

# UN imposes tight control over East Timor elections

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**18 July 2001**

Approved political parties began campaigning this week in East Timor for the election of a constituent assembly on August 30. UN and Timorese officials along with the international media have hailed the ballot as a further step towards democracy and independence, and a vindication of the Australian-led UN military intervention in 1999 that seized control of the half island from Indonesia and pro-Indonesian militia.

But an objective examination shows the elections have nothing to do with either democracy or independence. The framework for the ballot was not decided by the Timorese people but by the UN and the major Western powers, and the composition of the next government has largely been determined in advance. In effect, the half island will remain a semi-colonial protectorate—even after formal independence, originally due at the end of the year but now postponed to a date yet to be determined.

Sergio Vieira de Mello, who currently holds absolute legal power as the head of the UN Transitional Authority for East Timor (UNTAET), unveiled the terms and conditions of the election on June 29, in an address to the outgoing UN-appointed National Council of Timorese politicians.

No matter who was elected, he would personally appoint a new cabinet after the ballot, de Mello declared. It would include non-elected “eminent figures” and only “broadly reflect” the voting results. Moreover, he would insist on the formation of a “government of national unity” based on a 15-point Pact of National Unity to be signed by the parties contesting the election. He would also retain “ultimate executive authority” until independence, which was originally scheduled for December this year.

Vieira de Mello’s announcement followed a joint UN-World Bank meeting of aid donor countries in Canberra on June 14-15, which endorsed the plan to impose tight UN control over the political situation and made it clear that the Western powers would continue to militarily and financially dominate the small territory indefinitely.

With the agreement of the UNTAET cabinet—which was represented by its foreign and economic affairs spokesmen, Jose Ramos Horta and Mari Alkatiri—the meeting set an annual government budget of just \$US65 million a year, far less than required to sustain basic services. This was in line with the UN’s previous insistence that the number of public servants, including teachers and nurses, be cut from 36,000 under Indonesian rule to 12,000.

In his report to the gathering, Vieira de Mello appealed for loans and other financial contributions toward the budget on the basis that it had confronted the task of implementing “cruel cuts”. He promised to quickly tackle the “sensitive” issue of “unrealistic expectations” in levels of government services before they led to “disappointment and

unreasoned hostility”.

Anticipating social unrest, the meeting backed the imposition of heavy security restrictions on electioneering, with Vieira de Mello stating that 1,400 armed civilian police would be “vigilant and visible,” backed by 8,000 UN-badged soldiers. “There is still a very real fear among much of the population that the political process may lead to unrest and violence,” he told the participants.

Interviewed on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio on the first day of the Canberra meeting, Vieira de Mello reiterated that UN troops and senior administrators would remain after independence and that “the Australian Government...is of the same opinion”. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has indicated that Australian troops will remain in East Timor for three to five years at least.

Under the UN’s timetable, the August 30 ballot, to be held on the second anniversary of the 1999 vote to secede from Indonesia, will elect an 88-member assembly. This assembly must adopt a constitution within 90 days of its first meeting, giving it little time to consider alternative models. It is still not clear whether it will become the country’s first parliament, if and when independence is declared.

UNTAET’s rules restrict registration to parties that accept the 1999 referendum result, automatically barring dissident parties that either favour re-integration with Indonesia or reject the UN-imposed administration, calling for immediate independence.

Under the Pact of National Unity, parties must also pledge to refrain from violence and accept the election results unconditionally. More significantly, the document stipulates support for Xanana Gusmao, the former National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT) leader, to become East Timor’s inaugural national president, given “the aspirations of the overwhelming majority” of the people.

This is a classic case of fixing the election result before a vote has been cast. It means that the UN authorities, assisted by selected Timorese leaders, will not only appoint the next government but have already chosen the head of state.

The cementing of Gusmao’s position is all the more remarkable since he has repeatedly stated that he does not wish to contest any election for the presidency. Gusmao has held no formal position since he resigned suddenly from the UN’s National Council in March, but has continued to enjoy UN backing, functioning as a de facto president. Gusmao quit as Council president after being unable to obtain agreement from the two main political parties, Fretilin and the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT), for the CNRT to continue as an umbrella political front under his leadership after independence. Gusmao later disbanded the CNRT.

Some Timorese leaders have openly called for independence to be postponed or for the newly-formed state to form an association with

Portugal, the former colonial ruler, or Australia, the neighbouring regional power. The Catholic Bishop of Dili, Carlos Belo, has previously proposed delaying independence for two years and recently advocated associated-state status with Portugal for at least 10 years. In a July 4 interview with the *Australian Financial Review*, Ramos Horta said East Timor should have such a close relationship with Australia that it would be “almost an Australian protectorate.”

