

Australia continues its unrelenting campaign for “regime change” in East Timor

Peter Symonds
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Just over a week after its first troops landed in East Timor, the Australian government is conducting an unrelenting and barely disguised campaign of “regime change” in Dili. Two senior East Timorese ministers resigned on Thursday as part of a compromise deal brokered in a tense, two-day meeting of the country’s consultative Council of State. Nevertheless, the drumbeat continues from Canberra and in the Australian media for “an end to the political crisis”—in other words, for Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri to step aside.

Interior Minister Rogerio Lobato and Defence Minister Roque Rodrigues were both close Alkatiri allies. Clearly angry at being forced to resign, Lobato told the media that the violence on the streets of Dili was being orchestrated. He refused to name names but told journalists to investigate. “You will easily find who is behind this,” he said. Asked if the unnamed forces included President Xanana Gusmao, Lobato did not respond directly but left no doubt as to his attitude. “Well you are saying that... I don’t want to make accusations,” he declared.

From the outset, the Australian-led military intervention has rested heavily on Gusmao and Foreign Minister Jose Ramos Horta. Following the Council of State meeting, Gusmao moved to sideline Alkatiri by declaring a “state of siege” and announced he would assume full control of the police and army. Alkatiri, who has refused to resign, insisted that he remained prime minister and therefore constitutionally shared responsibility for the security forces. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, who is flying into Dili today, immediately backed Gusmao, saying that the president had “ultimate authority”.

Alkatiri’s position has been further undermined by the announcement that Horta will take over as defence minister, as well as retaining his post of foreign minister. Lobato’s deputy Alcino Barris was initially slated to take over as interior minister. However, according to an Associated Press report, Horta is expected today to be sworn in to that post as well, concentrating considerable power in his hands. “I’m the only one who might be able to heal the wounds within the armed forces, between the armed forces and the police force, between the armed forces and society at large,” he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Asked if Alkatiri should step down, he replied: “Well this is the opinion of many people across the nation that the prime minister should resign, however, we have to move one step at a time.”

Despite Canberra’s pretence of “neutrality”, Australian Prime

Minister John Howard immediately welcomed Horta’s elevation. He described Horta as “a very credible figure” and hailed the change as signalling “a slow movement towards a resolution of some of the political process.” Canberra has made little secret that it regards Horta as a crucial ally and wants him to replace Alkatiri, who is more closely aligned to Portugal, Australia’s chief rival for economic and strategic influence. At stake is at least \$30 billion of oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea.

The mercenary motives behind the military occupation of East Timor are further underscored by the continuing looting, violence and arson, despite the presence of more than 2,000 Australian, New Zealand and Malaysian troops in Dili throughout the week. A string of media reports has now cited examples of Australian soldiers standing by while homes are burned and gangs of youth, armed with nothing more than knives and machetes, roam the streets.

An article today in New Zealand’s *Dominion Post* reported that looters emptied a major government rice warehouse in Dili “under the nose of Australian forces”. “People came with trucks at night and took away all the rice. There is no security. We came for rice this morning, and now there is none,” local resident Agnes Noor said. The article noted: “It was the third time in a week the warehouse had been broken into while Australian troops were supposed to be guarding it.”

The failure to act is not a question of incompetence or lack of legal power. There is no doubt that the Australian military is quite capable of efficiently guarding warehouses and suppressing poorly armed gangs of youth if ordered to do so. After all, Australian soldiers are part of the US-led occupation of Iraq and its ruthless repression of any armed resistance. SAS special forces work closely with the American military in Afghanistan in hunting down and killing opponents. But the first step taken by Australian troops in Dili this week was to disarm the local army and police and confine troops to barracks. As a result, gangs of alienated, unemployed youth have had free rein to wander and burn at will.

At the same time, the Australian military has not disarmed the rebel forces, which have clearly had a hand in whipping up ethnic conflict between “easterners” and “westerners”. In fact, so-called rebel leader Major Alfredo Reinado, a former exile in Australia and trainee at Canberra’s national defence academy, has been accorded celebrity status. His every call for the sacking and indictment of Alkatiri is immediately reported in the Australian press. Yesterday Brigadier Mick Slater, head of the Australian

force, landed by helicopter at Reinado's base for discussions. The unstated implication is that this highly dubious figure is regarded as a leader in waiting.

