

East Timor: Presidential election campaign held under ongoing Australian occupation

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East Timor's presidential election, due to be held today, takes place under the ongoing occupation of the country by 1,200 Australian and New Zealand soldiers. The Howard government dispatched the troops last May to stamp its domination over the small half island and force out former prime minister Mari Alkatiri. Canberra views the presidential election, and the parliamentary vote due later this year, as a means of further undermining Alkatiri's Fretilin party and installing a regime amenable to the strategic and economic interests of the Australian ruling elite. The immediate aim is to ensure the defeat of Fretilin's presidential nominee, Francisco "Lu-Olo" Guterres, at the hands of one of the Howard government's favoured candidates.

Since independence in 2002, the Fretilin government has implemented a series of pro-business and pro-investor policies along the lines demanded by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. It has also introduced, however, limited social reforms that have been opposed by the most right-wing layers in East Timor, including the powerful Catholic Church, who, along with sections of the Australian press, denounced Alkatiri as a "Marxist". While the Fretilin government's agenda had nothing to do with socialism, Alkatiri had raised the enmity of Canberra by looking to rival powers such as Portugal and China for support and by forcing a number of limited but significant concessions on the illegal plunder of East Timor's oil and gas reserves by Australian oil companies.

The Australian government seized on escalating violence last year as the pretext for sending in hundreds of troops. When Alkatiri refused to bow to pressure to resign, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) television program *Four Corners* broadcast trumped-up allegations that he had authorised a "hit squad" to assassinate his political opponents. Alkatiri finally gave way last June, and Canberra's favoured candidate, Jose Ramos-Horta, was installed as interim prime minister. The charges against Alkatiri have since been quietly dropped due to lack of evidence.

Alkatiri, who remains Fretilin's general secretary, has played a prominent role in the presidential campaign alongside the party's candidate Guterres. Guterres, Fretilin president and parliamentary speaker since 2001, spent the period from 1974 to 1999 as a guerrilla fighter against the Indonesian military. Guterres defended Alkatiri during last year's crisis and rejected demands from President Xanana Gusmao for Fretilin to convene an emergency congress and dump both Alkatiri and Guterres.

Having spent considerable resources ousting Alkatiri as prime

minister, the last thing Canberra is prepared to allow is the election of one of his closest colleagues as president.

Over the past several weeks, Australian soldiers have begun playing an increasingly aggressive role. On February 23, soldiers shot dead two internally displaced refugees who were resisting being evicted from their camp at Dili airport. On March 4, five rebel soldiers were killed by elite SAS troops during a raid supposedly aimed at capturing former major Alfredo Reinado, a dubious figure with close links to Australia, who featured prominently in last year's violence.

Canberra's political provocations stepped up a notch on March 26, when Australian soldiers confronted Fretilin supporters during an election rally in the town of Gleno. For reasons that have not been explained, one soldier pulled an East Timorese man out of his vehicle, held him to the ground under his boot, and pointed a gun at his head. "F--- you, I'll kill you," the soldier reportedly said, before directing his gun at Fretilin members who intervened. A senior officer then ordered the soldier to withdraw. Alkatiri, who witnessed the incident, issued a formal protest condemning the behaviour as "completely unacceptable and unjustifiable".

In the event of an unfavourable outcome, there is every possibility that the Howard government will utilise post-election instability to manipulate the results. Last Thursday, Howard warned that Australian troops might directly intervene. "We expected some increase in activity and some increase in disorder in the lead-up to the election. We have a very large force there and I am sure the local commander makes the decision according to the local circumstances. We invest him with a lot of authority and he's got a very strong force and he will take whatever action is needed."

President Gusmao is once again playing a leading role in the anti-Fretilin machinations. In response to a number of armed clashes at campaign events between supporters of the rival parties, Gusmao provocatively accused the Fretilin leadership of instigating the violence. "Now the world can see that there's a party that instead of calling their supporters to calm down, they allow their supporters to provoke, to throw stones, to fight in the streets," he declared.

In preparation for the parliamentary elections later in the year, Gusmao is building a new right-wing political party, the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT), and will use it as a vehicle to win the post of prime minister—effectively swapping places with current PM Ramos-Horta. CNRT flags and banners

have been prominent at Ramos-Horta's election rallies, and Gusmao attended one of these rallies in Dili on Wednesday.

Former prime minister Alkatiri has denounced Gusmao for leading a "nest of liars" and has threatened legal action to prevent him from appropriating the initials CNRT, which ordinary East Timorese associate with the now defunct pro-independence umbrella organisation, the National Council of Timorese Resistance.

