

Australia continues push for control in East Timor

Mike Head
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Having secured the resignation of East Timor Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri last week, the Howard government is continuing its thinly veiled efforts, both internally and internationally, to install a compliant administration and establish Australian domination over a planned UN military and police force.

In the latest remarkable development, Australia's favoured successor, former foreign affairs minister Jose Ramos-Horta, has assumed the previously unheard post of "cabinet coordinator" of an interim government. President Xanana Gusmao has not formally announced Ramos-Horta's appointment and the position has no basis in the country's constitution.

Under intense Australian pressure, Alkatiri's party Fretilin has apparently agreed that Ramos-Horta, a non-Fretilin member, should assume day-to-day control of the state while a backroom struggle continues over whom Gusmao will name to head a caretaker government to run the country until elections scheduled for next May.

Gusmao, who has clearly aligned himself with Ramos-Horta and Australia, was last weekend forced to back away from an earlier threat to dissolve the parliament—where Fretilin has a clear majority of 55 out of 88 seats—and appoint an interim government of his own choosing.

Ramos-Horta has made plain his willingness to serve Australia's interests. He chaired a meeting of a Council of Ministers from the former Alkatiri government on Monday, just after calling for Australia to keep its troops in East Timor for a year. "I hope that Australia takes the lead with the United Nations and other countries in the region in having a strong robust (police) presence for as many as at least five years," he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio.

How long Ramos-Horta's interregnum will last, and whether he will succeed in replacing Alkatiri as prime minister, remains entirely unclear, however. Howard's government sent in nearly 2,000 troops and police in May on the pretext of restoring stability and safeguarding democracy in the tiny neighbouring state, but there is nothing democratic about what is taking place.

Ramos-Horta was installed after a week of intense political manoeuvring. Alkatiri resigned on June 26, just as truck convoys of Fretilin demonstrators headed toward the capital

Dili to defend his government. He and other Fretilin leaders feared the development of a movement outside their control against Australia's creeping coup. For weeks, Fretilin had held back its supporters from rallying against the protests and mob violence organised by opposition politicians and rebel army and police officers.

The day after resigning, Alkatiri continued to try to contain the pro-Fretilin protestors, meeting their convoy and appealing for restraint. His appeals for them to delay their entry into Dili until later in the week, however, only allowed anti-Fretilin mobs to go on a fresh rampage in Dili, torching homes of Fretilin leaders and further terrifying refugees from their previous rounds of violence.

When about 5,000 Fretilin demonstrators eventually entered Dili on June 29, some waving anti-Australian banners, Alkatiri and Fretilin used their protests as a bargaining chip to seek power-sharing concessions from Gusmao. They repeatedly appealed for calm and worked closely with the Australian-led military contingent to keep demonstrators under heavy guard. Troops in helicopters, armoured vehicles and on foot escorted convoys of trucks and buses along prearranged routes through Dili. Before entering the city, the demonstrators were stopped and searched for weapons.

Alkatiri urged the demonstrators to accept his removal and work instead to ensure that Fretilin retained its parliamentary majority. He told a rally outside his former office that it did not matter who was their leader. "But to maintain national unity, Fretilin must win again at the next election." At the direction of Fretilin leaders, the demonstrators left Dili peacefully the next night.

Following the Fretilin demonstration, UN officials apparently vetoed Gusmao's proposal to call early elections. An unnamed East Timorese official told the *Australian*: "The UN advised it was too short a time and, given the current situation, it would be unable to prepare the logistics and organise voter security, so that idea has been abandoned."

After Gusmao's backdown, Fretilin put forward several prime ministerial nominations for him to consider. A weekend meeting of Fretilin's national political commission short-listed Ramos-Horta, outgoing health minister Rui Araujo and agricultural minister Estanislau da Silva, according to party

sources.

