

Australian-led campaign pressures East Timorese prime minister to resign

Peter Symonds
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East Timor's Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri resigned yesterday amid an unrelenting campaign backed by the Australian government and media for his ousting. His announcement came less than 24 hours after a meeting of the ruling Fretilin party had refused to bow to demands by President Xanana Gusmao to sack the "illegal leadership" of Alkatiri and party president Francisco "Lu-Olu" Guterres. Gusmao had theatrically threatened to resign if his demands were not carried out, but backed away over the weekend.

Fretilin's central committee appealed to both Gusmao and Alkatiri to remain in their positions, but Alkatiri immediately came under pressure from close Gusmao ally, Foreign Minister Jose Ramos-Horta, who announced his intention on Sunday to resign "because the government is not functioning properly". Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer immediately declared that he would be "very sorry" if the resignation was confirmed, saying: "He [Ramos-Horta] has been a good friend and very effective foreign minister."

A factor in Alkatiri's decision was the prospect of legal charges after the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" aired a program on June 17 purporting to prove that he and former interior minister Rogerio Lobato had formed a "hit squad" to murder political opponents. Lobato was charged and detained with the help of Australian soldiers last week.

Alkatiri's resignation, however, was triggered not so much by the provocative campaign for his dismissal, but by the fact that Fretilin's own supporters were entering the fray, raising the prospect of a descent into open civil war. For weeks, Fretilin leaders blocked members and supporters from staging rallies in opposition to the relatively small anti-Alkatiri protests orchestrated by Gusmao, Ramos-Horta, opposition politicians and various rebel police and army officers. Yesterday, it was reported that 18 truckloads of Fretilin supporters were heading toward Dili to support the government.

What Alkatiri feared was the development of a movement outside of Fretilin's control, against the Australian-led occupation and its stooges. In his brief press statement, he declared his willingness to step aside, to prevent "any deepening of the crisis" and "believing that all militants and sympathisers of Fretilin will understand and support this position". A successor has yet to be chosen, but Fretilin will

inevitably confront a similar campaign if it fails to select someone who is acceptable to Gusmao and his backers in Canberra.

To ensure that his resignation is final, it was announced yesterday that Alkatiri would be charged with crimes against the state and faces a jail term of up to 15 years. Chief Prosecutor Longuinhos Montiero told the *Australian*: "It's related to the matter of him having knowledge of the weapons distribution and not doing anything about it." Even if it were true that Alkatiri and Lobato were involved in distributing arms last month to Fretilin supporters, it took place amid a collapse of the country's security forces and threats by rebel leaders of civil war. No one has suggested that any of the pro-Australian rebels, such as Major Alfredo Reinado, will be prosecuted for sedition, treason or other crimes against the state.

Speaking from Indonesia, Australian Prime Minister John Howard could scarcely conceal his glee at Alkatiri's departure. "It seems to me to be part of the process of working out the difficulties, resolving the impasse, breaking the logjam. To that extent I am pleased," he said. In a particularly hypocritical comment, he added that he had no view on who should replace Alkatiri, declaring: "It's not for me to nominate the prime minister of that country; it's an independent sovereign country."

For the last two months, however, the Australian government has been trampling on East Timor's sovereignty, under the pretext of preventing a slide toward civil war. At the centre of the political chaos that erupted in April and May are dubious figures such as Reinado, who trained at the Australian defence academy last year and has close political associations with Ramos-Horta.

Howard dispatched Australian warships to the waters off East Timor on May 12 without informing the government in Dili, but waited until the outcome of a challenge to Alkatiri at a Fretilin congress on May 17-19. It was only when Fretilin delegates overwhelmingly endorsed Alkatiri's leadership that Canberra exploited the escalating violence whipped up by his political opponents and rebel soldiers as the means for pressuring Dili into "inviting" an Australian-led military intervention.

