



# Timor-Leste's Agency at the 25th ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting and the 48th ASEAN Summit

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## **Timor-Leste's Agency at the 25th ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting and the 48th ASEAN Summit**

*By Lili Chen*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Although a new member of ASEAN, Dili's participation in the 25th ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting and the 48th ASEAN Summit, and its preparatory work for future ASEAN Summits showed how it could convert its ASEAN accession into real agency through institutional hedging, normative protagonism, convening leadership, and preparation for its 2029 ASEAN chairmanship.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Six months after Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN on 26 October 2025, its Foreign Minister, Bendito dos Santos Freitas, attended the 25th [ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting \(AEMM\)](#) in Brunei (27 to 28 April 2026). The themes of the AEMM were sustainable connectivity, blue economy cooperation, multilateralism, and dialogue on Myanmar. A few days later, the ASEAN Summit in Cebu, Philippines, took place, focusing on the theme "[Navigating our future, together.](#)"

For Timor-Leste, this was its first appearance at the AEMM and ASEAN Summit as a formal ASEAN member. That change in status is more than symbolic. It marks the beginning of a new phase for Dili's agency as a small state within and beyond the region amid global uncertainties.

From the perspective of small-state agency, this article showcases how small states with limited material capabilities and power can convert formal membership in a regional grouping into substantive agency. Four modes of agency are discernible in Dili's participation in the AEMM and the ASEAN Summit: institutional hedging through ASEAN-plus platforms, normative protagonism in democracy and

human rights, a convening role on regional issues, and proactive preparation for the 2029 ASEAN chairmanship.

### **Institutional Hedging Via ASEAN-plus Platforms**

[Cheng-Chwee Kuik](#) highlights small states' hedging as a crucial strategy. Weak states leverage multilateral platforms to engage with stronger powers across multiple fronts, avoiding complete alignment. Examples include the AEMM, East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, and dialogue partners' systems, which serve as institutional hedging mechanisms. For Timor-Leste, accession to ASEAN elevates Dili's status on these platforms from observer to substantive actor.

Both the AEMM declaration and the ASEAN Summit publicly supported Timor-Leste's official inclusion in ASEAN. The [AEMM Joint Statement](#) expressed: "We welcomed Timor-Leste to the 25th AEMM as the 11th Member State of ASEAN, and reaffirmed our continued commitment to supporting Timor-Leste's full integration." Likewise, the [Cebu Protocol](#) was adopted to amend the ASEAN Charter, officially finalising Timor-Leste's legal accession into ASEAN.

These declarations bind both the ASEAN and the EU, ASEAN's longest-standing dialogue partner, into a shared commitment to support Timor-Leste's integration into the regional grouping. In doing so, they recast Timor-Leste's compliance gap as a manageable task rather than a difficult challenge. As Malaysian Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan has [noted](#), 66 of the 84 required legal instruments await completion by Dili, a gap that can be closed without damaging ASEAN's or Dili's institutional standing.

In addition, Dili's ASEAN membership is embedded in multilateralism and cooperation, positioning the region as a site of institutional hedging for the new member. Minister Freitas [described](#) Timor-Leste's approach as a "proactive and strategic foreign policy approach – leveraging high-level diplomacy to expand economic opportunities, strengthen national capacity, and position Timor-Leste as an active and constructive partner within ASEAN and beyond."

During the Cebu ASEAN Summit, Dili also [signed](#) the Maritime Cooperation Declaration, the Youth/Climate Declaration, and the ASEAN Strategic Protocol for Emergency and Comprehensive Transformation (ASPECT) framework as a full member for the first time. These moves indicated that ASEAN membership serves as a platform for Dili to engage in institutional hedging by aligning with or balancing among regional members.

### **Normative Protagonism on Human Rights: From Norm Receiver to Driver**

[Kathryn Sikkink](#)'s research on Latin American norm protagonism, the historical role of Latin American states, jurists, and civil-society actors as active norm makers in shaping rather than receiving global human-rights and legal standards, shows that states with limited material weight can advance established normative agendas. [Antje Wiener](#) similarly argues that the meanings of international norms are continuously contested by all relevant stakeholders, including small states. Timor-

Leste's posture on democracy and human rights in Myanmar exemplifies both modes.

The AEMM was co-hosted by Brunei's Foreign Minister II, Dato Erywan Pehin Yusof, and EU High Representative Kaja Kallas, a prominent security advocate in Brussels' foreign policy. ASEAN's consensual culture and the EU's normative line found common ground on multilateralism and shared rules governing the international order.

