

Why Australia wants “regime change” in East Timor

Nick Beams
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If one were to believe the official version, the intervention of Australian troops into East Timor is driven by the purest motives. They are there simply to restore peace and stability after the collapse of government authority. But this political fiction has been increasingly exposed by events of the past few days as the power struggle which sparked the crisis comes to the surface.

The Howard government’s intervention has nothing to do with protecting the interests of the East Timorese people. It is aimed at bringing about a “regime change”—the replacement of the government of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri with an administration more in tune with Australian interests.

It has long been a dictum of foreign policy that there are no permanent allies or alliances, only permanent interests. This is certainly the case in East Timor where one of the chief concerns of the Australian government, supported by the opposition Labor Party, has been to ensure that other powers are not able to exert influence in what is explicitly referred to as “Australia’s own backyard”.

In 1999, the Howard government sent in troops to spearhead the UN military intervention in order to ensure that Australia, rather than the former colonial power, Portugal, exercised the greatest authority in post-independence East Timor and was in the best position to exploit its valuable oil and gas reserves. Nearly seven years on, the essential motivations remain the same.

The underlying conflict with Portugal came into the open last Friday when Prime Minister John Howard asserted during an interview that the crisis in East Timor was due to “poor governance”. This was a clear shot at Alkatiri’s government. It brought an immediate response from Portuguese Foreign Minister Diogo Freitas do Amaral, who criticised Howard’s remarks as “interference in the internal affairs” of East Timor. “We disagree with this kind of declaration by foreign countries,” he said.

But Howard was not deterred. In fact, he decided to say more at the next available opportunity.

In an appearance on the ABC television “Insiders” program on Sunday morning, Howard was asked “how bad” the government of East Timor had been and whether the responsibility rested with Alkatiri.

Howard said he did not want to get into “detailed commentary about the politics of the country” but proceeded to do just that. It was obvious, he said, that the country had not been well governed over the past few years. He said he was not going to retreat from his comments of two days before.

Pressed on longer-term Australian plans—whether there should be an East Timorese equivalent of the situation in the Solomon Islands where Australian officials have taken charge of the finance ministries, as well as the police and prisons—Howard went further.

“Well I don’t rule anything out, but I don’t want to presumptuously declare that that’s going to happen or ought to happen without the matter being discussed with the East Timorese,” he said. “I mean, we have a delicate path to tread here. On the one hand, we want to help; we are the regional power that’s in a position to do so. It’s our responsibility to help, but I want to respect the independence of the East Timorese. But then on the other hand, again, they have to discharge that independence or the responsibilities of that independence more effectively than has been the case over the last few years.”

The “delicate treading” concerns the activities of Australia’s rivals in the region, as indicated by the remarks of the Portuguese foreign minister. So far, the Howard government has been able to counter these pressures because of the backing it has enjoyed from the United States. Just as the Clinton administration backed the 1999 intervention, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has made it obvious that the US is fully backing the latest troop deployment. In a telephone conversation with Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer she is reported to have asked: “What do you want us to do?”

The immediate focus of regime change is the consultative Council of State meeting presently being held in Dili. This body, convened under President Xanana Gusmao, has the power to sack the Alkatiri government and appoint a so-called “national unity” government until elections due to be held next May.

After a nine-hour meeting yesterday, the council failed to make a decision and further negotiations are being held today. While there was no official announcement, East Timorese foreign minister Jose Ramos-Horta made it plain that, as far as he and Gusmao are concerned, Alkatiri should step down.

Speaking on ABC television, Ramos-Horta said: “What is necessary now is a political resolution of the current political crisis that involves, obviously, primarily the prime minister in a sense that so many people are wanting the prime minister to step down.”

When asked to put his own position, Ramos Horta, declined to comment, saying he was involved in negotiations with both sides.

Within East Timor the campaign to oust Alkatiri, the leader of the ruling party, Fretilin, has been underway for some time. It burst into the open a year ago, following Alkatiri’s decision to

make religious education in schools optional rather than compulsory.

