

East Timor: Ramos-Horta wins presidential election

Patrick O'Connor
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Jose Ramos-Horta has claimed victory in East Timor's presidential election after recording 69 percent of the vote in last Wednesday's run-off ballot. Fretilin's Francisco "Lu-Olo" Guterres—the leading candidate in the first round of voting held last month—polled just 31 percent. Unsurprisingly, the Australian government and the media hailed the result as a victory for democracy in East Timor. The vote, however, marked another stage in Canberra's year-long drive for "regime change" in the resource-rich country.

"I think [Ramos-Horta] was the hope of the side, I don't want to be disrespectful to his opponent, but now that he's won, I think he will be good," Australian Prime Minister John Howard declared. "He's a good friend of Australia and that's very important." Foreign Minister Downer added: "He's a very good friend of mine and we've worked together very closely over so many years... Jose Ramos-Horta will be a very good president."

The Howard government seized upon unrest in the capital, Dili, and the country's western districts in April and May last year and dispatched hundreds of Australian troops in a neo-colonial operation aimed at removing Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri's government. Canberra regarded the Fretilin administration as too close to rival powers including Portugal and China. Alkatiri resigned shortly after Australian troops landed in East Timor and Ramos-Horta was installed as prime minister. With Ramos-Horta now president-elect, the Howard government hopes to see previous President Xanana Gusmao become prime minister on the basis of a right-wing anti-Fretilin coalition following parliamentary elections on June 30.

Canberra is concerned to protect its illegal exploitation of East Timor's oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea, which is worth tens of billions of dollars. A setback in East Timor would open the door for rival powers to extend their influence, not only in the impoverished

country but in the wider region as well. The Australian ruling elite is increasingly concerned about Beijing's encroachments into the South Pacific—deemed Australia's "special patch" by Howard.

As well as the 1,700 predominantly Portuguese UN police, about 1,250 Australian and New Zealand troops are deployed in East Timor, including 100 elite Special Air Service forces. Australian personnel have played an increasingly aggressive role in recent months. In February, for example, troops shot dead two East Timorese men protesting the forced removal of internally displaced people from a Dili refugee camp. During the election campaign, Fretilin repeatedly alleged that Australian forces were interfering with their work and engaging in provocations.

Canberra's role was graphically demonstrated on election day when it was revealed that an unmanned Australian surveillance plane had crashed into a home in Dili several days earlier. The military had attempted to cover up the incident. According to the *Australian*, the homeowner, Vicente Soares, was promised compensation and "had been given bottles of water and some batteries, allegedly to buy his silence". Contrary to Australian military denials that anyone had been near the house at the time of the crash, Soares's 12-year-old son was asleep in his room and narrowly avoided being killed.

Again indicating his loyalty to Canberra, Ramos-Horta dismissed concerns over the incident. "It's very normal, it's nothing spectacular," he declared on May 10. "We didn't find anything spectacular to make an issue out of it... They have done it before many times and it's part of the [intervention] agreement—surveillance is very necessary. I was informed before what equipment they used, it is necessary."

Ramos-Horta's support for the protracted presence of foreign forces in East Timor formed just one part of his right-wing election campaign. Despite the president

having no constitutional authority to determine economic and social policy, Ramos-Horta published a lengthy platform outlining his vision of turning East Timor into a regional investment hub by effectively abolishing corporate taxes and all constraints on the activities of international investors in the country. A highly regressive 10 percent flat tax on personal incomes was also promised.

The president-elect said he would hand over at least \$US10 million to the powerful Catholic Church. The Church bitterly opposed Fretilin's attempt to ensure some degree of separation of church and state and its refusal to allow unfettered Catholic control over religious education in public schools. After his resignation last year, Alkatiri accused the Church of being involved in a series of coup plots against his government. Ramos-Horta has promised to facilitate a more prominent role for the Church in East Timor. He left no doubt about his allegiances when he cast his ballot on May 9 while wearing a t-shirt bearing a large image of Jesus Christ.

Five of the six losing candidates in the first round backed Horta in the run-off. Given what was at stake for Canberra, however, it cannot be excluded that election rigging may have been involved. Horta won large votes in districts where he obtained virtually nothing in the first round. In any case, far from being a free and fair election as portrayed by the international media, the vote was conducted under an Australian-led military occupation.

Among the most important endorsement was that of the Democratic Party's candidate, Fernando "La Sama" de Araujo, who won 19 percent of the vote. De Araujo, who has close connections with prominent figures aligned with Indonesian special forces and pro-Indonesian militias, endorsed Ramos-Horta after he promised to call off the Australian military's so-called pursuit of rebel army leader Alfredo Reinado, who is aligned with de Araujo. Reinado is a highly dubious figure with close links to the Australian military and played an important role in destabilising the Alkatiri government last year when he attacked East Timorese army forces loyal to the government.

Ramos-Horta's deal with de Araujo underscored the fact that his presidency will rest upon the most reactionary layers of East Timorese society. The election outcome foreshadows further social unrest and political instability.

Ramos-Horta's ability to win the presidency despite his opportunist manoeuvring, support for an increasingly unpopular Australian-led occupation, and pro-business economic program, is in large part a product of Fretilin's

own political bankruptcy.

In power since East Timor became independent in 2002, Fretilin sought to attract international investment by implementing International Monetary Fund-recommended programs. The IMF hailed the government's decision to set aside oil and gas revenues in long-term investment accounts rather than immediately spending the money on social programs aimed at alleviating poverty. Cynically posturing as a "president of the poor", Ramos-Horta promised to boost social spending. Fretilin was unable to expose the hypocrisy of this pledge because it essentially agrees with Ramos-Horta's pro-business, free market program.

Fretilin proved similarly unable to appeal to anti-occupation sentiment. While Guterres and Alkatiri issued a number of complaints about Australian troops' behaviour, at no time did they campaign for the withdrawal of foreign forces. This position follows their response to the crisis in April-May last year. While well aware of the Howard government's manoeuvres, Alkatiri signed off on the official invitation for Australian forces to intervene. In stepping down as prime minister just weeks later, he was critical of the Australian role but called off large protests by Fretilin supporters against Canberra's dirty tricks.

Fretilin, which led the armed struggle against the Indonesian military between 1975 and 1999, promised that the formation of a separate nation-state would advance ordinary people's living standards and provide them with security. Despite so-called "independence", the island is still politically and economically dominated by Australia and other major powers. A tiny layer of the East Timorese elite has been the only real beneficiaries, including many Fretilin cronies. Poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, disease, and premature death continue to wrack the country.



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