Even as the troops were landing in East Timor, Howard

provocatively declared on May 26 that the country “has not been well-governed”. His comments signalled the start of a barrage of vitriolic attacks in the Australian media demonising Alkatiri as “widely hated,” autocratic and a Marxist, who had to take responsibility for the country’s crisis and resign. If need be, Gusmao, as president, had to sack the prime minister.

Alkatiri refused to resign, however, and Gusmao lacked the constitutional power to remove him. So the anti-Alkatiri campaign shifted gear. Along with the incessant vilification of Alkatiri, Australian journalists dredged up allegations from his political opponents that could form the basis for legal charges. Nothing was too fantastic. Rebel leader Lieutenant Gastao Salsinha told “Four Corners” that Alkatiri was responsible for the massacre of 60 people, but refused to take the reporter to the secret grave.

At the same time, Gusmao and Ramos-Horta, with the backing of the Australian media, mounted an East Timorese version of the US-supported “colour revolutions” in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Hundreds of anti-Alkatiri supporters were trucked into Dili, under the protection of Australian forces, to demonstrate outside government buildings. Images of these protests have been beamed around the world as “proof” of Alkatiri’s unpopularity and the need to remove him.

The Howard government’s antagonism to the Alkatiri government has nothing to do with an autocratic style or “Marxist” politics. As *Sydney Morning Herald* correspondent Hamish McDonald noted last weekend: “The objection is not so much to the way Fretilin is running the economy. Marxist it is certainly not. The past four years have seen austere budgets... ‘These are the best little bunch of neo-liberals you could wish for,’ said one foreign aid official.”

Canberra’s real objection is that Alkatiri has taken a stance that has cut across Australian aspirations to bring East Timor firmly under its political wing. What has been particularly galling to the Howard government following its military intervention in 1999 is that other countries, particularly Portugal, have reaped the benefits. The Alkatiri government, following formal independence in 2002, has strengthened ties with the former colonial power, sought economic assistance from China and Japan, and received aid from Cuba.

As far as Australian imperialism is concerned, Alkatiri’s “crime” is that he failed to follow Canberra’s dictates and tried to balance between the competing powers. Above all, he refused to buckle immediately to Australian demands for the lion’s share of the Timor Sea oil and gas, which, if international law were applied, should belong to East Timor. After three years of hard bargaining, Canberra was compelled to make limited but significant concessions to Dili in the deal finalised this January.

Significantly, in today’s issue of Murdoch’s *Australian*, commentator Mark Dodd declared: “Alkatiri’s departure should spell good news for Australian companies wanting to do business in Dili. Too many were scared away when he was in

charge.” In its editorial, the *Australian*, which has been in the forefront of the campaign to oust Alkatiri, foreshadowed that the Australian-led occupation would last indefinitely, declaring: “Australia will have to keep troops on the ground for the foreseeable future in East Timor.”

With Alkatiri’s removal, Australia has tightened its grip over East Timor. Far from ending international rivalry over the half island, it is certain to intensify. In an interview last weekend, retired Portuguese general Alfredo Assuncao, formerly in charge of the UN military force in East Timor during 2000-2001, bitterly denounced Canberra’s predatory aims, declaring: “What interests the Australians most is oil and gas... So what better way to control these enormously rich resources than to be physically present and control the country’s political system?”

Assuncao described Australia as “the main enemy of the country [East Timor],” saying it always wanted to “control everything and everyone”. He declared that Australia was trying to get rid of Alkatiri “and anyone else putting East Timor interests above the ambitions of its neighbours”. While he is obviously speaking for the ambitions of the Portuguese ruling class in East Timor, Assuncao points to the fact that the Howard government is prepared to accept nothing less than a puppet regime in Dili.

Rather than ending the political chaos in East Timor, the ousting of Alkatiri can only lead to the sharpening of social and political tensions. What has been artificially portrayed in the media as a struggle between “easterners” and “westerners” is in fact a conflict between two factions of the country’s ruling elite, neither of which are capable of meeting the needs and aspirations of the impoverished masses. Whatever the shape of the next government in Dili, popular opposition will inevitably grow to Australia’s neo-colonial occupation.



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