

Australian military occupation of East Timor proceeds “full steam ahead”

Peter Symonds
27 May 2006

As Australian troops pour into East Timor and take control of the capital Dili, the neo-colonial character of the operation is becoming increasingly evident. Under the pretext of preventing civil war and helping the Timorese people, Australian imperialism has moved to reassert its dominance in East Timor, to install a compliant regime and to protect its economic and strategic interests.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard declared yesterday: “There is a significant governance problem inside East Timor, there’s no point in beating about bush. The country has not been well-governed and I do hope that the sobering experience for those in elected positions of having to call in help from outside will induce the appropriate behaviour inside the country.”

By last night at least 500 Australian troops, backed by armoured vehicles and Black Hawk attack helicopters, had fanned out in Dili, after seizing the international airport on Thursday. An Australian frigate and supply ship are stationed in Dili harbour. Three more troop carriers are due in the next two days, to bring the numbers to 1,300 soldiers and 500 support personnel—a force larger and far more heavily armed than East Timor’s tiny military. Australian troops will be reinforced by 200 New Zealand troops, 500 Malaysian military personnel and 120 Portuguese paramilitary police. The US is providing heavy airlift capacity and has sent 50 marines to guard its embassy in Dili.

Howard stressed that the Australian-led force was in East Timor to stay. “There’s no point in pulling out early. It’s a big thing to send 1,300 troops in. It’s a very foolish, shortsighted thing to pull them out before their job is completed. These tasks always last longer than you expect in the beginning.” The Australian press speculated that troops would remain at least until after Timorese elections next year, but Howard’s remarks foreshadow the possibility of a much longer military occupation.

Howard’s claims to have received an “invitation” from East Timor are transparently thin. In a Mafia-style operation, Canberra made Dili an offer it could not refuse. Amid deepening tensions within the East Timorese security forces, Australia dispatched troops and warships to the Timor Sea on May 12 without even informing the Timorese Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri. The move was designed to put pressure on Alkatiri, to encourage dissident pro-Australian elements, and to preempt any intervention by rival powers, particularly Portugal, East Timor’s former colonial ruler.

The Howard government has made no secret of its hostility to Alkatiri, who is increasingly being demonised in the Australian press as an autocrat, an incompetent and an elitist, out of touch with the sentiments of ordinary East Timorese. In Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian*, for instance, foreign editor Greg Sheridan branded Alkatiri

as “a disastrous prime minister” who has “entrenched the clique of ageing, dogmatic Marxist-Leninists within Fretilin and exacerbated every division within East Timorese society.”

Canberra had been pinning its hopes on a challenge by a faction led by UN ambassador Jose Luis Guterres to oust Alkatiri at last week’s congress of the ruling Fretilin party. When the “elitist” Alkatiri easily beat off his rival, the Howard government moved to intervene, using clashes between government and rebel soldiers and police as the pretext. While the full story of the factional divisions between “easterners” and “westerners” within the security forces remains to be told, it is no surprise that a dubious figure—Major Alfredo Reinado—with strong connections to Australia and its military has emerged as the purported rebel leader.

Relying heavily on East Timor’s President Xanana Gusmao and Foreign Minister Jose Ramos Horta, the Australian government used sporadic fighting between “rebels” and “loyalists” to extract an initial request for assistance on Wednesday night. While Howard insisted that the full intervention force would only be sent in once formal arrangements were in place, his stance abruptly changed on Thursday evening. Pointing to instances of violence, magnified out of all proportion by the Australian media, he gave the order to go “full steam ahead” without any final agreement on the rules of engagement with Dili.

Howard told the press: “We will go in without any conditionality. We’ve made a judgement the situation is deteriorating so badly that if we were to wait until we got three or four signatures on paper there might be significant further bloodshed and damaged property... Given the deteriorating situation, we will go ahead without any conditionality with the full deployment and the 1,300 [troops] will be in place in very short order.”

These comments underscore Howard’s complete contempt for the national sovereignty of East Timor. To intervene “without any conditionality”, let alone in response to any threat to Australia, constitutes a naked act of imperialist aggression. Moreover, the willingness of the UN and all the major powers to immediately sanction the military occupation exposes the hollowness of the grandiose rhetoric surrounding the granting of “independence” to East Timor in 2002.

Having presented the East Timorese government with a fait accompli, an Australian delegation, including senior military and diplomatic officials, met with East Timorese leaders late on Thursday to extract a formal agreement sanctifying the mission and giving Canberra a free hand. Defence Minister Brendan Nelson bluntly warned that Australian troops would not hesitate “to use whatever level of force is required to see they are disarmed and do not threaten

the life and safety of innocent people.” Nelson did not specify who “they” might be—government or rebels.