Both Gusmao and Ramos-Horta have clearly aligned themselves with Canberra, with the latter openly backing the presence of foreign forces. "If I'm the president of this country I will ask the UN, Australia and New Zealand to stay on here for as many years as possible," he declared. "More important than so-called issues of sovereignty and nationalism for me, is that the common people are able to sleep at peace at night."

Despite the presidential office being a largely ceremonial post, with the prime minister responsible for economic and social policy, Ramos-Horta has issued a detailed pro-business program. Under the guise of being a "pro-poor" package, its central thrust is to lower taxes and lift regulations for international investors and the wealthy. One proposal involves the establishment of a flat tax rate of 10 percent for those earning more than \$US1,000 a month. As well, Ramos-Horta wants a review of all legislation affecting investment, to make East Timor "the easiest country in the world to do business," saying "if we are to maintain any [business] taxes, it should only be on goods or industries that cause any environmental and health harm".

The presidential candidate also appealed to the Catholic Church, promising to hand over "at least \$US10 million" so that the Church can "assume a bigger role in the spiritual and moral guidance of our people". According to one East Timorese blogger, Ramos-Horta's supporters have been distributing election leaflets showing a photograph of the candidate meeting the pope.

Despite Ramos-Horta's overtures, sections of the Church have backed rival opposition candidate Fernando "La Sama" de Araujo. On April 4, Father Martinho Gusmao, the Church's representative on the National Electoral Commission, declared that de Araujo had the "character" required to lead the country. The Church's intervention may prove a fatal blow to Ramos-Horta's campaign. Standing as an independent, Ramos-Horta has had no party organisation behind him, and despite his portrayals in the Australian media as a major political figure, his popular support is limited. Turnout at his election rallies has been low compared to Fretilin's events.

De Araujo, a 44-year-old former student activist who was imprisoned in Indonesia from 1992 to 1998, has appealed to what he calls the "post-1975 generation," vowing to reverse Fretilin's decision to make Portuguese one of East Timor's official languages. He has accused Fretilin supporters of monopolising public sector jobs, and won support from a number of disaffected young East Timorese, particularly those who attended Indonesian universities in the 1990s. De Araujo's Democratic Party won 8.7 percent of the vote and seven seats in the 2001 parliamentary elections, making it the largest party after Fretilin.

Since then, de Araujo has developed ties with leading figures connected to the pro-Indonesian militias that wreaked havoc

during and after the 1999 independence referendum. After Reinado's forces mutinied last April, de Araujo organised joint protests against the Alkatiri government with Rui Lopes, who has had long standing associations with Indonesia's infamous special forces, Kopassus. According to Australian journalist John Martinkus, Lopes "provides money and logistics support" to de Araujo's Democratic Party. The presidential candidate is also an associate of Nemecio De Carvalho, former leader of the pro-Indonesian Mahidi militia.

De Araujo played a role in last year's destabilisation campaign against Alkatiri, accusing the former prime minister of trying to assassinate him. He publicly appealed to President Gusmao to dismiss parliament and sack Alkatiri as prime minister. Interestingly, de Araujo fled to Australia during the crisis—transported by the Australian military. The full extent of his involvement in the series of provocations leading up to the Australian military intervention and the ousting of Alkatiri remains unknown. It is significant however, that "rebel" military leader Reinado has publicly endorsed his campaign.

Like Ramos-Horta, de Araujo is standing on a pro-business, "free market" platform. He backs free trade agreements with both Indonesia and Australia and advocates the creation of an "investor visa" to facilitate the entry of those with capital worth \$US100,000 or more. People prepared to invest more than \$US200 million will be offered East Timorese citizenship. De Araujo's election manifesto promises he will "encourage investment, market liberalisation, and privatisation and deregulation" and "deter the state from protecting a wide range of economic activities as well as from developing and running nationalised industries [in order to] widen the scope of opportunities for the private sector to consider for investment purposes".

The likely outcome of the presidential vote remains unclear. Unless one of the eight candidates receives more than 50 percent of the vote today, the two leading candidates will contest a run-off ballot on May 9. Guterres, Ramos-Horta and de Araujo are widely regarded as the three front-runners. The five other candidates—Joao Carrascalao of the Democratic Timorese Party, Lucia Lobato of the Social Democrat Party, Avelino Coelho da Silva of the Timorese Socialist Party, Manuel Tilman of the KOTA party, and ex-Fretilin founding member Francisco Xavier do Amaral—are not expected to poll strongly. Opposition parties are already accusing Fretilin of rigging the election.

A run-off ballot would further heighten tensions and provide ample opportunity for the Howard government to intervene, using the well-worn pretext of a "humanitarian" crisis. The Australian media is preparing the groundwork, with exaggerated reports of pre-election violence. While UN monitors have reported clashes at 15 of the 128 campaign events held in the lead-up to the vote, sections of the Australian press have portrayed the country as on the verge of collapse.



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