

# Australian government's role in ousting East Timor's prime minister Alkatiri

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Over the past three weeks, a series of media reports has confirmed that the Australian military intervention into East Timor in May was not a humanitarian operation aimed at preventing violence and protecting the East Timorese people. It was part of a political campaign to oust East Timor Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and install a government more amenable to Canberra's demands.

Ever since East Timor's formal independence in 2002, the Australian government has been openly hostile to the Alkatiri government (see "How Australia orchestrated 'regime change' in East Timor"), particularly its refusal to be bullied into handing over the largest share of the substantial Timor Sea oil and gas reserves. Having dispatched troops in 1999 to secure its interests, Canberra became increasingly frustrated by Alkatiri's orientation to other powers—especially Portugal and China.

Within East Timor, Alkatiri's opponents gathered around President Xanana Gusmao, who broke from Fretilin in the 1980s, criticising its moderate program of reforms as too radical. The opposition included the Catholic church, which opposed Fretilin's insistence on the separation of church and state; former pro-Indonesian militia leaders who had wreaked havoc in 1999 at the time of the UN referendum on independence; dissident elements of the security forces; and opposition politicians demanding more far-reaching market reforms.

Further evidence has now emerged that from late 2005 efforts were underway to remove the Fretilin government. Veteran freelance journalist John Martinkus previously reported that two East Timorese leaders and two foreigners had approached armed forces chief Brigadier General Taur Matan Rauk and Lieutenant Colonel Falur Rate Laek on two separate occasions in late 2005 to mount a coup to remove Alkatiri, but were turned down.

In a "Dateline" program aired on Australian SBS TV on August 30, Alkatiri confirmed for the first time that he knew of the meetings. He went on to implicitly accuse the Australian government of being behind attempts to foment a coup against him. "I was informed by the commanders of the FFDTL [armed forces] of the situation, that they were approached by some Timorese and some foreign nationals. But I was fully aware and confident in the command of the army that I didn't think that it was an issue that could worry me and for me it was nothing," he said.

Asked about the nationality of the foreigners, Alkatiri said that the army command could not say "if they were Australian or American, but surely they were English-speaking." He bluntly told "Dateline" that Canberra wanted him out because he was too independent and threatened Australian interests in the Timor Sea oil and gas fields.

"I was fully aware we have our right and we still have our right on the Timor Sea and we have to defend it," he said. Asked if he had evidence of more recent Australian involvement in efforts to oust him, he replied: "Evidence, no. But the only prime minister in the world that was really 'advising me' quote-unquote, to step down was the prime minister of Australia during these days, these difficult days."

In February and March, a series of demonstrations and strikes erupted in

the country's small security forces. More than 600 soldiers—a third of the army—protested over pay, conditions and alleged discrimination against "westerners". The moves, backed by opposition parties, to stir up hostility against "easterners" were in fact aimed against Fretilin, which, during its long struggle against Indonesian rule, had been more firmly based in the island's mountainous east.

The protests of the 600 "petitioners"—who were finally sacked by Alkatiri—became the rallying point for anti-Fretilin forces, including youth gangs in Dili connected to opposition parties. On April 28, security forces suppressed a violent anti-government protest of soldiers and youth, stirred up by opposition politicians, which resulted in several deaths. The clashes provoked a further break-up of the police and army, paving the way for the Australian intervention.

The Australian media blamed the violence on Alkatiri and his government. But the most recent evidence points to Gusmao, opposition politicians, disgruntled soldiers and police, and former pro-Indonesian militia members.

The "Dateline" program noted many East Timorese believed that the opposition Democratic Party (PD) was responsible. It pointed to connections between PD leader Fernando Araujo, whose wife and child were flown to Australia in military helicopters, with notorious pro-Indonesian figures such as Rui Lopez and Nemecio de Carvalho.

While Lopez had fled to Indonesian West Timor by the time of the program, de Carvalho was quite open about his loyalties and methods. The former militia leader declared his support for President Gusmao's ambitions to play more than a ceremonial role, saying: "There must be a crisis and instability, including war. So he [Gusmao] can play in such a situation. Without conflict, without instability, without anarchy, war, maybe he will never get more power."

Journalist John Martinkus, who together with reporter David O'Shea produced the SBS program, has written two more recent articles, which point to the involvement of Gusmao and his Australian wife Kirsty Sword Gusmao in the intrigues.

The most significant allegation was raised in an article entitled "Claim that Gusmao ordered Dili's days of rage" in the *Age* newspaper last Saturday. It cited a statement written by the former vice-commander of the Dili district police, Abilio "Mausoko" Mesquita, who was arrested and is currently being detained in Dili's Becora prison for his role in the events of May.

