

Hand-picked cabinet in East Timor

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The United Nations administrator in East Timor, Sergio Vieira de Mello, swore in a new cabinet on September 20, following recent elections. While the world's media hailed it as the territory's "first truly democratic government," De Mello selected the entire ministry, based on his own preferences rather than the poll results, and still retains ultimate authority.

With the UN mandate over East Timor due to expire sometime early next year (no date has yet been fixed), De Mello and the UN authorities are anxious to install a trusted, pro-capitalist regime that can contain social unrest. The date for so-called independence has already been pushed back from the end of 2001, because of concerns about the tiny, impoverished state's stability once the UN withdraws its personnel and funding.

De Mello gave Fretilin, the former secessionist movement that gained the majority in the August 30 Constituent Assembly elections, only 10 out of the 24 cabinet posts. Having worked closely with UNTAET authorities over the past two years, Fretilin failed to live up to its predictions of an electoral landslide. It took 57 percent of the vote, giving it 55 seats in the 88-seat Assembly, a result that revealed considerable popular dissatisfaction.

Following its lower than expected vote, De Mello decided to limit Fretilin's weight in the new cabinet. While Fretilin secretary general Mari Alkatiri was appointed Chief Minister and Minister for Economy and Development, 11 cabinet posts were allocated to figures who did not participate in the August 30 poll.

The most prominent was Jose Ramos Horta, appointed Senior Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation. Armindo Maia, Rector of the University of Dili and member of a World Bank mission in East Timor, became Transport and Communications Minister. Judges and bureaucrats were appointed, including Domingos Maria Sarmiento, President of the Dili District Court, who became junior foreign affairs

minister and Mariano Jose Lopes da Cruz, Inspector-General of the East Timor Transitional Administration, who was chosen as Secretary of State for Natural and Mineral Resources.

The election runner-up, the Democratic Party (PD), which won seven Assembly seats, was allocated three cabinet positions. Most notably, its leader Fernando de Araujo was appointed Secretary of State for Labour and Solidarity, a post in which he will no doubt be expected to suppress demands for higher wages among Timor's lowly-paid workers. The PD, formed just before the election, captured the support of disaffected younger layers and has been included to give the impression of a representative government.

Media outlets dutifully described the cabinet as "inclusive," even though the next two most successful parties, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Timorese Social Democratic Association (ASDT), with six Assembly seats each, were given no posts. Like Fretilin, both parties are associated with the older political elite. ASDT traded on its close association with Fretilin while the PSD is largely a split from the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT), the former Portuguese-aligned party.

De Mello retained control of defence and police, appointing former Fretilin leader Xanana Gusmao, as a special adviser for strategic planning and defence. Gusmao's role, De Mello said, would be "consultative with maybe an executive function, with Gusmao being the intermediary between the chief of defence staff and myself." In effect, Gusmao—routinely referred to as the president-elect, despite never having stood for election—will be a free agent answerable only to De Mello.

In his opening address to the Constituent Assembly, Alkatiri pledged to introduce free market measures "to promote economic development more rapidly," while warning that his government faced financial difficulty.

He revealed that because of declining support from donor countries, the government had already suffered a \$US15 million shortfall in its proposed budget of \$65 million. “We must therefore pursue a policy of prudent fiscal management,” he declared. “I must alert our peoples to this financial constraint, as it may in the future hinder the implementation and execution of government programs.”

As one of his first acts in office, Alkatiri travelled to the northern Australian city of Darwin on September 25 for talks with US oil company Phillips Petroleum, which has demanded higher tax concessions before proceeding with a pipeline from the Timor Sea to Darwin. Accompanied by UN negotiator Peter Galbraith, Alkatiri underscored his regime’s dependence on the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves. “We need to get the whole operation going; we need the money in two or three years from now, but still we need a good deal for both sides.”

While trading on Fretilin’s reputation of conducting a protracted independence struggle, Alkatiri typifies East Timor’s small, relatively privileged elite. From a landed family, he became a lawyer and academic in exile in Mozambique, made money through rice farming and now owns considerable real estate in Dili.

Even though De Mello and Gusmao insisted that all parties sign a National Unity Pact to suppress political differences prior to the elections, in-fighting between various cliques has marked the early proceedings of the Constituent Assembly. At one point, PSD president Mario Carrascalao, from another wealthy family, threatened to boycott the Assembly because of Fretilin’s domination.

As a result of a bloc between Fretilin, ASDT and the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), Fretilin president Francisco Guterres was elected Assembly Speaker, with ASDT president Francisco Xavier do Amaral and PDC secretary-general Arlindo Marcal as vice-presidents. The de-facto coalition seems designed to secure the required two-thirds majority for Fretilin’s preferred constitution.

In a sign of continuing discontent, Resistencia Nacional Estudantil de Timor Leste (RENETIL), a student movement linked to the PD, has published a statement entitled “A popular challenge to UNTAET’s achievements”, which calls for De Mello’s removal and outlines UNTAET’s failure to deliver social

services to the masses. It notes that most people do not have access to safe water, power failures are frequent and the country’s landscape still features ruined buildings. “The experience of East Timorese in terms of basic services does not match UNTAET’s description,” it concludes.

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, a non-government agency operating in East Timor, has also reported widespread dissatisfaction. “Young people are worried about the lack of jobs, despite the apparent ‘economic boom’ provided by the large international presence, particularly in Dili,” it stated. “High school graduates are resentful that only those who speak English or Portuguese and can use a computer are accepted into the civil service. Many are left with an Indonesian education that has left them unequipped and sidelined from employment in the international sector.”



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