Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao accused of instigating 2006 political crisis in East Timor

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Former East Timorese major Alfredo Reinado has accused Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao of directly instigating the 2006 military mutiny, which triggered the political and social unrest that forced more than 100,000 people—10 percent of the population—to flee their homes. The violence was seized upon by Canberra as the pretext for dispatching an Australian-led military intervention and muscling former Fretilin prime minister Mari Alkatiri out of office.

The 2006 events unfolded as part of a "regime change" operation orchestrated by the former Australian government of John Howard and by Fretilin's domestic political opponents. Canberra regarded the Alkatiri administration as being too closely aligned to strategic rivals, Portugal and China, and resented the concessions it had been forced to make during negotiations over the exploitation of the Greater Sunrise oil and gas field. Fretilin, a bourgeois nationalist organisation, was also opposed by rival sections of the Timorese elite. Its limited promises of social reform were viewed with hostility by business and landowning interests, particularly those with connections to the former Indonesian occupying forces, while the powerful Catholic Church resisted the Alkatiri government's support for a separation between church and state.

Gusmao has long played a leading role in the political manoeuvres of these right-wing forces. But his public response to the 2006 crisis was particularly provocative. On March 23 he delivered a nationally televised speech in which he denounced Fretilin as corrupt and dictatorial, and stoked up regional resentments by accusing the government of favouring people from the eastern districts where Fretilin draws most of its support. The speech sparked widespread violence, marking a critical turning point in the crisis. The unrest became the pretext in May for the dispatch of Australian troops. In June, Gusmao—utilising a scurrilous documentary produced by the Australian ABC program "Four Corners" that falsely accused Alkatiri of arming a "hit squad" to assassinate his political opponents—then publicly threatened to resign as president unless Alkatiri stepped down. When Alkatiri eventually obliged, he was succeeded as prime minister by Gusmao's close ally Jose Ramos-Horta.

Gusmao now stands accused not just of exploiting the soldiers' mutiny for his own ends, but of direct responsibility for the crisis. Alfredo Reinado was one of the central figures in the military split. In April and May 2006, violent protests erupted in Dili in support of nearly 600 soldiers (known as the "petitioners") who had abandoned their barracks after accusing the Alkatiri government of discriminating against Timorese from the western regions of the country. Reinado, the commander of East Timor's military police, participated in some of the most violent clashes, including an unprovoked ambush on government soldiers and police. Currently facing eight murder charges and ten counts of attempted murder, Reinado and his armed followers have based themselves in the regional western districts and refused to accede to Gusmao's demands to turn themselves in.

Negotiations between the East Timorese government and Reinado over the terms of the former major's surrender appear to have broken down, provoking the public allegations against Gusmao.

Reinado recently recorded a video message that has been circulated on DVD in East Timor and released, in part, on the Internet. "I give my testimony as a witness, that Xanana is the main author of this crisis, he cannot lie or deny about this," the former major declared. "Many things will happen backstage and he knows about that, it's his responsibility and his links. He calls us bad people, but it's him that created us, turned us to be like this—he is author of the petition. He was behind all of this... He turns against us, those ordered and created by him. It's with his support that the petition exists in the first place, it's his irresponsible speeches to the media that made people to be fighting and killing each other until this moment and he knows many more things—we will talk about this."

Reinado is a dubious figure and his statement certainly cannot simply be taken on face value. He is yet to provide any supporting evidence. Nevertheless, his allegation dovetails with already-known information indicating that Gusmao was the leading Timorese figure in the calculated coup d'état against the democratically elected Fretilin administration.

Reinado is not the first person to have accused Gusmao of orchestrating violence. Former vice-commander of Dili's district police, Abilio "Mausoko" Mesquita issued a statement after his arrest in 2006 alleging that Gusmao had ordered him to attack a house belonging to army Brigadier Taur Matan Ruak on May 25. Mesquita claims to have repeatedly told UN mission head Sukehiro Hasegawa that Gusmao was the author of the political crisis. Mesquita was sentenced to four years jail last August for his role in the attack on Brigadier Ruak's house, despite Ruak asking the court to grant clemency and release him.

There is already evidence that Reinado had maintained communications with Gusmao as the crisis deepened in May 2006. On May 14 the two men met in Dili. On May 29—three days after the 1,300 Australian-led soldiers landed in East Timor—Gusmao sent Reinado a letter written on presidential letterhead which began with the greeting "Major Alfredo, Good Morning!" and encouraged him to pull back from the hills around the capital. "We have already combined with the Australian forces and you have to station yourself in Aileu," it declared. Gusmao concluded with "embraces to all" and his signature. Senior staff at the Poussada lodge, where Reinado stayed for six weeks, told the *Australian* that Gusmao later paid Reinado's hotel bill.

Significantly, Gusmao has refused to deny Reinado's latest allegations. "I do not want to respond to this issue because there are legal implications and I do not want to engage in a war of words," he declared on January 10. "Let whoever wants to scream about it scream... I am not paying any attention because I see it as irrelevant."

The prime minister later issued an extraordinary threat to journalists in Dili covering the story. "You have to exercise more responsibility towards the environment of stability or instability," he said last Tuesday. "We close our eyes when in the case of small and big things you go and interview Alfredo [Reinado]. Perhaps because of these things instability may emerge in the country—because of you—[so] we will arrest you."

