

# A very strange “coup attempt” in East Timor

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Nothing is clear about Monday’s events in the East Timorese capital of Dili, in which rebel soldier Alfredo Reinado was shot dead and the country’s president Jose Ramos-Horta was seriously injured, with gunshot wounds to his chest and stomach. The least likely explanation, however, is the official one by Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao, who immediately claimed that an attempted coup had been thwarted. He then called for Australian military and political support and imposed a state of emergency and curfew.

Gusmao insists that he and the president were the targets of an assassination plot. Reinado and several of his armed supporters arrived at the president’s residence early Monday morning. But if this were an assassination attempt, Reinado, a former army major who trained in Australia, had not done his homework. Ramos-Horta was out for his regular morning walk with two of his bodyguards. Rather than preparing to assassinate him, it is quite possible that Reinado was merely seeking to talk to the president, as he had during the previous period.

There are several versions of what happened next. By some accounts, Reinado and his men disarmed the guards and stormed into the house looking for the president. But yesterday’s *Australian* indicated that it was in fact the guards themselves who opened fire: “Neighbours and Ramos-Horta’s house staff told the *Australian* that Reinado did not fire the first shot. Instead, they said he had appeared at the gate asking for the president and was almost immediately shot through the eye.”

Ramos-Horta, who was returning from his walk, was caught in the crossfire. He was hit at least twice, but managed somehow to get to his residence. Sometime later, Australian military doctors managed to stem the loss of blood and stabilise him. The president was flown to the northern Australian city of Darwin for further treatment and is reportedly in a serious but stable condition.

Who was trying to assassinate whom has not been established. With speculation rife in Dili, Gusmao felt compelled to issue a statement declaring: “To put to rest the rumour that the president called Alfredo to kill him, I would like to reiterate that I was also ambushed and targeted. This shows that it was a planned operation from Alfredo.” He concluded with a thinly veiled threat to the media “not to speculate on issues that have not been confirmed”.

While the events at Ramos-Horta’s residence are sketchy, details of the assassination attempt on Gusmao are virtually non-existent. The prime minister claims that his convoy was ambushed by a second group of rebel soldiers headed by Gastao Salsinha, leader of the so-called “petitioners” who were sacked from the army in 2006 for protesting in support of better conditions. Gusmao’s vehicle was sprayed with bullets, but no one was injured and the

attackers managed to escape without a trace. Speaking to an *Australian* reporter, Salsinha denied any involvement in the attack and did not know why Reinado had appeared at the presidential residence.

No adequate explanation has been offered regarding Reinado’s motive for trying to kill the president and prime minister. The Australian media, which feted Reinado in 2006 as one of the leaders of the anti-Fretilin rebels, have generally dismissed him as “a bold, foolish rebel” or a Rambo with delusions of grandeur. While the dead major was no doubt somewhat unstable psychologically, he certainly had a firm grasp of military matters. Two botched “assassination attempts” and “a coup” that included no plans for seizing key centres or dealing with hundreds of Australian and foreign troops and police is an unlikely scenario.

A useful rule of thumb in such cases is to ask: who benefits? In this case, the question is: who has something to gain from the death of Reinado? At the top of the list is Gusmao—along with his Australian backers.

Just last month, Reinado accused Gusmao of being directly responsible for the army mutiny and violence that preceded the Australian military intervention in 2006. A message circulated by video, but ignored in the Australian media, declared in part: “I give my testimony as a witness, that Xanana is the main author of this crisis, he cannot lie or deny about this... He calls us bad people, but it’s him that created us, turned us to be like this—he is author of the petition... 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’s threat to “talk” had far-reaching political implications for Gusmao and for Canberra. In May 2006, former Australian Prime Minister John Howard claimed that the dispatch of troops to East Timor was needed to halt spiralling violence, because the local army was divided and the police force had disintegrated. Gusmao, then president, was calling for Australian troops to intervene and denouncing Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and his Fretilin government for creating the crisis by sacking the 600 “petitioners”. The Australian media were braying for the “Marxist” Alkatiri to resign over his mishandling of the situation.

