

A regime made in Australia

Gusmao appointed East Timor's prime minister

Richard Phillips
10 August 2007

Angry rioting and protests erupted in East Timor this week after President Jose Ramos-Horta appointed Xanana Gusmao as prime minister. Gusmao's 12-member cabinet includes Jose Luis Guterres as deputy prime minister. Guterres challenged former Prime Minister Mari Alkitiri for the leadership of Fretilin last year and now heads a breakaway faction from the organisation.

More than 70 people were arrested during the protests, mainly in the capital Dili and Baucau, on Monday and Tuesday. Australian troops and United Nations police fired hundreds of tear-gas shells and rubber bullets during street clashes.

Some demonstrators chanted "Down with John Howard" and called for a Fretilin government, while banners accusing Ramos-Horta of being a puppet of the Australian and US governments began appearing in Dili refugee camps.

Fretilin immediately declared the government "unconstitutional" and threatened to have Gusmao's appointment overturned by legal action. According to the East Timor constitution, Fretilin, which won 21 seats in the June elections and is the largest single party in the 65-member parliament, should have been given the first opportunity to form a government.

Gusmao's National Congress for the Reconstruction of East Timor (CNRT), which won 18 seats in the national ballot, claimed, however, that it had the right to govern after it formed a post-election alliance with the Association of Timorese Democrats-Social Democrat Party (ASDT) and the Democratic Party (PD). This gave it a bloc of 37 parliamentary seats.

After protracted negotiations involving Fretilin and the CNRT coalition, the talks collapsed late last month and Ramos-Horta appointed Gusmao prime minister on August 6.

The Howard government immediately congratulated the new government but made clear that Canberra's almost 1,000-strong contingent of troops and police would remain

in the country on a long-term basis. The US State Department issued a statement hailing the "peaceful, free, and fair presidential and parliamentary elections", while Washington said it would assist Gusmao in "meeting the challenges ahead".

Gusmao's regime is not the product of a "free and fair" electoral process but the end result of the Howard government's political campaign against the former Fretilin government, which held power in East Timor since its formal independence in 2002.

Canberra has secured the lion's share of East Timor's substantial offshore gas and oil resources in the Timor Sea, and has systematically intervened to block any challenge to its political and economic domination of the tiny nation.

When Alkitiri and the former Fretilin-led administration, which tentatively attempted to secure economic and diplomatic support from China and Portugal, forced some concessions from Australia during new negotiations over gas resources early last year, Canberra reacted with fury.

In May 2006, the Howard government seized on rioting that erupted in Dili as the pretext for sending naval ships and troops to the country to "restore calm". Aided and abetted by the Australian media, Horta, Gusmao and East Timor's clergy, Canberra unleashed a dirty tricks campaign against Prime Minister Alkitiri to force his resignation as prime minister and undermine the Fretilin government (see "How Australia orchestrated 'regime change' in East Timor").

While the Australian government disingenuously claims to have had no influence in the appointment of Gusmao's CNRT government, late last month, and in the midst of the post-election arm-twisting, Howard suddenly visited East Timor and met with Ramos-Horta.

The Australian prime minister told journalists that he also planned to meet with Gusmao, describing him as the "likely next prime minister". He also declared that Australian troops would remain in East Timor for as long as Canberra saw fit.

Ramos-Horta and Gusmao are tried and tested stooges of

Australian imperialism. But concerns remain within the Australian ruling elite as to whether the fragile new government can contain mounting social and political tensions produced by deepening poverty, unemployment and popular opposition to Australia's economic domination.

Anticipating an explosive reaction to Gusmao's appointment, Ramos-Horta met with heads of the East Timorese police (PNTL) and the local military (F-FDTL) a week before his announcement of the new government.

Ramos-Horta told PTNL commander Alfonso de Jesus that the police had to "remain neutral" while F-FDTL commander Brigadier Taur Matan Ruak told the media he was ready to "follow instructions given by the leaders who run this nation".

At the same time Australian Army Brigadier John Hutcheson replaced Brigadier Mal Rerden as head of the so-called International Stabilisation Force in East Timor.

Hutcheson has close relations with the East Timorese military and served in the country as "defence advisor" in 2001. More significantly, he led the military component of Australia's Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which took control of that country's major institutions—the police, courts, prisons, media outlets and the finance department—in 2003.

The Australian media predictably responded to the new government and the outbreak of rioting with praise for Ramos-Horta and Gusmao as "democrats" and "beloved freedom fighters", combined with denunciations of Fretilin and Alkitiri.

Greg Sheridan, foreign policy editor of Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper, issued an ultimatum to Fretilin, declaring that it had to decide whether it was "an armed militia or a respectable political party". This required the organisation to accept the new government and discipline its angry supporters, he wrote.

Likewise, an editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, bluntly accused Fretilin of being the "greatest source of instability" in the country. "We must try to ensure that East Timor does not turn into another Solomon Islands, or Papua New Guinea. Australia does not need another failing state for a near neighbour."

The "failing state" label has become the pretext for every act of political and military aggression by Australia in East Timor and the South Pacific over the past decade.

This was further underlined by Foreign Minister Downer in a major foreign policy speech in Canberra on Wednesday night. Downer specifically named China and Taiwan as major rivals in the region and emphasised that Australia would not hesitate to mount further military interventions to maintain its domination.

He claimed that China's increasing presence, and its

competition with Taiwan as an aid donor in the South Pacific, was undermining Australian attempts to establish "good governance"—a code phrase for political submission by governments in the South Pacific and East Timor to Australian dictates.

Downer also denounced those criticising Australian violations of national sovereignty in the region. The "cry of sovereignty", he declared, was being used as a "smokescreen" to "distract attention from corrupt and illegal behaviour".

Canberra's neo-colonial bullying further underlines the issues at stake for the Australian government and its big business backers.

As competition intensifies between regional powers for valuable resources and strategic positions, Australian imperialism cannot tolerate any attempt by any section of the ruling elites in East Timor and the south west Pacific to develop alternative economic and political alliances.

While Fretilin and Alkitiri continue to denounce Ramos-Horta and Gusmao, they have no fundamental differences with the new regime. Like it, they have worked to block and dissipate any mass opposition that threatens to get out of official control. Alkitiri has bent over backwards trying to accommodate himself to the CNRT, offering to back Gusmao as prime minister if he formed a coalition government with Fretilin.

In power from 2002, Fretilin maintained a pro-business regime, implementing the dictates of the International Monetary Fund and the same sort of free market program as that espoused by Ramos-Horta and Gusmao. It has no progressive solution to the immense social problems wracking East Timor, one of the poorest countries in the world, where almost half the population lives below the poverty line. Six years after so-called "independence", the average income is 55 US cents per day, unemployment is 40 percent and life expectancy under 57 years of age.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact