

How Australia orchestrated “regime change” in East Timor

Part 3

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This is the conclusion of a three-part article on Australia’s recent military intervention in East Timor. Part one was published on July 27, part two on July 28.

In an article entitled “East Timor: Alkatiri speaks” published last month on the *New Matilda* website, well-known Australian freelance journalist John Martinkus investigated Prime Minister Alkatiri’s claims that his political opponents had sought to gain control of the country’s army and foment a coup against the government.

Speaking to Martinkus, the prime minister said: “They were always trying to get command of Falintil-FDTL [East Timor’s Defence Forces]. They tried to convince the command to order and participate in a coup. They failed. When they failed to bring the command to join their forces in a coup then what they did is they tried to break F-FDTL and they did it by bringing out of their barracks almost 600 which they called the petitioners.”

The strike and protests carried out by 600 soldiers over pay and conditions in February and March; their subsequent sacking by the Alkatiri government; and the suppression of violent protests involving soldiers, young gangs and opposition politicians on April 28, were repeatedly cited in the Australian media as the reasons for sending in Australian troops.

Having spoken to the East Timorese military about these events, Martinkus wrote: “Senior sources within the command of F-FDTL confirmed that Alkatiri’s claims were genuine. They say three separate approaches had been made to the leadership to launch a coup against Alkatiri in the past 18 months.

“I was able to confirm that in April 2005, following weeks of mass demonstrations against Alkatiri’s Government, the commander of the F-FDTL, Brigadier Taur Matan Ruak, had been approached to lead a coup by senior figures within East Timor’s Catholic church. He rejected the offer. He was approached again early this year and asked to lead a coup in a meeting with two prominent East Timorese leaders and two foreign nationals. Again he refused, reportedly telling them it was against the Constitution and would set an unacceptable precedent.

“One of his leading deputies, Lieutenant-Colonel Falur Rate Laek, a veteran of the war against Indonesia, was also approached by the same two local leaders and foreign nationals. He also refused.

“Due to the sensitivity of the information, the nationalities of the foreigners were not revealed.”

The military officers involved, as well as Alkatiri and the Fretilin leaders, clearly know who made these approaches, including the names and nationalities of the foreigners concerned. Their failure to name names was not surprising. It flowed directly from Fretilin’s continuing refusal to openly oppose the Australian-led invasion of the country. Fearing it could lose control of a mass movement against the military occupation, Alkatiri

bowed to pressure and agreed to “invite” the Australian troops. He then resigned his post as prime minister and, not long after, gave his blessing to the installation of Horta.

It is not difficult to fathom who was behind the moves against the Fretilin government. Since 2001, the political opposition drew sustenance from the US and Australia, with Washington according the leading role to Canberra. If the “foreigners” were not Australian or US officials or agents, they were certainly acting in the knowledge that the ousting of the Alkatiri government would be welcomed by Howard and Bush.

The claims made to Martinkus are certainly credible. The hostility of the Catholic church to the Fretilin government emerged in the debates over the new country’s constitution, when church officials and opposition politicians argued for the reestablishment of Catholicism as the state religion. While their bid was unsuccessful, Bishop Belo nevertheless forced the removal of a clause expressing the basic democratic tenet of “separation of church and state” and another referring to the right to divorce.

In April 2005, church leaders organised a protracted campaign lasting several weeks to oppose the Fretilin government’s decision to make religious education in schools optional rather than compulsory. This elementary democratic step provoked bitter denunciation from the church, which demanded the ousting of Alkatiri. Speaking at a Dili rally on April 19, 2005, Father Benancio Araujo denounced the “dictatorship of Alkatiri” and warned that the church would summon people from beyond the capital to “topple the anti-democratic regime”. According to a report in *Asia Times*, the US ambassador to East Timor openly supported the church’s protests, even attending one of the demonstrations in person.

