignty.

Victims who come forward are often labelled as church haters and face being ostracised from their community.



In 2021, American missionary Richard Daschbach became the first member of the clergy to be convicted of sexual abuse of minors in Timor-Leste. Source: SBS / Dateline

American ex-priest jailed for rape

Belo is far from the only priest in the country to have child sexual abuse allegations levelled at them.

It's alleged that around a dozen other priests are accused of sexual abuse in Timor-Leste.

But prosecutions are rare.

In 2021, a Timorese court sentenced then 84-year-old American missionary Richard Daschbach to 12 years in prison for sexual abuse of children — the first time a member of the clergy has been convicted of such crimes in Timor-Leste.

Three years earlier, Daschbach, who had run an orphanage for 30 years in remote Timor-Leste, admitted to sexually abusing many young girls who were in his care.

Vatican urges Timorese Catholics to accept decision on Belo Underlining the Vatican's decision, Sprizzi said, "this is the proper official position of the Holy See on this matter" because "the crimes are serious" and "it wasn't because of the Dutch newspaper article."

In a letter addressed to his superiors, Daschbach wrote: "The victims could be anyone from about 2012 back to 1991, which is a long time."

He went on to say, "It is impossible for me to remember even the faces of many of them, let alone the names — who the victims are I haven't the faintest idea."

After his confession, the Vatican expelled Daschbach from the church.



Convicted child sex offender Father Richard Daschbach (left) and Timor-Leste's prime minister, Xanana Gusmão (right). Credit: ARTE

Daschbach, like Belo, supported the Timor-Leste rebels in their 24-year battle for independence, giving him status as a respected war hero and saviour of children.

Despite the evidence, criminal conviction and Daschbach's own confessions, many Timorese still defend his honour. Among them is the country's prime minister, Xanana Gusmão.

Since Daschbach's imprisonment, Gusmão has visited the priest twice for birthday celebrations.

Speaking to a reporter, Gusmão confirmed that he believes Daschbach doesn't belong in prison and will continue "every, every, every year" to bring him cake for his birthday.

In response to the news that the prime minister visited the convicted child sex offender in prison, Gusmão's three sons, who now live in Melbourne, wrote handwritten letters to Daschbach's victims apologising for their father's actions.

One wrote: "When I heard that my father had visited the perpetrator ex-priest RD, I felt sad and angry. I apologise if my father's actions caused you distress."

Gusmão has said the release of Daschbach will be one of his priorities while in office.

Daschbach also receives avid support from Martinho Gusmao, a former priest and presidential candidate in 2022 elections.

"I think this case must be ... cancelled ... his name must be restored," he said about Daschbach's sentencing.

"You cannot. Just because you hate the Catholic church in Timor-Leste, you cannot do that."



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The culture of silence

Josh Trinidad, a Timorese anthropologist and specialist in sexual violence, says Timor-Leste generally doesn't see paedophilia as a big issue.

"A lot of people still don't understand the issue of paedophilia [in Timor-Leste]," he said.

"It's not like in the West, in Australia or in the UK, if you are a paedophile is, you know, really bad."

As the victims of child sexual abuse crimes speak up, it is revealing a much larger cultural problem about the way sex abuse is perceived in Timorese society.

Many locals fear any reckoning to address the abuse will be deeply traumatic to the young nation that has fought relentlessly for its freedom.

Given the innate reluctance to even talk about child sexual abuse and the institutional power abusers and their supporters hold in Timor-Leste, it makes it more difficult for victims to tell their stories and be believed.

If you or someone you know is impacted by sexual assault/sexual violence, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or visit. In an emergency, call 000.