"The statement refers to a meeting at the president's office before the crisis, where, in the presence of local leaders, including chief of police Paulo Martins, Mr Ramos Horta and the Bishop of Baucau, it is alleged that the president discussed the need to get rid of the government of Mr Alkatiri because of its perceived "communist" sympathies. Other sources within the veterans' organisation independently confirm that they were invited to a meeting with the president at his residence in the hills above Dili in March, where a plan to remove Mr Alkatiri was discussed," the article stated.

The results of those meetings became evident in May as moves against Alkatiri intensified. On May 12, as he was leaving for a visit to Washington, Australian Prime Minister Howard announced the dispatch of Australian warships to the Timor Sea without informing the Dili government. The purpose was to maximise pressure on the Fretilin leadership, while moves were underway to replace Alkatiri at a party congress on May 17-19.

The ouster failed when the overwhelming majority of Fretilin delegates re-endorsed Alkatiri on May 19. Within days, however, violence erupted in Dili. It was seized upon by the Australian media to paint a lurid picture of chaos and disorder, which was, in turn, used to justify the dispatch of Australian troops. By May 28, just nine days later, 1,300 Australian soldiers backed by military helicopters and armoured vehicles had landed in East Timor and taken control of Dili.

It is now evident that those involved in the clashes were closely connected with, if not acting directly under the orders of President Gusmao. In comments to "Dateline", the president's wife Kirsty Sword dismissed as "codswallop" allegations that Gusmao was behind the violence. However, evidence to the contrary is continuing to mount.

\* On May 22, Major Alfredo Reinado, who had deserted on May 4 along with 20 military police under his command, moved to the outskirts of Dili and opened fire on government troops. Reporter David O'Shea, who was with Reinado at the time, told "Dateline": "I clearly saw and heard him shoot first. The soldiers who were fired on that day said that the attack against them came out of the blue."

\* On May 24, Reinado joined forces with another dubious provocateur, Vincente "Railos" da Conceicao, for an attack on a military base at Tacitolu on May 24. Under pressure from Gusmao and Horta, Alkatiri finally agreed to the intervention of an Australian-led force. Without waiting for formal terms to be decided, Howard ordered "full steam ahead" on May 25.

\* On May 25, according to the statement by Abilio "Mausoko" Mesquita, he was directly ordered by President Gusmao to attack the house of army commander Brigadier Taur Matan Ruak. Mesquita was filmed at the scene of the attack and was later arrested with several automatic rifles. In jail, Mesquita claims to have repeatedly told UN mission head Sukehiro Hasegawa that Gusmao was the author of the political crisis.

\* Also on May 25, a deadly attack took place on unarmed police who were being led to safety by the UN. While the incident was blamed on pro-government soldiers, "Dateline" stated: "We can offer a dramatically different scenario. This footage suggests that there were many more than three soldiers firing. One eyewitness we spoke to claims he saw civilians shooting at the police from these palm trees... 'Dateline' was told that the UN has video evidence supporting the version of events we have offered. Was this deadly confrontation part of a pattern to discredit the army and further undermine the prime minister?"

It is now evident that Reinado and Railos worked closely with President Gusmao. An article by John Martinkus entitled "East Timor: The President's Man", posted on the *Znet* website on September 9, revealed that Gusmao sent what was, in effect, a presidential order to Reinado on May 29, shortly after Australian troops had begun patrolling the capital.

Written on presidential letterhead, the letter began with the greeting "Major Alfredo, Good Morning!" and called on Reinado to pull back from the hills around Dili. "We have already combined with the Australian forces and you have to station yourself in Aileu," it declared. Gusmao indicated that he would also write to another rebel, Lieutenant Gastao Salsinha, then concluded with "embraces to all" and his signature.

Reinado duly pulled back to Aileu, then moved to Poussada, where, watched over by Australian SAS troops, he kept up a barrage of political attacks on Alkatiri. As Martinkus noted in his article, Reinado had personally met with Gusmao on May 14—just over a week before

Australian troops began landing. According to an article in the *Australian* on September 12, either Gusmao or his wife Kirsty paid Reinado's bill at the Poussada hotel when he moved out.

Despite intense pressure to resign, Alkatiri refused to budge. Moreover, despite his threats, Gusmao did not have the power under East Timor's constitution to sack the prime minister. So another method was contrived. On June 19, the government-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) aired a "Four Corners" program, which contained unsubstantiated allegations from Alkatiri's political enemies that the prime minister had approved the formation of a hit squad.

Lurid claims of mass graves and threats to the life of Fernando Araujo, leader of the opposition Democratic Party, fell by the wayside. But the centrepiece of the ABC program was an allegation by Vincente "Railos" da Conceicao that his "hit squad" had been armed by Interior Minister Rogerio Lobato and ordered by Alkatiri to kill Fretilin's opponents. The following day, Gusmao sent a tape of the ABC program, with its unsubstantiated allegations, to Alkatiri, with a letter demanding his immediate resignation.

