

How Australia orchestrated “regime change” in East Timor

Part 1

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This is the first of a three-part article on Australia’s recent military intervention in East Timor. Part two and three will be published on July 28 and 29, respectively.

Within six weeks of Australian troops landing in East Timor on May 24, the country’s prime minister Mari Alkatiri was forced to resign and the former foreign minister, Jose Ramos-Horta, who has made no secret of his sympathies for the US and Australia, had been installed in his place.

If one were to believe the Australian media, Canberra had no hand in these events. Acting out of the purest of motives, Prime Minister John Howard dispatched military forces at the end of May to protect the East Timorese from a sudden and largely inexplicable eruption of ethnic violence between “easterners” and “westerners”. Since then, the story goes, Australia has remained a neutral arbiter, standing above the political conflict in Dili. It is simply fortuitous that the new prime minister, is, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* put it, the “right man” for East Timor.

In reality, what has taken place is an Australian-inspired political coup. As troops were landing, Howard’s public declaration that East Timor had not been well-governed gave the signal for a deluge of propaganda in the Australian media demonising Alkatiri as aloof, an autocrat and a Marxist. Insistent demands that he take full responsibility for the violence and resign were counterposed to high praise for Ramos-Horta and President Xanana Gusmao, both of whom backed the Australian-sponsored campaign to remove the prime minister.

Alkatiri refused to immediately cave in and Gusmao lacked the constitutional power to sack him without the support of parliament, where Alkatiri’s Fretilin party had a large majority. So a new approach was taken. The government-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) aired a “Four Corners” program on June 19, which dredged up lurid allegations from Alkatiri’s political enemies that the prime minister had approved the formation of a “hit squad” to murder his opponents. Quite apart from the dubious and unsupported character of the claims, the program conveniently ignored the fact that the rebel soldiers and police officers who were making the charges were clearly guilty of taking up arms against the state.

Gusmao and Horta were “sympathetic” to rebel leaders such as “Major” Alfredo Reinado, a dubious character who had trained in 2005 at the Australian defence academy in Canberra and who had become a favourite of the Australian press. Reinado had pledged his allegiance to Gusmao and welcomed the arrival of Australian troops. He was also openly threatening civil war if Alkatiri were not sacked. No-one in Dili, Canberra or the Australian media even broached the suggestion that Reinado and his fellow rebels should be charged with treason. Instead Gusmao sent a tape of the ABC program, with its unsubstantiated allegations, to Alkatiri, with a letter demanding his immediate resignation.

Just a week later, on June 26, Alkatiri resigned. But since Fretilin

remained the largest party in parliament, with the constitutional right to nominate a new prime minister, the issue of who was to replace him remained. To force Fretilin into submission, Gusmao threatened to ignore the constitution, dismiss parliament and select his own interim government, pending fresh elections. Once again Fretilin capitulated. Ramos-Horta, who, like Gusmao had not been a Fretilin member for many years, was included among its three nominees. On July 10, he was duly sworn in.

While the Howard government has been rather coy about acknowledging its role, Murdoch’s *Australian* newspaper has been less so. In a comment on June 3, foreign editor Greg Sheridan bluntly declared: “Certainly if Alkatiri remains Prime Minister of East Timor, this is a shocking indictment of Australian impotence. If you cannot translate the leverage of 1,300 troops, 50 police, hundreds of support personnel, buckets of aid and a critical international rescue mission into enough influence to get rid of a disastrous Marxist Prime Minister, then you are just not very skilled in the arts of influence, tutelage, sponsorship and, ultimately, promoting the national interest.”

In his own crude fashion, Sheridan was simply foreshadowing what subsequently took place. Canberra shamelessly exploited and manipulated the factional divisions within the East Timorese political elite to install the man it wanted. Ramos-Horta’s first actions were to insist that Australia should lead any new UN mission to East Timor and, most importantly, to pledge that the parliament would rapidly ratify a stalled agreement between East Timor and Australia over the division of proceeds from the Greater Sunrise gas field. Among other concerns, the Australian government’s hostility to Alkatiri stemmed from his refusal to cave in totally to Canberra’s plans for the estimated \$30 billion worth of oil and gas reserves under the Timor Sea.

Inter-imperialist rivalries

The events of the past weeks have flowed organically from Australia’s past relationship with East Timor, in which concern for the welfare of the East Timorese people has never been a factor. Howard, like his Labor and Liberal predecessors, backed the Indonesian Suharto dictatorship’s invasion of East Timor in 1975 and its subsequent annexation of the former Portuguese colony. Canberra’s interest was centred on control of the substantial Timor Sea oil and gas reserves, which it secured in 1989 under the Timor Gap Treaty.

After the fall of Suharto in 1998, Australia faced the prospect of the treaty being declared null and void. The former colonial ruler, Portugal, in

league with East Timor's leaders, was pushing for the country's independence, as a means of regaining influence. Since the UN had never formally recognised Indonesia's annexation, a separate state of East Timor might well abrogate Canberra's deal with Jakarta, particularly as it ran counter to international law. The Australian ruling elite made the necessary calculations and effected an abrupt about-face. Suddenly, it became an advocate for the rights of the East Timorese people and a supporter of "independence". Utilising the violence carried out by pro-Indonesian militia both before and after the UN-supervised independence referendum in 1999 as the pretext, the Howard government dispatched troops to East Timor. Its real aim was to preempt Australia's rival, Portugal.

The perspective of "independence" for East Timor was never viable. In the era of globalised production, any nation, no matter how large, is subject to the dictates of the major transnational corporations and internationally mobile capital. A tiny statelet on an impoverished half-island, with a population of less than a million, could never be "independent" of the regional and global powers, or of the various international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and IMF. The inter-imperialist rivalry for East Timor's lucrative resources only intensified after the country was transformed into a UN protectorate. Its "Special Representative of the Secretary General," the late Sergio Vieira de Mello, had all the powers of a colonial governor.

