

Ramos-Horta slams criminal libel plan – threat to rights in Timor-Leste

asiapacificreport.nz/2020/06/09/ramos-horta-slams-criminal-libel-plan-threat-to-rights-in-timor-leste/

By Pacific Media Watch

June 9, 2020



By Antonio Sampaio in Dili

Former East Timorese President José Ramos-Horta says it is not opportune for the government to be debating the possible criminalisation of defamation, with the risk of jeopardising citizens' rights.

Instead, he says, the Timor-Leste government should concentrate on issues like the economy.

“I don't think it is a priority issue for the government. Instead of the government and the parliament wasting energy and time discussing new laws, which will constrain our democracy, it is better that they focus on the dynamisation of our economy that is completely paralysed.” he told the Portuguese news agency Lusa.

Ramos-Horta reacted yesterday to the news advanced by Lusa on Saturday that the Timorese government wants to criminalise defamation and injuries in response to situations of offence of honour, good name and reputation of individuals and entities, in the media and social networks.

The proposed measures, introduced in a draft decree-law to amend the Penal Code, prepared by the Ministry of Justice and to which Lusa had access, provide for prison sentences for defamation and injuries, for the crime of offending the prestige of a person. collective or similar, and the crime of offending the memory of a deceased person.

“I appeal to the Prime Minister to tell the government that we have other priorities. Let us give our society total freedom to speak and criticise,” said Ramos-Horta.

“It is what the Prime Minister must do, to show that he is above any suspicion of wanting to hamper public opinion and citizens’ rights,” he stressed.

‘Draconian’ laws

Ramos-Horta recalled that some laws already passed in the media sector were considered “draconian” at the international level, contributing to lower Timor-Leste’s rating in terms of press freedom.

“I don’t see how this new law will help freedom of expression in Timor-Leste and the name of Timor-Leste as a full democracy”, he stressed.

The Timorese historical leader also criticised the fact that the proposal mixes social networks – “which are almost like a coffee conversation” with the media, even if using new technologies and platforms.

“I do not see that over the years the proliferation of social networks has affected in any way, the security, peace or development of the country and the dignity or prestige of the government,” he said.

“Governors are individuals like everyone else. It is not because they are President, Prime Minister or deputies that they are suddenly untouchable people,” he said.

The Nobel Peace Prize winner says that it is “preferable for the good name of those who are open to government” and to act only in cases where “incitement to racial violence or hatred” is taken.

Parliamentary assaults

As an example, he mentions the incidents last month in the Timorese National Parliament, with assaults between deputies, overturned tables, shouting, shoving and the intervention of police officers.

“There has been no greater unrest than what has happened in Parliament. The media has faithfully reported what happened, as it reports bombastic statements that some leaders have made against each other, from different sides,” he said.

“If we do not want the media and social networks to report embarrassing things that do not dignify, let us behave with greater civility,” he said.

Even so, Ramos-Horta asked journalists to be more careful to prove facts before reporting the news, noting that there have been such examples in the country’s media.

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