Alkatiri repeatedly denied the charges, pointing out Railos's obvious political hostility and his attack on pro-government troops. Gusmao and Railos's relationship was clear at the swearing in of Jose Ramos-Horta on July 10—Railos was there, courtesy of a presidential invitation. During a "media event" filmed by the "Dateline" program at Gusmao's house, Railos was not only present, but warmly welcomed by the president.

These revelations further expose the Howard government's lie that it dispatched troops to East Timor for purely altruistic reasons. With soldiers on standby waiting to land, it is inconceivable that Canberra was not coordinating closely with Gusmao. He, in turn, was in contact with Reinado and Railos, who were busy manufacturing the clashes that provided the pretext. Reinado has longstanding connections to Australia, including military training last year at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

Martinkus's *Znet* article sheds further light on another murky incident—Reinado's arrest in Dili on July 26. He was detained after Portuguese police (GNR) searched the house where he was staying and found a cache of illegal guns and ammunition—a day after the end of a highly publicised weapons amnesty. The house, which Reinado claimed Gusmao had given him permission to use, was directly opposite an Australian military base.

Martinkus was in Dili at the time. He explained that the move by Portuguese police provoked a series of high level meetings at the presidential office involving senior officials, military and police. During the standoff, which lasted the entire day, Reinado freely sauntered onto the verandah to make statements to the assembled local and international press. He was finally detained in the evening by Australian soldiers after the press had been told to leave the area.

"The sequence of the day's events and the way the Australians actively tried to play down the event, gave me the impression that they had only reluctantly arrested Reinado and his men, and that they had been forced to by the GNR's discovery of the weapons. The crisis meetings at the president's office also suggested Gusmao's close involvement in the case," Martinkus commented.

These extraordinary events make clear that the factional struggle for power and influence in Dili continues. Portuguese police, no doubt with the backing of Fretilin, were keen to arrest a key opponent. Gusmao, with the tacit support of Canberra, resisted the detention of one of his loyalists, despite Reinado's obvious and flagrant breaches of the law.

Reinado's ability to literally walk out of prison on August 30, along with 55 other prisoners, raises even more questions about the collusion of Gusmao and his Australian backers. Reinado's media pronouncements over the past fortnight point to the political interests behind his "escape". During an interview on local TV on September 1, he castigated Ramos-

Horta for being weak and blaming him for the continuing violence in Dili. Since then he has continued his threats and invective, criticising the government for remaining under the dominance of Alkatiri and Fretilin.

In an interview with Indonesian TV, reported by the *Australian* on September 11, the rebel major accused Alkatiri of running the cabinet by “remote control”. “We have given the government time to resolve this problem,” he warned, “but if they cannot resolve it, there must be a revolution, involving correct law enforcement, and all the leaders who have broken the law must be ready to face trial.”

The *Australian* followed up with a front-page interview with Reinado on September 12. His loyalties are obvious. He declared that he had “good relations” with the Australian military, but was angry at the Portuguese riot police who were instrumental in his arrest. “They know what I stand for. The Portuguese want to silence me,” he said.

It is no accident that Murdoch’s newspaper is promoting Reinado and his denunciations of the Ramos-Horta government. The *Australian* stridently defended Howard’s military intervention and was in the forefront of the campaign for “regime-change” in Dili, openly expressing frustration with the delays in removing Alkatiri. Its renewed promotion of Reinado indicates growing dissatisfaction in Canberra with Alkatiri’s replacement.

Caught in the midst of competing interests, Ramos-Horta’s manoeuvres have not always won Canberra’s support. In the UN Security Council last month, he opposed Australian demands to maintain an independent military force in East Timor and supported rival Portugal’s push to bring all foreign security forces under the UN flag. When Reinado “escaped”, Ramos-Horta embarrassed the Howard government by criticising the Australian military for refusing his government’s requests to station troops at the Becora jail. In Canberra’s eyes, however, his cardinal sin has been a failure to fulfil his promise to obtain parliamentary ratification for an agreement on the huge Sunrise gas field—the largest in the Timor Sea.

Despite the Howard government’s propaganda to the contrary, it is becoming increasingly evident that Australian police and troops are making no serious efforts to track down Reinado. It suits Canberra’s purposes, for now, for him to be at large, making regular statements. As well as keeping the pressure on Ramos-Horta, Reinado’s threats of “revolution” could indicate that moves are already afoot to replace the Fretilin government completely.

The record of the Howard government in the ousting of Alkatiri demonstrates yet again that Canberra will stop at nothing to assert its economic and strategic interests in East Timor and throughout the Asian Pacific region. Having dispatched troops to the island in 1999 and 2006, the Australian government, with US backing, is determined to undercut its rivals and install a compliant regime.



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