This elementary move to separate church and state brought furious denunciations from the Catholic Church. Demonstrations were held calling for the ousting of Alkatiri and for an end to his “extremist government”. In a pastoral note issued in April 2005 the church hierarchy in Dili said the cabinet contained secret “Marxists” who endangered democracy. The government was following policies based on the “Chinese model” and the “retrograde Third World”.

According to a report in *Asia Times*, the US ambassador to East Timor openly supported the church in its street protests against the government last year, even attending one of the demonstrations in person.

Last January, a leading Fretilin member of the national parliament, Francisco Branco, denounced a prominent priest for waging a campaign to bring down the government. According to Branco, the priest had told churchgoers that a decision to send students to study in Cuba would turn East Timor into a communist country and Fretilin had a plan to kill nuns and priests if it won the next election.

Once the military intervention was launched, the Australian media, taking its cue from the Howard government, stepped up the denunciations of Alkatiri.

In a comment published last Saturday, the *Australian* foreign editor Greg Sheridan denounced Alkatiri as a “disastrous prime minister” leading the “so-called Mozambique clique of Fretilin ideologues”—a reference to Alkatiri’s long period of exile in another former Portuguese colony during the Indonesian occupation of East Timor.

“The catastrophic decision to make Portuguese the national language of East Timor perfectly illustrates the dogmatism and unreality of Alkatiri’s approach. This decision disenfranchised young East Timorese who speak Tetun, Indonesia or English. It entrenched the clique of ageing, dogmatic Marxist-Leninists within Fretilin and exacerbated every division within East Timorese society. And it does nothing to help East Timor earn a living in the international community.”

Alkatiri and his supporters are neither “Marxists” nor “communists”. Nor are the Howard government and its mouthpieces in the media concerned about the government’s policies toward the people of East Timor. Their opposition to Alkatiri centres on the fact that his faction has sought to win support from other major powers, principally Portugal, and increasingly in the recent period, China, as a counter-weight to the pressure of Australian imperialism.

Alkatiri, in particular, raised the ire of Canberra during the protracted negotiations over the exploitation of the oil and gas reserves when he denounced the Australian government for its bullying tactics.

After four years of intransigence from Howard and Downer, the Dili government was last year forced to agree to delay the final settlement of the maritime border between the two countries for 50 to 60 years. Under international boundary law—which Australia has refused to recognise—East Timor is entitled to most of the oil and gas revenues. But Canberra finally succeeded in having Dili drop

its claim of sovereignty over key resource-rich areas of the Timor Sea for two generations; by which time the main oil and gas fields will be commercially exhausted.

If Alkatiri were regarded as an Australian ally in East Timor, rather than as an obstacle, then the attitude of the Howard government, and, correspondingly, commentary in the mass media, would have been quite different.

For a start, the so-called dissident soldiers, whose rebellion sparked the crisis, would not have been portrayed as having legitimate grievances. Instead, the government’s decision to sack them after they went on strike would have been supported. Rather than Australian military commanders holding discussions with the “rebels,” they would have been denounced for organising a mutiny, taking the law into their own hands, and creating the conditions for “terrorism”. Their campaign for the ousting of the Alkatiri government, however, dovetails with Australian interests.

Those interests centre on securing Australia’s position in a region where great power conflicts are increasing. As a comment in yesterday’s *Australian Financial Review* noted, the emerging rivalry between Japan and China is extending into the Pacific, posing a “real challenge for a government that is always claiming to be on such good terms with Tokyo and Beijing”.

Pointing to the long-standing economic issues that have always motivated Australian foreign policy in this region, the comment continued: “It’s worth remembering that in 1920, Australian strategic planners were worried about Japan trying to get its hands on the rumoured oil resources of Portuguese Timor, but in 1975 there were fears that China would manipulate a leftish independent Timor for territorial advantage.”

Now that the existence of oil and gas resources had been clearly established, the rivalry between Japan and China for energy would pose increasing challenges for Australia, the comment noted.

One of the ways of meeting these challenges is to ensure that a “reliable” regime is in place in Dili. This is a major factor underlying the power struggle now being played out in the East Timorese capital.



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