

East Timor: final round of presidential elections

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The second and final round of voting in the East Timorese presidential election is being held today amid allegations that Australian troops have been carrying out provocations. On May 6, Fretilin candidate Francisco “Lu-Olo” Guterres released a press statement condemning Australian troops’ disruption of two Fretilin rallies, one in the capital Dili on May 5 and another in the central town of Ainaro on May 3. Helicopters landed close to the rallies and heavily armed troops moved among the crowds.

“The [Australian-led International Stabilisation Force] ISF military behaved in a heavy-handed and intimidatory way towards our supporters,” Guterres’s spokesman Jose Manuel Fernandes stated. “The ISF should not be frightening and intimidating an entirely peaceful election gathering... We are not convinced that there is no connection between the troops’ behaviour and the Australian government’s apparent support for Jose Ramos-Horta.”

Fernandes added that Fretilin received daily complaints from its supporters of harassment and intimidation by Australian troops. The ruling party has also raised questions about an incident in which an Australian rifle was left lying in the street. “Why was this weapon lying on the ground?” former prime minister and Fretilin secretary-general Mari Alkatiri asked. “Was it a trap? We don’t know.”

The Australian military denied any provocation, claiming rather lamely that the weapon fell from a vehicle and was later recovered. Brigadier Mal Rerden, Australian military commander in East Timor, also rejected Fretilin’s accusations that his personnel had interfered with election rallies and claimed that no soldier came closer than 50 metres to the meetings. Video and camera footage, however, clearly shows Australian troops on patrol in the middle of large crowds.

While claiming to be neutral, Canberra is tacitly backing Ramos-Horta, who in the first round of voting held last month received 22 percent of the vote, behind Fretilin candidate Francisco “Lu-Olo” Guterres who won 29 percent. After deploying hundreds of soldiers to the impoverished territory in May last year and orchestrating the removal of Alkatiri as prime minister, the Australian government is determined to engineer a favourable outcome in the presidential election and the parliamentary vote due later this year.

Canberra views Fretilin as an obstacle to its economic and strategic interests. The Alkatiri government had forced the Howard government to issue a number of limited but nevertheless unwelcome concessions on its exploitation of the Greater Sunrise oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. No less important was Fretilin’s relations with countries such as Portugal and China, regarded by Australia as rivals. Having dispatched troops to East Timor in 1999 in order to protect its interests during the transition to so-called independence from Indonesia, Canberra is not prepared to be sidelined by other powers in the resource-rich and strategically significant region.

Last year’s military intervention was centrally aimed at removing Alkatiri, who was finally forced to make way for Ramos-Horta after the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Four Corners” program broadcast baseless allegations that the Fretilin prime minister had armed a “hit squad” to assassinate his political opponents. Alkatiri resigned soon after Australian troops landed in East Timor, but Fretilin still retained a large parliamentary majority. With Ramos-Horta now running for president, outgoing President Xanana Gusmao has formed a new right-wing political party and aims to form a coalition government of anti-Fretilin parties following parliamentary elections scheduled to be held on June 30.

While the Howard government has targeted Fretilin for removal, the ruling party does not represent the genuine interests of the East Timorese working class and rural poor. Fretilin represents the interests of a layer of the country’s ruling elite that has sought to manoeuvre between Canberra’s demands and the competing interests of rival European and Asian powers, while simultaneously wooing foreign investors by implementing the dictates of the International Monetary Fund.

An IMF report released last February praised the post-independence Fretilin government for its “efficient public spending” and “outstanding track record of fiscal soundness”. In other words, wages have been suppressed and spending on health, education and other social services kept to a minimum. Fretilin’s economic program has made a mockery of its pre-1999 promises to improve life in an “independent” East Timor. The country remains among the world’s poorest, with widespread unemployment and tens of thousands living in

internally displaced people's camps.

