

Timor-Leste officially joins Asean

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Timor-Leste today officially acceded to Asean as its 11th member, marking a historic milestone for both the nation and the bloc.

The accession, the grouping's first expansion in 26 years, was formalised through the signing of the Declaration on the Admission of Timor-Leste into Asean during the opening ceremony of the 47th Asean Summit and Related Summits at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre (KLCC).

The signatories were Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet, Prime Minister of Laos Sonexay Siphandone, Vietnam Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, the Sultan of Brunei, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, and Myanmar's Foreign Ministry Permanent Secretary U Hau Khan Sum. Timor-Leste was represented by Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão.

This follows Timor-Leste's depositing of its Instruments of Accession to the Asean Charter and the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) on Oct 25 - the final legal step required for full Asean membership.

Asean, established in 1967, now comprises 11 members: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and Timor-Leste.

Timor-Leste's accession completes the geographical representation of Southeast Asia, with Cambodia being the last country admitted to the bloc on April 30, 1999.

Timor-Leste is the youngest nation in the region, having gained its independence on May 20, 2002. In 2011, it formally applied to join Asean, marking a decade-long journey to meet the bloc's economic and institutional benchmarks.

Major progress came in 2022 when Asean leaders at the 40th and 41st Summits in Phnom Penh agreed in principle to admit Timor-Leste as the 11th member and granted it observer status to participate in Asean meetings, including summits.

At the 2023 Asean Summit in Indonesia, leaders adopted a Roadmap for Timor-Leste's Full Membership, focusing on institutional strengthening, human capital development and capacity-building support.

With a population of about 1.4 million, Timor-Leste remains heavily reliant on oil and gas exports, while agriculture and services are increasingly contributing to national revenue. Its GDP grew by 3.4 percent in 2024 to US\$1.99 billion (RM8.4 billion) and is projected to expand by 3.9 percent in 2025 amid easing inflation and fiscal stability.

Timor-Leste is also the only Portuguese-speaking country in Asia.

President Jose Ramos-Horta, in a special interview with Bernama at his Presidential Palace in Dili, expressed deep appreciation to Malaysia and Anwar for their steadfast support of Timor-Leste's Asean membership bid.

"We thank Malaysia and all Asean leaders for the trust in us that we are capable of discharging our responsibilities as an Asean member. We may have weaknesses, but we pledge to improve and do better year after year," he said.

Ramos-Horta added that Timor-Leste would remain a "loyal and steady friend of Asean", committed to contributing to peace, stability, and fraternity across the region.

"Our goal is to be part of Asean's vision of leaving no one behind, and to help make Southeast Asia a beacon of peace, prosperity and justice. Hopefully, one day, I can nominate Asean itself for the Nobel Peace Prize," he said.

Reaffirming a shared destiny

Meanwhile, Anwar today described Timor-Leste's historic admission into Asean as a milestone that reaffirms the bloc's shared destiny and enduring spirit of regional kinship.

Speaking at the opening ceremony of the 47th Asean Summit and Related Summits in Kuala Lumpur, Anwar said Timor-Leste's inclusion gives new meaning to the vision of an inclusive and united Asean.

"Timor-Leste's place here completes the Asean family - reaffirming our shared destiny and deep sense of regional kinship. Within this community, Timor-Leste's development and its strategic autonomy will find firm and lasting support," he said.

- Bernama

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