Australia installs its man in East Timor: Jose Ramos-Horta

Peter Symonds
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In what amounts to the culmination of an Australian neo-colonial putsch, Jose Ramos-Horta was formally sworn in as East Timor's new prime minister on Monday. He replaces Mari Alkatiri, who was pressured to resign on June 26, following an extraordinary campaign of vilification in the Australian and international media, including trumped-up charges that he approved the formation of a "hit squad" to murder political opponents.

Ramos-Horta clearly understands to whom he owes his new post. Last week, as he openly functioned as prime minister in waiting, Ramos-Horta declared that Australia should lead any new UN mission in East Timor. The chief purpose of the Howard government's military intervention has been to oust the Alkatiri-led Fretilin government, which had established relations with Australia's rivals for influence in the region, particularly Portugal and China.

Immediately after being sworn in, Ramos-Horta made another pledge to Canberra, vowing to quickly push legislation through the East Timorese parliament ratifying a deal with Australia over the division of proceeds from Greater Sunrise, by far the largest of the Timor Sea oil and gas fields. "We cannot be known as a country that signs agreements and then doesn't ratify them. Our credibility as a state and as a government is at stake," Ramos-Horta blandly declared.

Alkatiri's refusal to buckle to Australian bullying in negotiations over the Timor Sea energy resources was one of the main reasons for Canberra's hostility to his government. While an agreement was finally signed in January, it has not been ratified because of opposition from those who still felt that it conceded resources to Australia that under international law belonged to East Timor. The Australian resources corporation, Woodside, has been waiting on ratification before resuming development work on the gas field, conservatively estimated to contain $20-25 billion of reserves.

The Australian government and media immediately hailed the installation of Ramos-Horta as a step forward. The headline of today's *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial said it all: "At last Jose Ramos Horta: The right man for East Timor". The newspaper enthused: "It has taken a dickens of a long time, but the leaders of East Timor have finally made the wise and obvious chose of Jose Ramos Horta as the new prime minister to start to put their fractured polity back together."

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer greeted Ramos-Horta's inauguration with the announcement that Canberra could now consider pulling out some of the Australian-led military force of 2,500 soldiers—in other words, mission accomplished. The concern of the Howard government has never been for the welfare of the East Timorese people. Rather the political instability, which has been deliberately fanned by the Australian media and which created 150,000 refugees, was only ever a pretext for masking the real objective: regime change in Dili.

The international press has hailed Ramos-Horta as the consummate diplomat and co-winner with Bishop Carlos Belo of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize, an honour always awarded for services rendered to the major powers. What Ramos-Horta's record reveals is a man thoroughly wedded to the defence of capitalism, who was hostile even to Fretilin's empty "socialist" posturing and who broke from the organisation in the 1980s. His loyalty to the US and Australia was evident when in February 2003 he penned a thoroughly dishonest article for the *New York Times* defending the impending illegal invasion of Iraq.

Ramos-Horta was sworn in by President Xanana Gusmao, who has been central to Australia's efforts over the last six weeks to oust Alkatiri. In a rather brazen acknowledgement of his collusion in the plotting, Gusmao invited Vicente "Railos" da Conceicao to be seated among the audience of assorted political leaders, diplomats, Australian military officers and church representatives. It was Railos's allegations that he was the head of a "hit squad" formed by Alkatiri and interior minister Rogerio Lobato that provided the basis for beginning legal proceedings against the former prime minister.

Railos's claims have never been subject to serious scrutiny, even though he is clearly a political enemy of Alkatiri and was thrown out of the army for fraud. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) aired his accusations on its "Four Corners" program on June 17. The desperate attempt to dredge up a legal case against Alkatiri only became necessary after he refused to immediately step down and it was discovered that Gusmao, as president, did not have the constitutional power to sack him. On June 18, Gusmao sent a tape of the ABC program to Alkatiri

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together with a letter demanding his resignation.

