

Media Exposure is Not Always Enough

By Matt Crook*

In 2009, the media broke a story that the Timor-Leste Deputy Prime Minister, Jose Luis Guterres, awarded his wife a Ministry of Foreign Affairs contract in the Timorese Permanent Mission to the UN while he was Foreign Minister.

The news was soon followed by stronger allegations that Guterres, along with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zacarias da Costa, had illegally obtained financial benefits as a result of abusing their authority. Both were indicted.

Da Costa was subsequently cleared and Guterres' case is being heard at Dili District Court. Nevertheless, the pair remain in office. In Timor-Leste, corruption cases exposed in the media are not unusual, but they don't have the impact such stories would have in other countries. Consider the story of Minister of Justice Lucia Lobato.

Citing SMS evidence, in October 2008, Tempo Semanal published a series of stories showing that Minister Lobato had colluded with a contractor – who was also her friend and a fellow party member – to secure a US\$1 million contract for the reconstruction of a prison wall in Dili.

As local and international journalists continued to write about the case, Lobato vehemently denied any wrongdoing and filed an unsuccessful defamation lawsuit against Belo.

Despite widespread attention, the case against Lobato created little more than a stir, and she also remains in office.

In Timor-Leste, the role of the press in tackling high-level corruption is widely recognized, but analysts are divided: Does the media spotlight make a serious impact? Or do barriers, such as weak journalistic skills, the industry's dependence on government sponsorship, lack of access to information laws, and weak anti-corruption policies hamper the media's ability to effectively report on corrupt activities?

“One thing we do know is that the media have been getting braver,” said Christopher Samson, head of the Timorese anti-corruption non-profit organization The Mirror for the People (LABEH – *Lalenok Ba Ema Hotu*).

Samson believes the media plays a watchdog role, providing the citizens of Timor-Leste insight into what is going on behind closed

doors, forcing the government to be more vigilant of its own doings, and deterring potential acts of corruption.

Stories without Investigation

But the number of media outlets that can afford to report on corruption is in decline. Tempo Semanal remains the only local newspaper able to pressure the government, posting leaked documents and stories in English often picked up by international media.

Following Tempo Semanal's lead, other national dailies have been publishing more corruption stories, but their reporting tends to be lackluster, if not outright sensational.

Many cases of corruption in Timor-Leste are disseminated to the public through stories that cite information contained within leaked documents, and media investigations that are not always thorough or the result of a methodic reporting process.

"The media still don't really do stories about corruption. The stories mostly come from statements and press releases," said Otelio Ote, editor of the Dili Weekly, a paper printed in English and Tetum. "Sources sometimes don't want to speak to us anymore. The government doesn't allow ministries' directors to talk to the media," Ote added, referring to widespread difficulty in getting access to information that the government would rather keep private.

Despite a proliferation of corruption cases in the news, the media in Timor has not become the catalyst in the resignation or firing of corrupt government officials.

In recent years, stories have called for the resignation of Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao over claims he signed off on a multi-million dollar government contract to a company linked to his daughter. In addition, Lobato's name has come up again, along with Minister of Finance Emilia Pires, over the controversial awarding of government contracts.

In 2010, numerous stories were published about a project of Gusmao's that saw US\$70 million of unused cash shift to almost 800 infrastructure projects, many of which were reportedly not up to standards or remain unfinished. The media reported that US\$3 million had allegedly gone missing from that budget. Deputy Prime Minister Mario Carrascalao, who had been appointed to tackle corruption in the government, resigned, claiming the prime minister ignored the missing US\$3 million. On his way out, he asserted that corruption, collusion and nepotism were still "rampant" in the government.

If any sign of progress can be attributed to the work of the media in recent years, it might be the creation of the country's first Anti-Corruption Commission, an office set up in response to broad public perception that high-level corruption is rampant.

When Aderito de Jesus, the head of the new commission, stepped into his role in February, he dismissed concerns that the Commission would have little power to investigate high-level corruption.