In late April, Alkatiri accused the church of acting like an “opposition party”, then backed down and withdrew his plans to make religious education voluntary. The retreat only emboldened the Catholic priests. In January 2006, a leading Fretilin parliamentarian, Francisco Branco, denounced a prominent priest for waging a campaign to bring down the government. According to Branco, the priest had told churchgoers that a decision to send students to study in Cuba would turn East Timor into a communist country. Moreover, Fretilin had a plan to kill nuns and priests if it won the next election.

There were at least two other reasons why the anger of Australia and the US with the Fretilin government deepened at the start of 2006. In January, Canberra and Dili finally signed a deal over the joint exploitation of the oil and gas fields in the Timor Sea. While the lion’s share still went to Australia, Alkatiri had forced the Howard government to make limited, but significant, concessions to East Timor. Moreover, Dili was also examining proposals to cooperate with China and several European countries, rather than Australia, to explore and develop other potential energy resources in East Timorese territory.

In February, the Dili government called tenders for its own Timor Trough fields, after a Chinese-Norwegian survey estimated that the area held half a billion barrels of light oil, and some 10 trillion cubic feet of gas (about 10 percent of the total estimated Timor Sea reserves). By the April 19 deadline, five companies had submitted bids, either individually or in consortia. They were Italy's ENI, Portugal's GALP (in which ENI is the majority shareholder), Brazil's Petroleo Brasileiro (Petrobras), Malaysia's Petronas and India's Reliance.

At the same time, the East Timor Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) released a comprehensive report about the crimes of the Indonesian dictatorship in East Timor between 1975 and 1999 and the responsibility of the major powers, especially the US and Australia, for their complicity. The report, which was funded by the UN, cut directly across efforts by Gusmao to bury the past and to effect reconciliation with Indonesia. In formally presenting it to the UN Security Council, Gusmao opposed the document and attempted to suppress its findings.

The report was eventually leaked to the media. The US and Australia both reacted angrily to its conclusions, which, while limited, nevertheless held the two countries responsible for supporting the Indonesian junta and called on them to pay reparations to East Timor. As far as Canberra and Washington were concerned, the CAVR report constituted, not only yet another black mark against the Alkatiri government, but also against the UN. Their hostility to the UN stemmed from the fact that, in attempting to carry out its mandate, the organisation had helped install and maintain the Alkatiri government. The Bush administration had repeatedly opposed the extension of the UN presence in East Timor and, in mid-2005, succeeded in having the size and aims of the mission wound back considerably. In January 2006 and again in May, in the midst of the political crisis, the US and Australia both opposed any further UN presence in East Timor.

Given its long record of intrigue, there is no doubt that Australia had a direct hand in the political events leading up to its May 24 military intervention. The Howard government's close relations with Gusmao and Ramos-Horta were undoubtedly augmented by a network of contacts established by Australian diplomatic staff, military personnel and intelligence operatives in Dili with opposition politicians, rebel soldiers and police, and even gang leaders. Canberra not only knew who was involved in the army protests in March, but, in all likelihood, encouraged them.

During questioning before a Senate committee, Defence Deputy Secretary Strategy, Michael Pezzullo, admitted that 28 Australian military personnel had been in East Timor well before May 24 and had daily contact with Timorese officers. The Greens, who fully supported the dispatch of Australian troops, asked what these Australian officers had been doing. "I want to know if Defence had any role in the sacking of troops that precipitated the current crisis. I want to know what communication and cooperation Defence has had with the rebel leader Major Reinado," Greens Senator Kerry Nettle asked. No further details were forthcoming.

East Timor's opposition leaders stridently demanded a UN investigation into the violent protest that took place on April 28 in Dili, which ended in police killing several demonstrators. However, commenting in her article "Imperialist Coup in East Timor", journalist Maryann Keady wrote: "I arrived in Dili just as the first riots broke out on April 28 this year and as an eyewitness at the front of the unrest, the very young soldiers seem to have outside help—believed to be local politicians and 'outsiders'. Most onlookers cited the ability of the dissident soldiers to go from an unarmed vocal group, to hundreds brandishing sticks and weapons, as raising locals' suspicion that this was not an 'organic' protest. I interview many people—from Fretilin insiders, to opposition politicians and local journalists—and not one ruled out the fact that the riots had been hijacked for 'other' purposes."