The flimsy nature of the case against Alkatiri was further underscored in an article this week by freelance journalist John Martinkus, who wrote of the death squad allegations: “Other reporters had been to see this [Railos] group and some had chosen not to report on it. They were located in the house of the Carrascalao family and their story didn’t seem to be true. The Carrascalaos are an established family in East Timor [and] were instrumental in the UDT [Timorese Democratic Union] party that fought a brief civil war with Fretilin in 1975—people with axes to grind.”

But it is precisely on these layers of right-wing politicians, disaffected Falantil fighters and unemployed youth that Gusmao and Ramos-Horta have relied in their intriguing to oust Alkatiri. The violent clashes of recent months, presented in the Australian press as ethnic tensions between “easterners” and “westerners”, follow four years of scheming to bring down the Fretilin government. While Gusmao’s head of protocol attempted to explain away Railos’s presence by saying he was “a community leader” and former Falantil fighter, it is entirely fitting that a shady representative of the plotters should be present at Ramos-Horta’s inauguration.

Conservative figures like Mario Carrascalao, who functioned as governor for a decade under the Indonesian junta, have been deeply frustrated by the economic policies of the Fretilin government. While Alkatiri has attempted to do the bidding of international finance capital and has been praised for being “fiscally responsible”, his government has refused to simply open the door to foreign investors for the unrestrained exploitation of East Timor’s resources. East Timor’s opposition has repeatedly criticised the government for not being “business friendly” and failing to provide incentives and infrastructure.

Ramos-Horta has immediately set out a different orientation. In his acceptance speech, he criticised the government’s “very slow and complicated bureaucracy” as an obstacle to foreign investment and promised to end the “bureaucratic stranglehold”. “We are going to introduce the concept of ‘fast track’ to accelerate the execution of projects. The item public grants in the 2006-2007 budget, is a response to the need felt by all that we have to simplify the process to make quicker the rendering of services to the nation,” he declared.

In case the message was not clear enough, Ramos-Horta added: “The private and entrepreneurial sector is an indispensable pillar in the development and well being of our country. With them we are going to find ways to offer incentives and enthuse them and facilitate their activities. The foreign investors in this country can count on this government to listen to them and to support them. We are going to better and simplify the laws and rules for the process of registration of companies. We are going to investigate the complaints about the non-payment of bills by the government.”

Ramos-Horta also made a direct appeal to another bastion of reaction—the Roman Catholic Church—which has been deeply involved in the intriguing against the Fretilin government. “It must be venerated and called once again to partnership with our young state, help us get out of this crisis, heal the wounds, help us better serve the people in all areas such as social, educational, cultural, spiritual and moral. This government, then, invites the Catholic Church to assume a bigger role in education and in the human development of our people and in the fight against poverty,” he said.

While he has yet to announce his ministers, Ramos-Horta has promised an “inclusive” cabinet, that is, with political figures from outside Fretilin, which holds the overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats. As part of the compromise reached with Fretilin, two of Alkatiri’s ministers—Estanislau da Silva and Rui Araujo—have been named as deputy prime ministers. Ramos-Horta will also have to include other Fretilin ministers in the cabinet if he is to have the party’s support in parliament.

However, the relentless campaign for “regime change” will not stop with the ousting of Alkatiri. On June 27, the day after Alkatiri’s resignation, an editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* made clear that the target was not just the former prime minister, but Fretilin itself. Entitled “Fretilin the stumbling block in East Timor”, the editorial complained that, while the country had “turned the corner”, the parliament was still dominated by “ageing economic nationalists”. A step forward depended on Fretilin “reforming its own views on the economy and loosening its grip on the institutions of government.”

Already several of the so-called rebel leaders have declared their dissatisfaction with the inclusion of any Fretilin members in the new government and declared their determination to stage new protests. Major Augusto Araujo accused Ramos-Horta of being too close to Alkatiri and Fretilin and declared that he would meet with Gusmao to demand the president dissolve parliament and call new elections.

While the Howard government currently appears to be satisfied with Ramos-Horta, its military intervention and behind-the-scenes scheming has set in motion reactionary social forces that may yet plunge the country into further chaos.

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