But while corruption stories continue to pique the public interest, few have resulted in government investigations, much less convictions. Before the institution of the Anti-Corruption Commission, investigating corruption cases was the mandate of Sebastiao Ximenes, Timor-Leste's ombudsman for Human Rights and Justice. Ximenes' office forwarded close to 30 corruption cases to the prosecutor-general over four years, and only now has some progress been made.

Prosecutor General Ana Pessoa, a former member of the opposition FRETILIN party, seems to be attempting to make a dent in the number of corruption cases involving government officials by pushing to get cases to court.

"The media are very important to fight corruption," said Ximenes "They are very important because sometimes we don't know about some things that are happening within the government, and the media can give us that information. We don't have capacity to cover all the departments of the government."

So what is the problem? De Jesus says the media struggles with the challenge of conducting professional investigations. While he recognizes its significance as a watchdog institution, he says there is work to be done. "In terms of raising public awareness, it is very important, but in terms of finding hard evidence, there is some way to go."

Don't Bite the Hand that Feeds You

Another issue is the media's approach to stories. Local news outlets are often founded by idealists rather than businesspeople, and frequently lack plans for sustainability. This makes it hard to build long-term skills and specialization, and fosters an aspect of taking the watchdog role too far.

For example, some media take a "guilty until proven innocent" approach, foregoing the use of the term "allegedly" before court decisions become final.

"It's hard to say the media are mature," said de Jesus. "They are learning, some are doing quite well, but the rest are struggling to

perform professionally. It's not only the media, but the public in general, who need to learn. It's a very tricky issue. Everyone is in the learning process."

Another issue hampering the media's ability to conduct effective investigative journalism is its reliance on income from advertising. As a result, news agencies have altered their content offerings. Even Tempo Semanal's coverage has recently shifted away from corruption to human-interest stories.

"Everyone is connected, and papers run on adverts, a major source of which is the government," said an analyst who prefers not to be named. "The more Jose Belo did these stories, the less advertising he was getting. Now he seems to have made a conscious decision to cover more human-interest stories."

Many newspapers facing similar conflicts choose not to delve too deeply into investigations.

Despite increased press freedom since Timor-Leste became independent in 2002 – after decades of oppressive Indonesian military rule – news agencies have little access to the information needed to run investigative reports.

Timor-Leste still does not have a Freedom of Information Law granting the press free access to government documents.

Compounding this issue, journalists often find themselves stonewalled by high-level officials. Belo told an audience at the Australian Embassy in 2009 that before he ran a story about advisors' salaries in the Ministry of Finance, "someone with power" put pressure on the printing company not to print that edition.

Passion vs. the System

As a result, while Timorese journalists remain invariably passionate, the capacity of the media is low, especially when reporting on complicated, sensitive issues. A USAID corruption assessment from September 2009 determined that the Timorese media has used its relative freedom to attack corruption with "great zeal," but "complicated by poor access to government information, reporting is generally anecdotal, presented weakly and poorly sourced."

Unfortunately, a willing Anti-Corruption Commission and prosecutor-general may not be enough to overcome shortcomings in the country's judicial system, especially in terms of human resources, warned Ombudsman Ximenes.

"Even if the anti-corruption commissioner is a good commissioner, even if he has good staff, if we don't take action and provide

resources to the prosecutor-general's office then the Commission maybe cannot succeed," he added.

With the Anti-Corruption Commission yet to earn a name for itself, Ximenes fears the door is wide open for corruption. "Now is a good opportunity for those who corrupt. We still don't have an institution that really fights corruption," he said.

Using local media to raise awareness of corruption is paramount to tackling the problem, and the rest will fall into place – eventually, says LABEH's Samson, whose organization is taking strides to help the people of Timor-Leste weed out truth from rumor with the belief that, as Ximenes says, "only a fool will steal when the people are watching him."

In the meantime and until then, "we are a nation ruled by rumors," he said.

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