Even Horta had to acknowledge in his report to the UN Security Council

on May 5 that Osorio Lequi, the leader of a newly formed opposition party, the PDRT, had been involved in heightening tensions. Horta reported that the clashes on April 28 were not carried out by dissident soldiers, but by a mob of youth and some political elements, including PDRT members, who attacked the police and went on a rampage. Significantly, at the same UN session, US and Australian officials vehemently opposed any further extension, let alone an expansion, of the UN mission, which was due to end. A compromise was finally struck extending its remit for a month.

There is every reason to believe that the Howard government, with the backing of the Bush administration, had already set in motion plans for a military occupation of East Timor. On May 12, as he was about to leave for Washington, Howard confirmed that the Australian military had ordered three warships to sail to waters off the coast of East Timor, without informing the Alkatiri government. Canberra's gunboat diplomacy was aimed at intensifying pressure on the Fretilin leadership. Howard was well aware that plans were underway to oust Alkatiri at a Fretilin congress being held from May 17 to 19. The dissident faction, led by East Timor's ambassador to the UN and the US, Jose Luis Guterres, and the former ambassador to Australia, Jorge Teme, was receiving open backing in the Australian media.

But Guterres' move collapsed when the overwhelming majority of Fretilin delegates re-endorsed Alkatiri on May 19. As soon as the congress ended, clashes rapidly erupted between pro-government security forces and dissident soldiers, police and youth gangs in and near Dili, providing the necessary pretext—the collapse of "law and order"—for the Australian military to be sent in. Two of those involved in the clashes—"Major" Alfredo Reinado and Vincente "Railos" da Conceicao—have all the characteristics of agents provocateur.

Reinado spent his exile in Australia and trained last year at the Australian defence academy in Canberra. Controlling a handful of military police, he moved on May 23, with SBS reporter David O'Shea in tow, to the outskirts of Dili where he provoked a firefight with government troops. Feted in the Australian media in subsequent days, Reinado made no secret of his desire for Australian "peacekeepers" to take control, and of his insistence that Alkatiri resign and be put on trial.

On May 24, under pressure from Gusmao and Horta, Alkatiri finally agreed to endorse a formal invitation for troops and police from Australia, Portugal, Malaysia and New Zealand to enter the country. Within hours, the first Australian soldiers began to land at Dili airport. But the clashes in Dili continued as Australia pressed for final agreement on the extent of its involvement and the rules of engagement. In his interview with journalist Martinkus, Alkatiri explained that Reinado and Railos joined forces that day for a joint attack on a pro-government military base at Tacitolu. Interestingly, Railos was to emerge just a fortnight later with allegations that he was the leader of a pro-Fretilin "hit squad," armed by interior minister Lobato with Alkatiri's agreement! This completely unsubstantiated claim quickly became the pretext for demands that both leaders resign.

Howard cut short his visit to Ireland to arrive back in Australia on May 24, in time to publicly announce the dispatch of troops to East Timor. As news came in of the escalating clashes at Tacitolu and elsewhere, Howard gave the order for the intervention to proceed "full steam ahead" without waiting for final agreement from the Alkatiri government. Within days, the full force of 1,300 Australian troops and police, backed by armoured vehicles and attack helicopters was on the ground. At the insistence of Australian diplomats and military officials, the Fretilin government conceded wide powers to these "peace-keepers," allowing them to effectively impose martial law in Dili.

The chronology of events over the past five years demonstrates that the Australian military occupation of East Timor, the subsequent removal of Alkatiri and the installation of Ramos-Horta as prime minister, were not

the outcome of the unforeseen breakdown of “law and order” in Dili. They were, on the contrary, the product of long-hatched plans for “regime change”, aimed at protecting the vital economic and strategic interests of Australian imperialism. Having failed since 2002 to secure its objective of ousting the Alkatiri government through more indirect means, the Howard government, with the support of the Bush administration, opted in May-June 2006 for the more direct military approach.

Concluded



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