

Australian government steps up campaign to oust East Timor's prime minister Mari Alkatiri

Peter Symonds
12 June 2006

The Australian government has intensified efforts over the past week to oust East Timorese Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, who is regarded by Canberra as too close to rival Portugal and an obstacle to Canberra's ambitions for regional hegemony.

The media—from Murdoch's *Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)—has played a central role in dredging up a series of allegations that Alkatiri is responsible for establishing a hit squad and acts of violence, including murder, against his political opponents and their supporters. All these claims, emanating from Alkatiri's rivals, remain unsubstantiated. Nevertheless they have been uniformly presented in the press as good coin.

It is not possible at this stage to determine whether there is any element of truth in the accusations or if they have simply been fabricated out of thin air. What is certain, however, is that the purpose of the cynical campaign is to further blacken Alkatiri's name and to prepare the way for his removal.

The Australian government has made clear its intention to get rid of Alkatiri from the outset. Having dispatched warships to the Timor Sea on May 12, it backed a challenge to the prime minister at a congress of the ruling Fretilin party on May 17-19. When the bid to replace Alkatiri failed, Canberra exploited the escalating violence whipped up by his opponents and rebel soldiers as the means for pressuring Dili into "inviting" a military intervention.

As Australian troops were pouring into East Timor, Prime Minister John Howard signalled the next stage of the campaign. On May 26 he provocatively declared that the country "has not been well-governed". Since then an avalanche of commentary has appeared in the Australian media vilifying Alkatiri as aloof, unpopular, autocratic and a Marxist, who must go and, if necessary, be sacked by President Xanana Gusmao.

Despite escalating pressure, Alkatiri has so far refused to step down, insisting instead on his rights as the elected prime minister of the country. Moreover, as legal experts have pointed out, the president does not have the constitutional right to remove the prime minister without the approval of parliament where the ruling Fretilin party has a large majority.

Last week the Howard government, obviously concerned about the political ramifications of openly and unconstitutionally ousting Alkatiri, changed tack. During his visit to Dili on June 3, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer backed away, publicly at least, from demands that the prime minister step down. Within days, the accusations against Alkatiri began to surface in rapid succession.

Last Wednesday, top UN official Ian Martin opened the door for the campaign by calling for a full investigation into Alkatiri's handling of the crisis, including opposition claims that he ordered the shooting of demonstrators on April 28. Alkatiri, who has denied the allegation, agreed to the UN inquiry. He accused opposition parties of exploiting the grievances of 594 soldiers, sacked after striking over pay and conditions, as the means for mounting a coup against his government.

On Thursday, Lieutenant Gastao Salsinha, leader of the rebel "petitioner" soldiers, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Alkatiri was responsible for the massacre of 60 people whose bodies were buried in a secret grave. He claimed to be able to produce witnesses who knew the exact location, but refused to take the reporter to the site. "No. We are still too afraid," he said.

Salsinha failed to provide any further details, then incongruously added: "I have evidence that Alkatiri ordered civilians to be shot. I personally saw three people who were shot." But none of the most elementary facts have been made available—who was killed, when, where and why—even for the three that Salsinha "personally" witnessed, let alone proof that the prime minister ordered the purported murders. Salsinha did, however, make perfectly clear where he stood politically, reiterating his demand for Alkatiri to resign.

The ABC has continued to demonise the prime minister. On the same day, Liz Jackson, a reporter with its "Four Corners" program, tracked down members of an armed group, who claimed to be a hit squad formed by Alkatiri and former interior minister Rogerio Lobato to "eliminate political opponents, to eliminate the so-called petitioners' group and people who break Fretilin rules". They brandished rifles and ammunition as

proof of their claims. “They clearly have an interest in seeing the removal of the prime minister,” Jackson noted.

Murdoch’s *Australian* also spoke to the group’s leader “Railos” da Concecao on a plantation hacienda owned by Mario Carrascalao, businessman, former governor during Indonesian rule and bitter Alkatiri opponent. Da Concecao claimed that the squad had been formed just prior to the Fretilin congress last month. Fretilin member Lucas Soares, who was at the hacienda and voted against Alkatiri, claimed he had been threatened.

