



**P R I M E
M I N I S T E R**

POLICY SPEECH BY
HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRIME MINISTER
KAY RALA XANANA GUSMÃO AT THE ASEAN SECRETARIAT
RESPONSIBILITY AND OPPORTUNITY: TIMOR-LESTE IN ASEAN

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Palácio do Governo
Avenida Marginal
Dili, Timor-Leste

His Excellency, Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN

Ambassadors of fellow ASEAN nations

Ambassadors of ASEAN Partners

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to be here today, as the first Head of Government of Timor-Leste to visit the ASEAN Secretariat since we joined ASEAN.

I extend my thanks to the Secretary-General of ASEAN and the Secretariat team for the warm welcome.

Before I begin, I must express our deep sorrow at the devastating floods and landslides in Aceh, North Sumatra and West Sumatra and at the severe flooding affecting other parts of Indonesia.

On behalf of the Government and people of Timor-Leste, I offer our heartfelt condolences to all who have lost loved ones and our sympathy to the families who are displaced or still waiting for news. In this time of grief Timor-Leste stands with Indonesia and with the communities facing the impact of this tragedy.

With this in mind, I turn now to the work that brings us together today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For the people of Timor-Leste, our accession to ASEAN was the realisation of a long-held dream. It was also a powerful affirmation of our journey as a nation, from resilience and determination, to hope and promise.

I am going to briefly share with you Timor-Leste's perspective on the responsibilities and opportunities ASEAN membership presents.

I have no doubt, that in the decades to come, future historians and commentators will describe Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN as a pivotal moment in our development.

A pivotal moment that turned our gaze from our difficult past, to look outward and recognise we are a part of a greater whole.

Our journey to this pivotal moment was long and often lonely.

The Portuguese arrived in 1515. For centuries, colonial rule defined our place in the world. In 1975, as Portugal departed its colonies, the Timorese declared independence.

I led our resistance forces in the mountains and valleys of our country, often cut off from the world, but never from the conviction that self-determination was our right. For decades we felt forgotten.

Then the Asian Financial Crisis triggered the Reformasi political movement that offered hope to our people. And in early 1999, the new Indonesian President, B.J. Habibie, agreed to allow the Timorese to vote on our future.

In August 1999, we bravely exercised our right to self-determination and voted overwhelmingly for independence.

On 20 May 2002, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste was reborn as an independent and sovereign nation.

From the beginning, we understood that the success of our small nation depended on friendship and cooperation within our region.

We prioritised reconciliation with Indonesia.

We understood that independence, infused with resentment and bitterness, would not deliver stability or opportunity for our people.

We understood that in the wake of Reformasi, Indonesians were also living through a period of disruption and seeking a more just and democratic future.

Reformasi gave us a genuine sense of solidarity with the people of Indonesia.

So instead of being trapped by the past, we were determined to look forward.

We acknowledged our separate, and shared, histories and then moved forward together in a partnership based on respect, cooperation and mutual interests.

Our reconciliation with Indonesia allowed our new nation to build our future alongside our largest neighbour without fear or grievance.

It is testimony to the success of our partnership that it was my dear friend, Indonesia's first directly elected President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who first encouraged us to apply for ASEAN membership in 2011.

Today, the strong and friendly relationship between Indonesia and Timor-Leste is an example of true reconciliation – one that we believe provides a model, not just for our region, but for the world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The realisation of Timor-Leste's long held dream to join ASEAN brings with it responsibilities and opportunities.

As a member of ASEAN, we have a responsibility to respect and adopt the core values of ASEAN.

These include:

- peaceful cooperation
- respect for sovereignty
- unity in diversity
- regional solidarity
- collective responsibility for enhancing regional peace
- good governance, and
- the principles of democracy, respect for fundamental freedoms, the promotion and protection of human rights and ASEAN centrality.

For Timor-Leste, these are not abstract ideals. They reflect our lived experience as a country – of struggle, reconciliation and nation-building.

And now, as a member of ASEAN, we have the responsibility to ensure these ideals and values are reflected in our laws, policies and institutions.

As Prime Minister, I am leading the reforms that must be made to ensure our full integration in ASEAN.

We have adopted a 'whole of government' approach to our participation in ASEAN making it the responsibility of the entire government – not just a single ministry.