But bitter infighting is obviously continuing, with the anti-Fretilin factions threatening to bring protestors into Dili to demand that Gusmao exclude any Alkatiri supporters in a new cabinet. Efforts are also being made to drive a wedge through Fretilin, with an anti-Alkatiri faction lodging a High Court writ to overturn his re-election as party secretary-general at Fretilin's national congress in May.

Gusmao, who was due to meet a Fretilin delegation today, has said nothing publicly for days. Ramos-Horta hinted on Wednesday that the announcement of an interim government could be delayed for "a week or two".

One issue being thrashed out is what to do about the accusations of distributing arms to Fretilin supporters that were brought forward against Alkatiri as a means of forcing him to resign. The Australian media, with the ABC in the vanguard, dug up the unsubstantiated allegations from Alkatiri's bitter political enemies. No charges are being laid against pro-Australian rebel soldiers, such as Major Alfredo Reinado, who initiated armed attacks against the government and Fretilin members.

Alkatiri refused to heed a summons from the prosecutor-general to be questioned last Friday and Fretilin MPs have backed his claim to parliamentary immunity. In order to secure the prime ministership, Ramos-Horta appears ready to strike a deal with Alkatiri. He said Alkatiri was probably guilty of crimes against the state, but any sentence would be commuted by parliament.

Whatever the outcome of the machinations, Canberra will have the political veto. The *Australian* reported on July 1: "Although finding a suitably qualified administrator to replace Alkatiri is proving tough, there are a number of people who would be acceptable to the Howard government, including former defence and foreign minister (and Nobel Peace Prize laureate) Jose Ramos-Horta."

In an interview published yesterday in the *Melbourne Age*, Alkatiri pointed to Australia's involvement in his ousting, saying its media had demonised him as part of an "orchestrated plot" because of his tough stance in talks over oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. He refused to name the culprits, saying, "I'm sure that one day it will all come out."

Within hours, after objections from Howard and the ABC, Alkatiri denied making any suggestion that the Australian government plotted his removal. His spokesman said he "never blamed Australia, and never said Australia was behind all of this" and that he fully supported the Australian military presence.

Alkatiri's retraction is one more in a growing list of backdowns which began in May when, under considerable pressure from Canberra, the prime minister and Fretilin acquiesced in issuing an "invitation" for Australia to intervene militarily. Fretilin's backpedalling reflects its basic political perspective and class outlook: far from challenging

imperialism, it has always sought to accommodate to, and balance between, rival major powers in order to establish its "own" state.

With its considerable oil and gas reserves and strategic location at the eastern end of the Indonesian archipelago, East Timor has become a battleground in escalating global conflicts over energy sources and spheres of influence. Canberra has intervened twice militarily with US backing—in 1999 and 2006—to secure its interests in the Timor Sea fields and assert its wider authority in the Asia-Pacific region.

Alkatiri and his government had granted oil and gas rights to European and Chinese companies as a means of countering pressure from Australia and the US, and may be looking for support in these quarters. On July 3, the European Union (EU), which represents the interests of Portugal, announced that it would send a senior envoy, Miguel Amada, to "contribute actively to a peaceful and constitutional settlement to the current political crisis" and establish an EU delegation in Dili.

Brazilian Paulo Sergio Pinheiro has also been appointed to head a UN inquiry into the civil unrest in East Timor. Its investigations into the clashes between rival security force factions on April 28-29 and May 23-25 could become a vehicle for raising questions about Australian involvement.

Backed by Washington, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has been personally lobbying Security Council permanent members, including Britain and France, for Australian control of any UN mission. "Obviously having France and Britain and clearly the United States working very closely with us in the Security Council is going to make a very big difference to us getting the sort of successor mission for the UN that we would like," he told reporters while in Europe.

This behind the scenes manoeuvring is clearly a major factor in the unresolved political crisis in Dili, as each of the international powers seeks an administration amenable to its interests. Far from ending the danger of civil war in East Timor, the Australian military intervention is fuelling a struggle for power that could well precipitate such a conflict.



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