

Timor journalists fight repressive new media laws

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Jose Belo was shackled, hung upside down, electrocuted, beaten, burnt and jailed for three years in the mid-1990s because of his resistance to Indonesia's brutal occupation of East Timor.

Now the founder of a newspaper known for its hard-hitting investigative journalism and head of East Timor's journalists' union says he is prepared to go to jail again to fight what he sees as repressive new media laws before his now-independent country's parliament.

"The laws are dangerous. If they are passed I will oppose them and go to the jail. So too will other journalists here," he says.

"The laws give excessive powers to a state-funded media council with the power to impose criminal penalties that will be used to control journalists."

Thirty-eight years after six Australian-based journalists were killed while attempting to reveal Indonesia's secret invasion of East Timor, the proposed laws will bar foreign journalists unless they receive government approval to report in the country.

"Foreign correspondents who have played a key role in our struggle for independence will not be able to operate freely," Belo says.

Benjamin Ismail, head of the Asia Pacific desk of Reporters Without Borders, says such provisions are unacceptable because they endanger freedom of information and media independence, which are needed for a country to function democratically.

"They constitute a dangerous first step towards censorship and the gagging of news media by leaving the door open to abuse of power by the government and officials," he says.

The laws include a restrictive definition of a journalist that would exclude freelance journalists, independent journalists and student journalists.

Only individuals employed by a recognised media outlet and who must have served at least six months as an intern in a media organisation will be allowed to work as a journalist.

Critics of the laws say this will prevent "citizen journalism" in social media such as Twitter and Facebook.

While the proposed laws claim in a draft preamble to ensure freedom of the media, La'o Hamutuk, a prominent non-government organisation in Dili, says they will limit people's freedom to receive and distribute information.

In a submission to a government committee reviewing the laws, La'o Hamutuk says they do not reflect East Timor's history of media being used to inform and direct the struggle for liberation.

"Timor-Leste (East Timor) has already gone for more than a decade without a media law and we have not had problems with media and information," La'o Hamutuk says. "During this time, Timorese people enjoyed their right to information and freedom of expression through various media, after nearly five hundred years of repression and censorship."

The government drafted the laws last year based loosely on media restrictions in Indonesia and Portugal, after state secretary for communications Nelio Isaac Sarmiento was quoted in the East Timor media as saying there should be consequences for those practicing journalism without proper accreditation.

"The media law and code of ethics will be used for sanctioning those who violate the law," he was quoted as saying.

Toby Mendel, a Canadian running an organisation called the Centre for Law and Democracy who has studied East Timor's media, says the government is trying to pass restrictive laws, including establishing a press council that is not independent.

“On the other hand, many media outlets are very unprofessional and yet the media is very divided and is unable to establish its own self-regulatory system,” he says. “The result is that the public are subjected to often unprofessional media behaviour and yet do not have any opportunity to make a complaint about this.”

Nobel laureate Jose Ramos-Horta, a former president and prime minister, opposes the laws.

“Let a thousand flowers blossom, let a million criticisms of political elites and businesses fly around [rather] than have a single journalist be harassed or imprisoned because of a tendentious law aiming at curbing freedom of press,” said Dr Ramos-Horta, who is now head of the United Nations mission in Guinea-Bissau.

Belo, 42, has often come under attack for crusading and investigative reporting in his *Tempo Semanal* newspaper but has never backed away from a fight, including with powerful figures in Dili.

His exposes in 2009 landed former justice minister Lucia Lobato a five-year jail sentence for corruption.

“I will not give up on this. Nor will other journalists. It’s not about us. It’s about the future of our country,” he says.

Fairfax Media has supported Tempo Semanal and East Timorese journalism through its workplace giving program More than Words.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/timor-journalists-fight-repressive-new-media-laws-20140305-hvga2.html>