The inescapable conclusion is that the continuing scenes of chaos suit the political purposes of the Howard government and are being, if not actively encouraged, at least tacitly allowed to take place. Canberra is exploiting the mayhem as a political lever to tighten its grip over East Timor. By arguing that the half-island is a "failed state", it can intensify the pressure on Alkatiri to resign and push for the UN to sanction Australian control over key levers of state power.

The occupiers' last consideration is the plight of the East Timorese people. While hundreds of Australian troops, armoured vehicles, transport, attack helicopters and support personnel and supplies have been landed in Dili in a matter of days, there has been no comparable operation to provide desperately needed food and aid to the thousands of people now sheltering in refugee camps. Ron Redmond, a spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, estimated yesterday that 100,000 people have been displaced—about 65,000 in 30 squalid encampments in Dili and a further 35,000 outside the capital.

The Australian government's cynical and calculated manipulation of the plight of the East Timorese parallels its operation in 1999, following the UN-sponsored referendum on independence. Having already decided on military intervention, Howard deliberately delayed sending the troops in, even though he was well aware—through detailed intelligence reports—that the Indonesian armed forces intended to unleash pro-Indonesian militia against independence supporters. Canberra then used the predicted scenes of carnage to stampede public opinion in Australia and around the world, and to pressure the UN into supporting the operation.

Australian Justice Minister Chris Ellison told the ABC yesterday that in light of the continuing violence in Dili the government was considering the dispatch of a further contingent of Federal Police, on top of the 71 officers who have already been sent. Ellison is currently in New York for a meeting with the UN Head of Peacekeeping to discuss UN support for an ongoing Australian-led force in East Timor.

Ellison left no doubt as to the character of Canberra's plans, which are modelled on the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Asked if the East Timorese operation could "morph into something more of a RAMSI-style mission", he replied: "[T]hat's certainly the presentation that I'm making to the United Nations tomorrow, that the RAMSI template, if you like, is a very important way to go in nation building, and it demonstrates, I think, a format which can work in nation building."

The "RAMSI template" is nothing but a recipe for a long-term colonial-style occupation. While the Solomon Islands still has an elected government, nominally at least, all of the main levers of power, including the police, prisons, courts and finance, are in the hands of Australian officials installed to run the administration for at least a decade. Just over a month before troops landed in East Timor, the Howard government sent 300 soldiers and police to the Solomon Islands to reinforce RAMSI, after rioting erupted following elections. The protests reflected deep hostility towards

both RAMSI and the Australian government, as well as towards local politicians.

The Howard government's objective in East Timor is to establish Australian imperialism's unchallenged domination over the tiny statelet, against any claims by rival powers, particularly Portugal. Within ruling circles, there remains a certain bitterness over the outcome of the 1999 intervention. While Australia provided the bulk of the troops, the argument runs, Portugal has been able to wield significant influence through Alkatiri and the ruling Fretilin party, threatening Australia's economic and strategic interests, especially its control over the Timor Sea oil and gas.

The Howard government is somewhat cautious about openly stating its aims, but the media, particularly Murdoch's *Australian*, has no such hesitation. In last Thursday's edition, foreign editor Greg Sheridan listed the central facts readers needed to know. At the top of the list, he bluntly declared Portugal to be "Australia's diplomatic enemy in East Timor". He berated Portuguese Foreign Minister Diogo Freitas do Amaral for his criticisms of Howard, branding them as an attempt to prop up Alkatiri.

"The Portuguese see Alkatiri as the key to their influence. Without Alkatiri, East Timor never would have embraced its mad policy of deciding that Portuguese would be the national language. Alkatiri has been the author of every calamitous decision the East Timorese government has made, decisions that have led to it being, when Australia intervened militarily, a failed state," Sheridan wrote.

After denouncing Portugal's record as the colonial power in East Timor, he concluded his diatribe by declaring: "That it [Portugal] is now to send troops to East Timor to help stabilise the situation is not a welcome contribution but a sinister bid for influence that will once more reinforce Alkatiri." The obvious inference is that Alkatiri has to go and Portugal, including its 120 riot police, should keep out of Dili in order to ensure Canberra's exclusive domination.

The belligerence of Sheridan's comment, using language normally employed against enemies in times of war, is an expression of the criminal character of Australia's operation. Relying on the backing of the Bush administration, the Howard government, with unconditional support from the Labor Party and the entire political establishment, is recklessly embarking on a course of carving out a neo-colonial sphere of influence in the Asia Pacific region against its Asian and European rivals. Its scope will not be limited to the Solomon Islands and East Timor.



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