The discussion of the situation in Myanmar was referred back to the earlier [Five-Point Consensus](#) in the AEMM. Similarly, the same issue remained contentious during the ASEAN Summit, highlighting growing [frustration](#) among ASEAN member states over the lack of progress in implementing the Five-Point Consensus.

These examples demonstrated the normative tension between pro-democracy states and those that were not, reflecting not only the value conflict within ASEAN but also the gap between ASEAN's normative commitment to democracy and its practices, a gap that may threaten the institution's existence.

This is where Timor-Leste's voice and stance were unique. Since 2021, its President, Jose Ramos-Horta, and Prime Minister, Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao, have publicly recognised the National Unity Government and supported Myanmar's pro-democracy forces. Gusmao even [expressed](#) Dili's reconsideration of joining ASEAN in 2023 if ASEAN could not properly address the Myanmar issue. In response, the military junta in Myanmar formally opposed Timor-Leste's accession in July [2025](#) and expelled Timor-Leste's chargé d'affaires in February [2026](#). Fortunately, friction between the two states was contained and deferred within AEMM and ASEAN.

Dili's normative stance was clear, but whether it will use the opportunity to demonstrate a distinctive Timorese position in steering the regional grouping towards a more principled and potentially provocative role on normative issues will need to be observed over the coming years.

### **A Wider Convening Role on Regional Issues**

Another expression of agency occurred before the AEMM and ASEAN Summit. On 20 April 2026, Freitas was elected First Vice-Chair of the 82nd Session of the [UN ESCAP](#) in Bangkok, where he led the General Debate on "Opportunities and Solutions for a Sustainable Future." Additionally, [Ambassador Adão Soares Barbosa](#) chaired the Least Developed Countries (LDC) Group on Climate Change this year.

These roles and opportunities highlighted Dili's active convening role within the bloc, demonstrating how a small state can influence regional agendas on issues like climate adaptation, sustainable development, and regional inclusion. They illustrated how small states can develop international influence through thematic specialisation, sharing operational experiences with the bloc and regional partners.

These roles suggest that Timor-Leste's small-state agency now operates at both regional and international levels: within ASEAN's dialogues, within the broader UN system, and through issue-based regional coalitions. These roles enable small states to share their experiences on various issues and to build coalitions both inside and outside the regional grouping.

### **Proactive ASEAN Chairmanship in 2029**

The AEMM and the ASEAN Summit 2026 are pretexts for Dili's leadership at the [2029 ASEAN Summit](#), which it will host and chair. The Timorese government has [established](#) the Executive Committee for the ASEAN Chairship National Organising Council (ACNOC) 2029 and the ASEAN National Secretariat, both tasked with preparing for the ASEAN Chairship.

On 19 April, Minister Freitas met the Singaporean Ambassador, [Teo Lay Cheng](#), to discuss preparations. A few days later, the EU Ambassador to Timor-Leste met the President of Dili's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI) to expand [private-sector cooperation](#) to strengthen economic growth ahead of Dili's chairmanship in 2029.

As this article shows, national actions and bilateral partnerships have demonstrated that a small state created an operational agency through its formal inclusion in ASEAN. They helped transform Dili's regional diplomacy into agency and leverage to claim the bloc's chairmanship in 2029, and to host and set the agenda.

Chairing ASEAN entailed choosing themes and agendas, organising meetings, shaping the language and content of the communiqués, and planning and implementing the budget and programme. The capacity-building commitments in the AEMM Joint Statement, together with Dili's commitment to lead, will prepare it to assume the chairmanship role effectively in 2029.

### **Conclusion**

The 25th AEMM and the 48th ASEAN Summit did not seem extraordinary at first glance. They produced standard communiqué language, predictable priorities for securing regional energy and trade amid global wars and uncertainties, and renewed commitments among partners and members. But for Timor-Leste, these two meetings were the first regional and interregional events Dili attended as a full ASEAN member.

As demonstrated by Dili, a small-state agency turned formal membership into real leverage and agency through regional and interregional forums. Dili has already expressed its strong commitment to human rights and democracy, and counteracted the Myanmar military junta's actions against its own people.

The longer-term test is whether Timor-Leste can scale up its agency to uphold the 2029 chairmanship role while consistently embodying values aligned with the bloc.

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