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Former Prime Minister Alkatiri has demanded that Gusmao resign. "I never had any doubts that Xanana was behind, or in front of the crisis, and it was because of this that I have been saying right from the beginning that this has been a big conspiracy," he said. "Now, because they are upset with one another Alfredo has revealed that this was in fact the case."

These remarks stand in stark contrast to the way Alkatiri conducted himself during the 2006 crisis. The former prime minister then made no genuine attempt to expose the conspiracy against him, acquiesced to the Australian intervention, and resigned just as large numbers of Fretilin supporters began demonstrating in defence of his government. For Alkatiri and the Fretilin leadership, the prospect of a mass movement mobilised in defence of democratic rights developing beyond their control terrified them far more than a Gusmao-led right-wing coup.

The Australian media have buried Reinado's allegations. The story was completely ignored for more than a week; only when the blackout could no longer be sustained did the broadsheet newspapers publish short reports describing Alkatiri's demand that Gusmao resign and the prime minister's threat to arrest Timorese journalists. Beyond this, however, there has been no detail and no analysis. This is certainly no accident or oversight. Almost every section of the media was complicit in Canberra's destabilisation campaign against the Alkatiri administration. The press is now seeking to evade any serious examination of Gusmao's role in the 2006 events because to do so would raise embarrassing questions about the former Howard government's, and their own, involvement.

Gusmao has long-standing and close connections with Canberra. It is highly unlikely he would have moved against the Alkatiri administration without prior backing from Howard.

It is equally unlikely that Canberra was caught unaware by the split within the Timorese military. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in July 2006: "Given its long record of intrigue, there is no doubt that Australia had a direct hand in the political events leading up to its May 24 military intervention. The Howard government's close relations with Gusmao and Ramos-Horta were undoubtedly augmented by a network of contacts established by Australian diplomatic staff, military personnel and intelligence operatives in Dili with opposition politicians, rebel soldiers and police, and even gang leaders. Canberra not only knew who was involved in the army protests in March, but, in all likelihood, encouraged them."

Reinado's claim that Gusmao was behind the "petitioners" uprising again raises questions regarding the former major's Australian connections. Reinado lived in Australia in the 1990s, and his wife and children still reside in Perth. He returned to East Timor in 1999, and after joining the country's armed forces, received military training in Canberra.

When Australian troops landed in Timor in May 2006, they made no effort to detain Reinado. SAS forces accompanied him to the hotel outside Dili where he stayed for six weeks, issuing regular denunciations of the Fretilin government and public messages of support for the Australian-led intervention force. In July, Portuguese police arrested Reinado in Dili on weapons charges. The illegal arms were being stored in a house directly opposite an Australian military base. A month later Reinado somehow managed to walk out of the Dili prison, which was being guarded by Australian and New Zealand forces.

After negotiations between Reinado and Ramos-Horta faltered over the terms of the former major's surrender, Horta authorised an Australian military raid. The Howard government dispatched an additional 100 SAS troops for the operation on March 4, 2007 in which Australian and New Zealand forces attacked the former major's base in the central mountain town of Same. Five of his followers were shot dead, although Reinado and the rest of his men somehow managed to escape. It has never been explained how the elite forces failed to apprehend Reinado. The only plausible explanation is that the operation was never aimed at capturing him.

In the aftermath of the raid, Australian military spokespeople ludicrously declared that the SAS remained "on the hunt" for Reinado but were unable to locate him. The former major meanwhile continued to grant interviews to TV crews and other media personnel. Remarkably, he declared that he did not blame Australian forces for killing five of his men and still supported the foreign military presence in East Timor.

Australian commander of the International Stabilisation Force (ISF) in East Timor, John Hutchison, confirmed last Wednesday that his forces would not arrest Reinado. Hutchison reportedly told a press conference in Dili that the Australian military does "not want to intervene in the internal problems" of East Timor. This remark merely underscores the depth of Canberra's cynicism. The Fretilin leadership has complained that the ISF's refusal to move against Reinado violates an active arrest warrant issued by the courts and rests on nothing but an arbitrary order of President Ramos-Horta, who has called for further negotiations.

The standoff is heightening opposition towards the Australian-led occupation within the East Timorese population. Australian Catholic priest Father Frank Brennan, a former director of the Jesuit Refugee Service in East Timor, warned last month: "There is a growing perception among local critics of the Timor government that the Australian troops are the personal troops of the president given their presence without full constitutional mandate and their ready response to Horta's arbitrary command, which showed little respect for the traditional separation of powers between the executive and the judiciary."

Popular hostility will only increase as the neo-colonial character of the Australian-led intervention becomes ever more apparent. Newly-elected Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd visited East Timor last month and pledged to maintain the Australian presence until at least 2009. However, the operation will almost certainly last much longer. President Ramos-Horta told the *Australian* that he expects the UN mission, backed by the Australian military, to continue until at least 2011.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute has encouraged the Rudd government to go even further and look to install Australian personnel directly into East Timor's state apparatus, as Canberra has done in other South Pacific countries. A report issued last November titled "After the 2006 Crisis: Australian interests in Timor-Leste" stated: "Expatriates in critical posts like chief of police, prosecutor general, and senior court appointments could provide a circuit-breaker from political interference as well as promote professional development and an ethos of public service complementing the political and economic advice and audits provided by UN missions and the IMF."

That the prospect of an Australian takeover of East Timor's police force and judiciary is now being actively discussed serves to demonstrate the real character of the tiny impoverished country's so-called "independence".

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