At stake was not only the Timor Sea oil and gas, but the island's strategic location astride key naval and shipping routes between the Indian and Pacific oceans. Washington's support for Canberra's ambitions in East Timor was bound up with the growing rivalry between the US and China for influence in Asia. The Pentagon has long regarded the deep-water Ombai Wetar Straits as one of the crucial naval "choke points" in any military conflict in the Asia Pacific region. Likewise Portugal, backed by the European Union, viewed East Timor as an important outpost in the struggle for influence in Asia, a region that has assumed critical importance with China's and India's emergence as the world's main cheap labour platforms.

The inter-imperialist rivalries found their expression in Dili's factional politics. The Fretilin leadership had always looked to Portugal. Fretilin itself was forged, not in a struggle against Portuguese colonial rule, but rather against the Indonesian annexation of East Timor and its repressive military rule. The party's leaders were drawn from the Portuguese-educated elite, and they used East Timor's so-called "Portuguese identity" in their campaign for "independence" from Indonesia. Fretilin's program was not Marxist, but it did advance basic democratic and social reforms that rested on a nationally-regulated capitalist economy.

Opponents of Fretilin's agenda included Horta and Gusmao, who broke with the party and regarded its limited reformist program as too radical. Gusmao oriented directly to the most rightwing and reactionary political forces in East Timor, including the Catholic Church and the UDT, which had supported the country's incorporation into Indonesia. UDT leader Mario Carrascalao, the island's largest coffee plantation owner, served as provincial governor for a decade under the Indonesian dictatorship. These layers regarded the "Marxist" Fretilin as an intolerable barrier to foreign capital and to their ambitions for the unfettered exploitation of the island's resources and cheap labour.

Immediately prior to Suharto's fall in 1998, Gusmao, with the support of Portugal, engineered a grand coalition of "national unity"—the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT)—which included Fretilin as well as the UDT, church leaders and individuals such as Horta. Fretilin, however, remained the dominant force within the CNRT, because it was popularly recognised as having led the difficult and courageous struggle against the brutal 24-year Indonesian occupation.

Having achieved its objective of a UN referendum, the CNRT began to fracture under UN rule. Despite Gusmao's efforts to maintain the broad

coalition on which his influence rested, Fretilin increasingly came to play the dominant political role.

This outcome produced seething resentment in Australian ruling circles. Even though it had provided the majority of troops for the UN military intervention in 1999, Canberra found that rival Portugal was gaining the political upper hand through its ties to Fretilin. In the political manoeuvring that took place in the lead-up to formal independence in May 2002, the Howard government increasingly relied on Fretilin's opponents. Both Gusmao and Ramos-Horta had longstanding connections with Australia—Horta during his exile and Gusmao through his Australian wife, Kirsty Sword.

Gusmao made a conscious appeal to the various anti-Fretilin layers on the basis of "national unity". Around him gathered those whose positions were threatened by Fretilin's ascendancy—former officials and police in the Indonesian provincial administration, businessmen wanting immediate access to be provided to foreign investors, and the Catholic church, which opposed Fretilin's secular demands for a separation of church and state. Insofar as any geographic divide existed, it reflected the fact that Fretilin's base had traditionally been in the eastern areas of the island—those more conducive to guerrilla warfare—rather than the more developed western regions, with their links to the Indonesian province of West Timor. Gusmao, who had established close ties with the Indonesian regime during his imprisonment in Jakarta, called for reconciliation with Indonesia.

The political differences erupted into the open in the election for a constituent assembly in August 2001. Fretilin won an absolute majority—55 of the 88 seats. Its closest rival, with seven seats, was the Democratic Party (PD), formed just prior to the election. The PD appealed to younger, disaffected people who saw few opportunities for advancement in a Fretilin-led state, where Portuguese, spoken by few East Timorese, would be the official language. Mario Carrascalao's Social Democratic Party (PSD) gained just six seats.

Fretilin proposed a secular parliamentary constitution, which would ensure the party's continued dominance. Its opponents backed Gusmao's push for a presidential system, based on a "national unity" front, in which he would hold overall power. Fretilin prevailed and, with UN backing, transformed the constituent assembly into the first parliament. The factional bitterness re-emerged during elections for the presidency in April 2002. Fretilin did not stand a candidate, allowing Gusmao to win an overwhelming majority. But Alkatiri pointedly announced that he would be casting a blank ballot, while other Fretilin leaders gave tacit support to Gusmao's nominal opponent.

As far as Canberra was concerned, the outcome of the UN-supervised process was disastrous. Those in Dili most sympathetic to Australian interests had been largely sidelined. While Gusmao had become president, he had limited constitutional powers. Moreover, the Fretilin government quickly made clear it would not simply acquiesce to Canberra's diktats. In the week prior to formal independence, the Howard government flew Alkatiri to Canberra by VIP jet to pressure him into finalising a deal ceding most of the largest Timor Sea gas field—Greater Sunrise—to Australia. But Alkatiri refused to cooperate.

Australian journalist Maryann Keady, in a recent article entitled "Imperialist Coup in East Timor", points out that the moves against the new government began as soon as "independence" was declared. "The campaign to oust Alkatiri began at least four years ago," she wrote. "I recorded the date after an American official started leaking stories of Alkatiri's corruption while I was freelancing for ABC Radio. I investigated the claims—and came up with nought—but was more concerned with the tenor of criticism by American and Australian officials that clearly suggested that they were wanting to get rid of this 'troublesome' prime minister.... After interviewing the major political leaders, it was clear that many would stop at nothing to get rid of Timor's

first prime minister.”

To be continued



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