In an extraordinary admission that the Australian government is pursuing its own political agenda, Howard declared that the military would not “take sides” and would remain “neutral”. In other words, the Australian government has not sent soldiers to protect the government of East Timor, but is arrogating to itself the right to determine who the “enemy” is. The real target is Alkatiri and his government.

Already efforts are underway by Gusmao and Horta, regarded as reliable allies in Canberra, to push Alkatiri aside. On Thursday, Gusmao announced that he was assuming full control of the East Timorese security forces, despite objections from Alkatiri that the decision was unconstitutional. Horta has declared that he intends to organise talks between the rival factions on Sunday, even though Alkatiri has branded rebel leader Major Reinado a criminal and refused to negotiate to him. Not without justification, earlier in the week Alkatiri described the moves against him as “a real effort to launch an outright coup against the government.”

With the backing of the US and the UN, the Australian government is planning a major political intervention. An article in today’s *Australian* by defence analyst Bob Lowry, a former adviser in East Timor, indicated the scope of what is being prepared. Lowry called for the sacking of the present home affairs and defence ministers, the disbanding of the defence ministry, the integration and downsizing of the police and military, the installation of a foreign chief of police, and a full review of the constitution. He stopped short of openly calling for the ousting of Alkatiri, saying only that his future “must be left to the political process”. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has dispatched top UN political troubleshooter Ian Martin, who presided over the 1999 independence referendum, to oversee these political processes.

Howard is no more concerned about the plight of the East Timorese people today than he was in 1999. The guiding policy of successive Australian governments, Labor and Coalition, going back to Canberra’s tacit support for the Suharto dictatorship’s invasion in 1975, has been to obtain control of oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea and establish a strong security presence in the region. As in 1999, Australia has intervened quickly to preempt efforts by Portugal and other European countries to secure influence in East Timor. Canberra’s objection to Alkatiri is not that he is an elitist, but that he has sought support from other powers, particularly Portugal, and refused to immediately buckle to Australian bullying in negotiations over the Timor Sea oil and gas.

For all the talk of helping the East Timorese people, the Howard government has done nothing since 1999 to alleviate the country’s desperate social conditions. East Timor remains one of the poorest countries in Asia with unemployment of more than 50 percent, widespread poverty and a severe lack of basic services. It is this appalling social crisis that has led to ethnic tensions, whipped up by an unscrupulous and privileged ruling elite, all of whom, including Gusmao, Horta and Alkatiri, regard the masses with contempt. While it is prepared to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to secure its military and political objectives in East Timor, the Howard government is offering only \$A1 million in material assistance to the East Timorese.

In carrying out this latest act of neo-colonial aggression, Australia has above all been dependent on the backing of the Bush administration. US support was essential for ensuring UN backing for a military intervention led by Australia, rather than one of its rivals.

As foreign editor Greg Sheridan commented in the *Australian*: “When you are confronting a regional crisis, having the world’s biggest power as your best friend is an immense advantage. US assistance is evident in logistics support, but much more importantly in the politics of the UN Security Council.”

At home, the Howard government has relied on the slavish support of the entire political and media establishment. Opposition leader Kim Beazley immediately offered Howard the “strong and unqualified support” of the Labor Party. The media has not only uniformly backed the intervention, but has played a particularly venal role in whipping up an atmosphere of crisis and hysteria to justify it. Under conditions where a majority of Australians oppose the illegal US-led occupation of Iraq, the ruling class fears that any criticism will prompt people to start drawing conclusions about the predatory nature of the operation in East Timor.

The invasion of East Timor comes just a month after the Howard government dispatched more than 300 heavily-armed soldiers and police to prop up its 2003 occupation of the Solomon Islands, amid growing opposition and discontent. The two operations have provoked a debate in Australian ruling circles on the need to expand the military to deal with further challenges to Australian interests in the region.

An editorial in today’s *Australian* raised the spectre of a series of “failed states” and the need for a military presence in each. “Canberra faces a long-term, Solomons-style commitment to East Timor if a dangerous slide into instability on our doorstep is to be avoided. As with the Solomon Islands, the bloodshed in East Timor underscores that independence is just the first step to nationhood. The long-term scenario would appear to demand a series of Australian garrisons stretching across an unstable Asia-Pacific.”

The editorial underlines the fact that the Australian bourgeoisie has no intention of respecting the “independence” and “nationhood” of any of the countries in its “sphere of influence” in the Asia-Pacific region. On the contrary, it is asserting its unconditional “right” to intervene anywhere and at any time to protect its economic and strategic interests.



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