

Uncertain East Timorese presidential election outcome foreshadows further instability

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In the first round of East Timor's presidential election on Monday, Fretilin candidate Francisco "Lu-Olo" Guterres received the highest vote, with 28.8 percent of the total, according to preliminary results. Prime Minister Jose Ramos-Horta, who stood as an independent, won 22.6 percent support, ahead of six other candidates, including the Democratic Party's Fernando "La Sama" de Araujo who received 18.5 percent. Because no candidate won more than 50 percent of the vote, a run-off ballot between Guterres and Ramos-Horta is scheduled for May 8.

Opposition candidates, led by de Araujo, have disputed the outcome and are threatening legal action over alleged voter intimidation and ballot tampering. The National Electoral Commission yesterday decided not to hold a recount unless ordered by a court of appeal. The Australian media has promoted corruption accusations against Fretilin, and the uncertain outcome will likely see further instability, providing the Howard government with ample opportunity to intervene. Canberra has made clear its determination to prevent a Fretilin victory.

About 1,200 Australian and New Zealand troops currently occupy East Timor. These forces were dispatched last May after the Howard government seized upon, and possibly instigated, a violent split in the East Timorese military in order to tighten Canberra's grip over the oil- and gas-rich country and unseat the Fretilin government of Mari Alkatiri. The Howard government considered Alkatiri to be too close to rival powers China and Portugal, and an obstacle to the Australian ruling elite's economic and strategic interests. While Canberra successfully ousted Alkatiri and installed its favoured candidate Ramos-Horta, Fretilin still has a large parliamentary majority.

The Howard government views the presidential

election and the parliamentary vote scheduled for June 30 as a means of further undermining the ruling party and installing a pliant pro-Australian regime. Canberra has backed Ramos-Horta's and President Xanana Gusmao's efforts to switch offices through the presidential and parliamentary elections. Gusmao has formed a new right-wing party to mobilise opposition to Fretilin.

Sections of the Australian media could hardly contain their excitement when early returns from polling booths in the capital, Dili, showed Ramos-Horta with a strong lead over Guterres, who, it appeared, was not even ranked among the top two candidates. The tone shifted, however, once Guterres overtook Ramos-Horta after additional votes from Fretilin strongholds in the eastern districts were counted. Opposition candidates' allegations of corruption and vote rigging are now being widely promoted.

"The difference [in vote tallies] today is that we have had a lot of votes coming in from the eastern towns, particularly Baucau and Lautem which are two Fretilin strongholds in the east of the country," ABC Radio's Ann Barker declared on Wednesday. "Fretilin says they have very good campaigners there, good organisers and that's why their vote has sort of jumped today. But in light of the allegations that we've heard this afternoon, you now have to wonder whether there may be something more sinister behind it."

No evidence has been produced to substantiate the opposition's allegations. More than 2,000 international and East Timorese election observers monitored the 700 polling booths and reported few irregularities. Some booths ran out of ballot papers, but many of these were in areas that traditionally back Fretilin. De Araujo and other opposition candidates have accused Fretilin members of spoiling the ballots of 150,000 voters—a

figure based on the difference between the 357,000 valid votes counted and the 520,000 people registered to vote. However, the chief of the UN mission in East Timor, Atul Khare, explained that the “missing” ballots were due to voter turnout, which at around 70 percent was lower than initial estimates.

Electoral fraud allegations are being aired by the Australian media in preparation for a possible Guterres victory in next month’s run-off ballot. The media and political establishment in Canberra would no doubt dismiss such a result as illegitimate and fraudulent. Ramos-Horta is already being portrayed by sections of the Australian media as a certainty for the second round of voting. Having spent considerable resources on ousting Alkatiri last year and maintaining its occupation of the country, the Howard government is not about to let an election disrupt its agenda.

The presidential vote revealed widespread voter disaffection with the entire East Timorese political establishment. No candidate received more than 30 percent support. Fretilin’s vote was significantly lower than the 57 percent of the vote it won in constituent assembly elections held in 2001. The decline reflects disillusionment with the realities of life following East Timor’s so-called independence. Fretilin promised its supporters that formal independence, granted in 2002, would set the stage for national economic development and raised living standards for the population.

This has been exposed as an illusion. While “independence” has benefited a tiny layer of the East Timorese elite, ordinary people continue to suffer from extreme poverty. According to the World Bank, more than 20 percent of the population lives on less than a dollar a day, and unemployment in urban areas is more than 40 percent. Tens of thousands of people displaced during last year’s unrest still live in squalid refugee camps.

Ramos-Horta attempted to capitalise on Fretilin’s record by presenting himself as a “president for the poor”. Both he and Xanana Gusmao promised to spend oil revenues on social programs aimed at reducing poverty and unemployment. Pledging to pay \$US40 a month in pensions to the poorest 100,000 East Timorese, Ramos-Horta accused Alkatiri of being a “fiscal conservative”.

The Fretilin government earlier agreed to International Monetary Fund demands that oil and gas

revenues be locked away in an investment fund, supposedly in order to prevent corruption and wasteful spending. The real purpose, however, was to provide a means through which Australia and other countries could avoid providing adequate levels of aid money to East Timor. Fretilin’s implementation of this measure demonstrated the pro-business nature of their program, which belied allegations levelled by right-wing elements in East Timor and sections of the Australian media that the party was “Marxist”.

Ramos-Horta’s populist pitch on the oil fund fell flat, however. The candidate received just 22 percent of the vote, despite his constant promotion in the Australian media as a political colossus and despite receiving Canberra and Washington’s political, and probably financial, backing. Behind Ramos-Horta’s appeal to the poor lay a clear appeal to international investors and Timorese business interests. He promised to eliminate virtually all business taxes and impose a flat income tax of 10 per cent in order to “make East Timor a fiscal paradise, next only to Hong Kong, that would attract investors from Australia and the entire region”.

It remains unclear whether Ramos-Horta will receive the backing of the losing six candidates’ supporters in the run-off ballot. While most of the candidates are adamantly anti-Fretilin, Ramos-Horta is widely regarded as an opportunist and a self-serving manoeuvrer. Some of the minor candidates have threatened to boycott the second round unless the preliminary results of the initial vote are revised. Whatever the outcome, none of the problems affecting East Timor’s working class and rural poor will be resolved.



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