Importantly, our government considers that participation in ASEAN structures and meetings is not an expense – it is an investment in our country's and our region's future.

We are working with the ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN member States to fulfil all post-accession commitments and join ASEAN's economic agreements.

We are strengthening our national laws, regulations, and institutions to ensure smooth integration across all three ASEAN pillars – Political-Security, Economic and Socio-Cultural.

We are modernising our customs systems and rationalising our trade and investment rules and standards.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are also aware that ASEAN membership brings with it the responsibility to contribute positively to our regional solidarity.

No longer does Timor-Leste stand-alone – we are now part of the regional political and economic architecture.

ASEAN creates a space for dialogue, trust and friendship between leaders and between countries.

Timor-Leste now has a responsibility to contribute meaningfully to this dialogue, to build stronger relationships in our region and to support the building of trust and peace.

As part of this commitment, in 2026 I hope to be able to visit most ASEAN nations to strengthen bonds of friendship and progress regional integration and cooperation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Just as ASEAN membership creates responsibilities, it also presents great opportunities for our country.

Thanks to our ASEAN membership, Timor-Leste is now part of a dynamic and innovative regional community of more than 670 million people.

Integration with ASEAN's economy will provide great opportunities for our people, supporting investment, development and job creation. It will help us diversify our economy and provide ideas and inspiration for our young people and businesses.

More than 60% of Timorese are under the age of 30, and their future will be increasingly shaped by ASEAN's vast regional network of education, labour and innovation opportunities.

Our young people will benefit from ASEAN initiatives to accelerate digital connectivity, capacity-building and participation in the digital economy.

ASEAN membership also gives confidence to potential investors. It signals that Timor-Leste has joined its region and aligned with its rules and norms.

It positions Timor-Leste to become a key energy and mining hub in Southeast Asia. We are rich in geological resources, both onshore and offshore, and we are committed to developing them to provide a strong foundation for our economic future.

The foundation for the development of our energy and minerals industry is a petroleum hub on our south coast known as the Tasi Mane project.

It will be anchored by the development of Greater Sunrise – one of the most valuable undeveloped gas fields in our region.

We are confident that our accession to ASEAN and integration in the region will support the development of the Tasi Mane project.

As well as energy and minerals, Timor-Leste is building a tourism industry.

Our country is blessed with tropical beaches and marine environments rich in biodiversity. We have great beauty in our mountains and a deep heritage, history and culture.

The improved interconnectivity we enjoy across ASEAN is already growing our tourism industry and we want to ensure that this creates jobs for our people and builds relationships and connections with our ASEAN neighbours.

I urge you all to visit Timor-Leste where I know you will be very warmly received.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Timor-Leste also embraces the opportunity ASEAN provides to engage collectively at this time of change and uncertainty.

In a world that is fracturing – with growing conflict and mistrust – ASEAN operates with the conviction that international cooperation still matters.

In our shared commitment to ASEAN centrality, we have the benefit of regional solidarity and mutual support and respect.

At the same time, we recognise that this solidarity is being tested. We are, of course, all concerned with the renewed fighting along the Cambodia–Thailand border. Despite the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord of October 2025, peace has proved fragile.

In moments like this, ASEAN's core principles must guide us. We urge both governments to exercise maximum restraint and return to dialogue through existing bilateral channels and ASEAN mechanisms, consistent with the ASEAN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

The immediate priority must be to protect civilians and prevent further displacement, while creating space for dialogue and diplomacy. Our region cannot afford for this dispute to deepen or for it to divert us from our shared agenda of integration, development and stability.

This is why ASEAN must remain steady and proactive. ASEAN must do all that it can to support effective efforts at de-escalation and a negotiated settlement that provides a foundation for long-term peace.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As ASEAN works to uphold stability and progress, Timor-Leste begins its new chapter as a member of the family.

We enter ASEAN with a sense of humility, gratitude and determination.

For ASEAN, we hope that our membership brings a new generation and a new story, reinforcing a shared sense of purpose and unity.

Our history has taught us that no nation is too small to make a difference, to uphold dignity, justice and the right to live in peace.

In welcoming Timor-Leste during a time of global uncertainty and conflict, ASEAN has shown the world that solidarity is stronger than division.

Let us all continue to stand together for unity, for cooperation and for peace.

Thank you very much.