

East Timor election reveals disaffection with Fretilin

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In the leadup to the United Nations-conducted ballot in East Timor on August 30 to elect a Constituent Assembly, the UN, the international media and leaders of Fretilin, the former independence movement, all predicted that Fretilin would win by a landslide—perhaps taking as much as 90 percent of the vote.

Fretilin was portrayed as the party that had led a 26-year fight for independence against Portuguese and Indonesian rule and that would fulfill the democratic aspirations of the East Timorese masses. The media coverage generally gave the impression of a carnival atmosphere, dominated by large Fretilin rallies.

When the election results came in, however, Fretilin barely obtained a majority, polling 57 percent of the vote, with a plethora of nine other parties and one independent sharing the remaining votes. Fretilin took 55 seats in the 88-seat Assembly, leaving it short of the two-thirds majority it hoped for in order to dictate the drafting of a national constitution.

The results reveal that the growing disparity between Fretilin's rhetoric of alleviating hardship and the stark reality of continuing grinding poverty has made inroads into its support among the poorest layers of society. In the minds of many people, Fretilin is closely associated with the UN regime, which has failed to deliver any significant improvement in living standards over the past two years.

Fretilin reorganised its Central Committee to include leading Indonesian collaborators such as Francisco Kalbuadi, the son of an Indonesian general who led the attack on the border town of Balibo in 1975, signalling the start of the Indonesian invasion from West Timor. Fretilin's campaign manager in Ermera, a coffee-growing area 60 kilometres southwest of Dili, the capital, was a district head under Indonesian rule and

very unpopular. Fretilin won only 38.6 percent of the vote in Ermera.

The Democratic Party (PD) was the next most successful party, winning seven seats, followed by the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Timorese Social Democratic Association (ASDT), with six seats each.

Fernando de Araujo and Constancio Pinto head the PD, formed just before the elections. Araujo was a leader of Resistencia Nacional Estudantil de Timor Leste (RENETIL)—the underground organisation of Timorese students in Indonesia—and Pinto was a student leader in Dili under Indonesian occupation. PD has oriented to young people, among whom there is wide disaffection with UN rule. Unemployment stands at 80 percent, and most available jobs are with the UN, which often requires fluency in English.

The ASDT is headed by Xavier do Amaral, a founding member of Fretilin who was expelled in 1977 because he differed with the unsuccessful policy of waging a guerilla struggle against the Indonesian military. Amaral made his peace with Fretilin at its party congress in 2000, but for the elections adopted the name ASDT—Fretilin's original 1974 title. In effect, ASDT claimed to be returning to Fretilin's roots, making nebulous reformist calls for social justice. Amaral's base of support is among the Mambai-speaking people in the central mountain area.

While distancing himself from Fretilin, Amaral has offered to form an alliance to allow it to pass its proposed constitution unhindered. "Given the shared ideologies (with Fretilin)," Amaral said, the ASDT was prepared to "offer its services". Amaral has also withdrawn his pre-election declaration that he would stand for President against Xanana Gusmao, the former Fretilin leader who enjoys the UN's support.

The PSD is headed by Mario Carrascalao, a former Indonesian Governor of East Timor, who formed the party in September 2000 as an alternative to Fretilin and the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT), the former Portuguese-aligned party. The PSD has also sought to appeal to a younger generation, which distrusts the older parties. The UN regime’s foreign minister, Jose Ramos Horta, was reported to be aligned to the PSD, but he has disavowed any link.

Five other parties—the UDT, Sons of the Mountain Warriors (Kota), Christian Democratic Party (PDC), Peoples Party of Timor (PPT) and Timorese Nationalist Party (PNT)—each gained two seats in the Assembly. Three other parties took a seat each and an independent won the enclave of Oecussi in West Timor.

During the election, all parties adhered to the UN’s “Pact of National Unity,” insisted upon by Gusmao as a condition for accepting the presidency. Among other things, the pact required them to refrain from criticising each other and to agree in advance to the formation of a unity government. None of them presented a program beyond bland platitudes.

Since the election, Fretilin leaders have reiterated their allegiance to free market capitalism and their previous disavowal of any connection to socialism and Marxism. Fretilin president Francisco Guterres stated in Dili after the poll that: “Fretilin would like to solemnly reaffirm that it wants to form an all-inclusive government, a government that is transparent, an efficient government.”

Nevertheless, during the campaign, Fretilin leaders made vague pledges to eradicate poverty within a certain time frame, fostering illusions among its supporters that it stands for social equality. On the weekend, the *Australian* interviewed a Fretilin voter, Jaoa Neves, who was of the firm belief that “(East Timor) is not going to be a capitalist nation—it will be a socialist nation,” where “everyone will have the chance to study, not just the people who have money”. The *Australian’s* reporter commented: “This kind of talk from the Fretilin heartland makes Fretilin’s leaders nervous.”

The UN administrator of East Timor, Sergio Vieira de Mello—who still holds absolute power under the terms of the UN protectorate—moved quickly after the election to bolster the position of Gusmao, whom the media routinely describes as “president-elect”. Vieira

de Mello appointed Gusmao as special advisor for strategic planning and defence, likely to be a key post in the transitional government that the UN will announce on September 15, even though Gusmao was not a candidate on August 30.

According to his close associate Horta, Gusmao has criticised the Fretilin leadership for raising popular expectations of measures to alleviate the ravages of poverty and unemployment. Horta told *Newsweek* magazine that Gusmao “has a strong resentment and anger towards Fretilin. He saw Fretilin’s campaign as reminiscent of its radicalism of the 1970s.” *Newsweek* commented: “Gusmao worries that Fretilin leaders do not share the modern, investor-friendly outlook necessary to attract badly needed foreign capital.”

Reflecting these concerns, on September 6, Vieira de Mello and World Bank officials held top-level talks with party representatives in Dili on the make-up of the new government and met with Fretilin secretary general Mari Alkatiri to discuss the drafting of the constitution.

While the August 30 election has been hailed by the UN, Western governments and the international media as the “democratic birth” of a new nation, the reality is that the UN remains in charge, until some time next year at least, and the incoming government will be beholden to foreign investors and the global banks, notably the World Bank and the IMF.



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