The Fretilin Congress took place in a highly-charged atmosphere, with the security forces fractured and Australian warships heading to East Timor. If the prime minister did form a “secret Falintil protection force,” he would hardly choose an unstable individual like da Concecao, who has provided no credible explanation for his sudden change of loyalties, to lead it. Da Concecao told the *Australian* that he was “prepared to die” to bring down the government. Concocting a story would, of course, be a far easier means to the same end.

Alkatiri has denied all of the allegations, but that has not halted the campaign. On Saturday, the ABC interviewed Angela Freitas, opposition Labour Party vice-president, who alleged that Alkatiri was responsible for an attack on the party’s supporters in Dili. On Sunday, the ABC reported that Fernando de Araujo, the opposition Democratic Party leader, had fled Dili, claiming that the government had ordered his assassination.

None of the Australian media make the slightest pretence of journalistic neutrality. In the highly volatile situation in Dili, journalists have made no inquiries into the activities of anti-government thugs, their involvement with rebel soldiers and police or their connection to opposition parties. Significantly, there has been no serious investigation of the activities of rebel “leader” Major Alfredo Reinado, who provoked the armed clashes that triggered much of the immediate violence that provided the pretext for landing Australian troops.

Predictably, the Howard government has seized on the allegations to intensify the pressure on Alkatiri. Last Friday Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, called for an investigation into the “very serious and very dramatic allegations,” offering international assistance if need be. East Timor’s Foreign Minister Jose Ramos Horta, a close ally of Canberra, appealed for an “impartial, independent investigation” while reaffirming his willingness to step into Alkatiri’s shoes should the need arise.

One allegation slipped into the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Saturday deserves noting. Bob Lowry, a former Australian army lieutenant colonel, who was employed to set up East Timor’s intelligence agency, claimed that Alkatiri had asked him how to spy on his political opponents.

Earlier in the week, Lowry had let the cat out of the bag about the purpose of this campaign of vilification. Commenting in the *Australian* on June 6, he tackled the question of how to lever

Alkatiri out of power. After noting that Gusmao did not have the constitutional power to dismiss the prime minister and that an early election was impossible organisationally, Lowry concluded that the best solution all around would be to allow Alkatiri to make “a gracious exit”.

The obvious problem is that the prime minister shows no signs of making any exit, gracious or otherwise. “Convincing Alkatiri to adopt such a course would require effective backroom politics and diplomacy to convince him that a more direct attack on his leadership is possible,” Lowry advised. Within days, the possibility of “a more direct attack” in the form of a welter of accusations, a police investigation and a legal indictment had begun to materialise.

Not content with the prospect of a lengthy legal process, opposition politician Manuel Tilman and rebel leader Reinado yesterday called for “a conference of intellectuals” to find a way to suspend the constitution, opening the way for Gusmao to dissolve the Alkatiri government and set up a coalition of national unity. Reinado and Tilman attended church together in Maubisse guarded by Australian SAS soldiers and rebel soldiers, who unlike pro-government troops have not been disarmed.

In a blunt repudiation of democratic norms, Tilman said the nation’s constitution was “out of step with reality,” adding there was ample room for the president to declare it invalid. Reinado complained that “there has not been much progress” in solving the crisis and said Gusmao “needs help”. While Gusmao has yet to make any public statement, according to Australian military commander in East Timor Mick Slater, he is “engaging” three rebel groups, including the one led by Reinado.

The *World Socialist Web Site* holds no brief for Alkatiri, Horta, Gusmao or any of the East Timorese leadership whose manoeuvring with one or other of the major powers has nothing to do with the interests of the impoverished masses of the island. But the real criminals are the political gangsters of the Howard government, who, having backed the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq to the hilt, will stop at nothing in carving out a neo-colonial sphere of influence for Australian imperialism in the Pacific.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact