

A highly-orchestrated election in East Timor

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Even before a single vote was cast in today's United Nations-organised election of a constituent assembly in East Timor, the local and international media had declared the result to be a foregone conclusion. Fretilin, the former independence front that has worked closely with the UN administration since Indonesia's withdrawal from the territory two years ago, was "expected to sweep to power" according to media reports.

Not only that, but Xanana Gusmao, the former commander of Fretilin's guerilla force, Falintil, was invariably referred to as the "president-in-waiting," despite the fact that he is not a candidate in the election. Moreover, no presidential post even exists—the constituent assembly is meant to draft and adopt a constitution over the next 90 days.

While the election is portrayed by the media, the UN and Western governments as the first exercise of democracy in East Timor since the UN seized control of the half island from Indonesia in 1999, these pre-ordained results indicate that it is a highly stage-managed ballot designed to produce an outcome acceptable to the major powers that led and backed the UN intervention.

The UN administrator of East Timor, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and the governments involved have made it clear for months that they regard it as essential that Gusmao take the presidency in order to contain social unrest, quell differences within East Timor's small political elite and implement the measures required by global investors. Reflecting this consensus, a report in the British *Independent* described Gusmao as East Timor's "one credible leader".

When Gusmao formally announced on August 25 that he would run for election as president—no date has been set for such a poll—he openly referred to pressure from international governments to do so. In an interview with the British Broadcasting Commission (BBC) on

the same day, he revealed that the United States had asked him to stand.

As soon as he made his long-expected announcement, the leaders of the 16 parties running in today's election welcomed it, without exception, as did Vieira de Mello. The UN administrator, who currently holds supreme power in the territory, gave Gusmao his endorsement, stating that the announcement would "reassure the population and will help us to move this process forward in a stable, peaceful manner as has been the case so far".

Gusmao made his candidacy conditional on the continued adherence of all political parties to the "National Unity Pact", which has prevented them from criticising each other or expressing policy differences throughout the election campaign.

Furthermore, he insisted that this unity must dictate the character of the government to be formed when the half-island is declared to be an independent state, probably some time next year. The "composition of the Government... must be guided by a sense of competence and professionalism and not by political criteria," he said.

Gusmao also called for a policy of "Reconciliation and Amnesty" toward the Indonesian military and its pro-Jakarta militias, which engaged in a scorched earth program of killing, burning and looting after the August 1999 vote for secession from Indonesia.

In accord with the National Unity Pact, the electioneering has been marked by a lack of political discussion. The media has depicted the election campaign as a series of jubilant rallies, marches and pop concerts, but its most significant feature has been that the parties have restricted themselves to bland platitudes.

As a *Washington Post* report noted: "Many of their platforms appear strangely identical... Party leaders have refrained from taking rhetorical potshots at each

other.” When the newspaper asked Fernando Lasama de Araujo, the leader of the recently formed Democratic Party, why voters should choose his party rather than Fretilin, he declined to answer. “We don’t want to criticise anybody,” he said.

Fretilin’s leaders, president Francisco Guterres and secretary-general Mari Alkatiri, have been widely reported predicting a landslide victory, winning 90 percent of the vote and 79 of the 88 seats in the constituent assembly. International ballot monitors, including those from the US-based Carter Centre, have reported complaints of Fretilin intimidation, including the use of words such as “traitors” to describe its opponents.

When addressing voters, Fretilin leaders have largely confined themselves to boasting that their party was the only one to fight for independence after the Indonesian regime invaded the former Portuguese colony in 1975. When speaking to international journalists, however, they have stressed that Fretilin is advocating a “free market” economy in line with the requirements of the global markets and financial authorities.

The UN and the various capitalist powers—notably Australia, Portugal and the US—see Gusmao and Fretilin as the only ones capable of holding East Timor together when the reality of abject poverty begins to discredit the rhetoric of national independence. Living conditions remain below the poor levels imposed under Indonesian rule. The UN administration and Western aid donor countries have set a budget of just \$US65 million a year, requiring severe cuts in government services, including health and education.

In recent weeks, moreover, hopes of early substantial revenues from oil and gas projects in the Timor Sea have been dashed by the refusal of the major oil companies involved, led by Philips Petroleum of the US, to make final commitments to the largest projects unless they receive hefty tax concessions.

In addition, the price of the only cash crop, coffee, has fallen by 25 percent in recent weeks. As the UN starts to withdraw its personnel early next year, the bubble economy created by its presence will begin to burst, leaving most East Timorese families relying upon subsistence agriculture.

Despite the orchestrated character of the election campaign, sharp tensions exist within the Timorese leadership, reflected in the formation of so many rival

political parties. Alkatiri has spoken of forming an “inclusive” government, but not necessarily including leaders of other parties. On August 27, the Portuguese news agency *Lusa* on August 27 reported him declaring that Fretilin would accept “a coalition of talents, not a coalition of parties”.

Fretilin has already drafted a constitution along the French lines that will allocate most domestic power to a prime minister and cabinet, with a president having control over foreign and military policy. It is not clear that Gusmao agrees with that model and several parties have expressed reservations about Fretilin’s proposal to declare independence, nominally at least, on November 28.

For now, Vieira de Mello intends to keep a tight rein over the territory. He said on August 21 that if Fretilin emerged as the major party after the elections he would form a “Planning Commission” consisting of Gusmao and Alkatiri, which would oversee “all areas of government” and answer to a “chief minister... or me, the transitional administrator”.



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