News



East Timor President Francisco Guterres delivers a speech in Dili in late January. The government of East Timor, one of Asia's most Catholic countries, is blocking a Nov. 23 trip by Guterres to the Vatican, where he plans to invite Pope Francis to visit the country. (CNS/Reuters/Lirio Da Fonseca)

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The government of East Timor, one of Asia's most Catholic countries, is blocking a planned trip by its president to the Vatican, where he plans to invite Pope Francis to visit.

The president and government have been in a standoff since June, when the Alliance for Progress and Change, or AMP, which won the May 10 general election, presented its candidates for the nation's ministry for presidential approval.

After a few rounds of discussions over nearly a dozen contentious nominations, President Francisco Guterres declined to endorse nine nominees he claims are under suspicion or investigation for corruption, leaving open important ministerial positions. The Alliance for Progress and Change has said the president should approve the ministers, and if any formal proceedings are brought against them, they would have to stand down while they are tried in court.

The government, a three-party coalition led by the prime minister, is elected separately from the president, who currently represents the main opposition party, Fretilin. There is a split of powers between the two top jobs, and the government controls the budget and has approval of all the president's travel.

"As long as the president will not swear in the nine nominees, the AMP will block the president from visiting abroad," a spokesman for the government told Catholic News Service.

Guterres told media at a briefing at the Presidential Palace in the capital, Dili, Oct. 26: "His Holiness Pope Francis has invited me to pay a visit to Rome and is really hoping for this visit to take place.

"Well, I could also invite His Holiness to visit Timor-Leste [East Timor] during my visit to Rome, which means an official invitation shall be extended by the president of the republic to His Holiness the pope.

"An official invitation to the pope is imperative, even though His Holiness has the will to visit Timor-Leste. Therefore, the nuncio informed me when he delivered the invitation, and I hope the national parliament may be able to decide soon."

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East Timor has a long Catholic history begun by missionaries who arrived with the Portuguese in the 15th century. The Portuguese later became the half-island nation's colonial masters until 1975, when a newly elected Portuguese socialist government suddenly withdrew from most of its colonies.

In 1975, many Timorese converted to Catholicism when the former colony was invaded by neighboring Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country. East Timor gained independence from Indonesia in 2002.

By then the country, which now has a population of 1.3 million, was more than 90 percent Catholic. St John Paul II became the first pope to visit in 1989 and was the first head of state to visit during the Indonesian occupation. During his visit, he admonished the Indonesians to respect human rights and helped to bring the plight of the country to an international audience. In 1996, the Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo of Dili shared the Nobel Peace Prize with activist Jose Ramos-Horta.

The presidential trip to visit Francis was scheduled in early October during a visit by the apostolic nuncio to East Timor, Archbishop Joseph Marino, who lives in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a country to which he also serves as nuncio.

On Oct. 23, the president of the East Timor bishops' conference, Bishop Basilio do Nascimento, told media: "As you all know, last week nuncio Joseph Marino visited Dili with a reason that the Vatican invited the president to pay a visit to the Vatican." The bishop announced the Nov. 23 visit and said he wanted to see if the bishops thought a papal visit was possible, since East Timor is the "proportionally biggest [Catholic country] in the region."