Hostility toward Australian troops has escalated, particularly as military operations have become increasingly aggressive. In February this year, for example, Australian soldiers shot dead two East Timorese men who were protesting the forced closure of a refugee camp near Dili airport. Fretilin has made a very limited and carefully targetted appeal to anti-Australian sentiment by stressing its support for "national sovereignty" and issuing widely publicised complaints of Australian military interference in its campaign work. This appeal is entirely hypocritical, however, as Fretilin backed the initial intervention in May last year and does not call on Australian troops to leave. Ramos-Horta has nevertheless accused the party of running an "anti-Australian" election campaign and warned of chaos if foreign forces leave.

The collapse in much of Fretilin's support base has allowed Ramos-Horta to posture as a "president for the poor". However, Ramos-Horta's proposed economic program is centrally aimed at removing all impediments and barriers to the accumulation of profit, by turning East Timor into another "Hong Kong" through the elimination of virtually all taxes. The presidential candidate has sought to camouflage this right-wing pro-business agenda by demagogically denouncing Fretilin's failure to spend more of the country's oil and gas revenues to resolve poverty and unemployment.

In the month since the first round of voting, Ramos-Horta has engaged in a series of manoeuvres aimed at winning the support of the six losing candidates. Last month he announced he was calling off the Australian military's pursuit of "rebel" military leader Alfredo Reinado. Reinado, a highly dubious figure with close connections to the Australian military, played a major role in last year's unrest after he mutinied and attacked forces loyal to the government. Shortly after the announcement, Fernando "La Sama" de Araujo publicly backed Ramos-Horta's campaign and openly acknowledged the Reinado quid pro quo.

The cynical deal underscored Ramos-Horta's determination to mobilise the most reactionary forces in East Timorese society behind his campaign. Prior to the first round of voting, De Araujo had been endorsed by Reinado and sections of the powerful Catholic Church. He also has close ties with elements connected to pro-Indonesian militias and Indonesian special forces. During last year's unrest that preceded the Australian military intervention, he organised joint demonstrations with these layers aimed at bringing down the Alkatiri government.

Another dubious figure, Vicente "Railos" da Conceicao, has openly campaigned for Ramos-Horta. Railos's allegation that Alkatiri had asked him to lead the hit squad was central to the "Four Corners" program that was used to force the Fretilin prime minister out. Railos's transformation from a supposed pro-Fretilin hitman to an anti-Fretilin politician has never been adequately explained.

A subsequent UN investigation recommended that Railos be

prosecuted for his participation in an attack on East Timorese soldiers last May and for the "illegal possession, use, and movement" of weapons. A Fretilin statement released on April 30 accused Railos of working as Ramos-Horta's "principal campaigner" in the town of Liquica and of visiting the prime minister's office and meeting with an "advisor on investment," Chris Santos, an Australian national. Ramos-Horta issued a press release in reply, which did not deny any of the allegations and instead repeated the hit squad allegations against Alkatiri.

That an individual who Ramos-Horta alleges was the ring-leader of a government-sponsored assassination unit is now playing a prominent role in Ramos-Horta's election campaign raises further serious questions regarding the events of April-May 2006. All the evidence indicates that the unrest and the allegations against the Alkatiri government—enthusiastically promoted in the Australian media—were calculated provocations aimed at overthrowing the Fretilin government, orchestrated by right-wing sections of the East Timorese ruling elite, possibly with Canberra's active assistance.

The Howard government can be expected to continue its manoeuvres in East Timor irrespective of who becomes president. The Australian media has presented the election as a virtual foregone conclusion, unanimously predicting that Ramos-Horta will defeat Guterres. Five of the six losing first round candidates have backed Ramos-Horta, but the outcome remains highly uncertain, particularly as it is unclear whether these candidates' supporters will turn out in large numbers today. The Australian media coverage serves as a pre-emptive move against a Fretilin victory—if Ramos-Horta loses, allegations of vote rigging and corruption will no doubt be widely promoted, opening the door for a legal challenge to the outcome.



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