For his part, Gusmao has advocated close ties with Indonesia and actively pursued the UN’s South African-style agenda of “Reception, Truth and Reconciliation” with leaders of the Indonesian-backed militia that devastated the half island before and after the 1999 secession ballot. Earlier this month, he held a meeting at the West Timor border with Cancio Lopes de Carvalho, the head of one of the most notorious Indonesian-armed groups, the Mahindi (Life or Death Integration) militia group. Lopes de Carvalho and his two brothers, Francisco and Nemecio, also militia leaders, later issued a statement of support for Gusmao to become president.

Gusmao’s relations with the militia leaders, UNTAET’s neo-colonial regime and the development of mass unemployment and poverty under its rule have provoked hostility among East Timorese, which is partially expressed in the emergence of an array of political parties.

Even with the restrictions placed on registration, 16 parties and 16 independent candidates will contest the August 30 elections, some expressing criticisms of the UN and Fretilin, whose secretary general Alkatiri, has been a key figure in the UN administration, together with Gusmao and Ramos Horta.

Any decline in Fretilin’s popularity is of particular concern to the UN because the party has used its credentials as a liberation movement that fought Indonesia’s 24-year rule in order to urge Timor’s oppressed masses to accept a pro-Western economic order that will benefit foreign investors and Timorese capitalists. Alkatiri and Horta were closely involved in negotiating last month’s new Timor Gap Treaty, which allowed Australia to retain most of the benefits of the oil and gas reserves under the Timor Sea.

Several parties have split off from Fretilin to tap into the growing discontent, including the Socialist Party of Timor (PST), which advocates mild economic reforms; the Timorese Association of Social Democrats (ASDT), which is using Fretilin’s original name from 1974; and the Popular Council for the Defence of the Democratic Republic of East Timor (CPD-RDTL), which opposes the August poll on the basis that Fretilin already declared independence in 1975.

In several recent incidents, although the facts are murky, Vieira de Mello and UNTAET cabinet members appear to be seeking to discredit these parties, accusing them of planning to disrupt the elections. They have labelled CPD-RDTL as a pro-Indonesian front and linked it to letters allegedly sent to UNTAET threatening widespread violence. Earlier in the year, three CPD-RDTL members were arrested for supposedly attempting to assassinate Gusmao at a political rally.

Just before campaigning commenced, UN troops seized 200 military-style uniforms that had arrived from Indonesia, purportedly for use by the ASDT. Ramos Horta declared the consignment to be a breach of the national unity pact, which bans assistance from any foreign country, and demanded an explanation from ASDT leader Francisco Xavier do Amaral, one of Fretilin’s founding figures in 1974.

While UNTAET has sought to justify its security measures by raising concerns about election violence, in an earlier report to the UN Security Council in May, Vieira de Mello spoke more candidly about

the danger of political unrest. He warned that “pervasive poverty and unemployment create social conditions that make it relatively easy to incite people to violence, notably disaffected youth”.

After nearly two years of UN rule, East Timor remains one of the poorest territories in the world. Its Gross Domestic Product has declined from \$US350 per head in 1999 to \$US250 per head. Most services and infrastructure are still to be restored. Only three hospitals exist and just 300 schools have been re-roofed out of 820.

The cost of living has soared, partly due to the “bubble economy” created by the UN’s highly-paid expatriate staff and also because UNTAET has imposed import duties, a 10 percent consumption tax and user fees for government services. Local workers are demanding higher wages, with a strike by Radio UNTAET and TV Timor Lorosa’e workers disrupting plans to broadcast the opening of political campaigning.

Ruling circles in Australia appear to be cautiously supporting Fretilin’s leaders, together with Gusmao and Horta (who are no longer Fretilin members), as the best hope of containing the situation. Reflecting this stance, Geoffrey Barker reported in the *Australian Financial Review* last month that “there seems little doubt that the dominant majority party will be Fretilin”. Barker described it as “the biggest, richest and by far the best-organised group”.

Barker commended Fretilin for having abandoned “earlier Leftist preferences for highly centralised command economy politics for policies similar to those of the Australian Labor Party” and for committing itself to “small government”. At the same time, he warned that its platform still contained “idealistic rhetoric” that could dangerously raise popular expectations of East Timor’s people being materially better off than under Indonesian rule.

While working with the East Timorese leaders for now, the UN powers have demonstrated that they have no intention of quickly relaxing their political and military grip over the resource-rich and strategically significant enclave in the Indonesian archipelago.



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