Alkatiri is certainly no Marxist, but his government had refused to tamely accept Canberra’s demands for the lion’s share of oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. The Howard government, which had deployed troops to East Timor in 1999, had expected that Australia would assume the dominant role in the tiny statelet eventually created in 2001. However, the Alkatiri government had attempted to preserve a modicum of independence by establishing

relations with other countries, including the former colonial power Portugal, as well as China, Cuba and Brazil. The dispatch of Australian troops in May 2006 was not to help the East Timorese, but was part of the Howard government's agenda to oust Alkatiri and install political figures more amenable to Australian demands—notably Gusmao and Ramos-Horta.

Major Reinado, who trained in Canberra in 2005, was a key figure in the events leading up to the military intervention. He had joined the “petitioners” and bitterly denounced the Fretilin government for using violence against the protesting soldiers. He was part of a right-wing chorus gathered around Gusmao, including church leaders, former pro-Indonesian militiamen and businessmen, who were hostile to the very modest reforms being carried out by Alkatiri. They created anti-government youth gangs by exploiting widespread discontent over poverty and unemployment.

Reinado was directly involved in fomenting the mayhem. On the eve of Australian troops landing, his men, accompanied by an Australian camera crew, clashed with government troops, adding to the atmosphere of chaos and breakdown. Gusmao has always insisted that he had no hand in these events. But a growing body of evidence points to his involvement with anti-Fretilin plotters and his links to Reinado.

On the surface, Canberra and its political allies in Dili have achieved everything they wanted since May 2006. Within two months of the military intervention, Alkatiri had capitulated to Canberra's pressure to resign and was replaced by Ramos-Horta as interim prime minister. He and Gusmao, with the Australian government's tacit backing, teamed up to contest last year's presidential and parliamentary elections. Ramos-Horta won the presidency, while Gusmao became the prime minister in bitterly-fought elections marred by violence and allegations of ballot rigging.

None of the underlying issues has been resolved. Fretilin, which won a plurality of seats in the parliamentary elections, continues to challenge the current government's legitimacy. Gusmao is dependent on an unstable coalition that is facing rising anger over its failure to keep its promises. Having campaigned on pro-poor policies, the government has proposed a budget for 2008 that slashes rice rations for an estimated 100,000 refugees, mainly Fretilin supporters, displaced by the 2006 violence. It will also cut pensions for former Fretilin veterans while providing tax benefits and other financial incentives for business.

Dili remains a nest of political intrigue. Australia, Portugal and Malaysia all have security forces in the tiny country to promote their interests within the government and state apparatus. China and Brazil are providing economic aid to extend their influence. The police and army remain deeply factionalised and there is growing hostility to the continued presence of Australian troops, who remain outside UN control and were widely accused of being partisan in last year's elections.

For the past 20 months, Reinado has been something of a loose cannon. Though he faced charges of murder and possession of illegal weapons, the major led a charmed life. He was detained on weapons charges in 2006, but literally walked out of the main Dili jail, even though it was guarded by Australian and New Zealand

troops. He evaded recapture and was always available for media interviews in his various hideouts. In the lead up to the second presidential round, Ramos-Horta, to secure the support of the right-wing Democratic Party which won 19 percent in the first round, officially called off the hunt for Reinado.

In the midst of the continuing crisis, Reinado's threat last month to expose Gusmao's role in 2006 was a political bombshell with the potential to further undermine the East Timorese government and weaken Australian influence. Alkatiri immediately demanded that Gusmao resign and called for fresh elections. Ramos-Horta met Reinado at his base in Maubisse three weeks ago, no doubt to try to allay the major's frustration that his demand for the dropping of charges had not been met. Last week, Australian troops were involved in a menacing standoff with Reinado as he was meeting with three government parliamentarians. A week later he is dead.

Not only is a troublesome rebel now out of the way, but the governments in Dili and Canberra have immediately exploited the “coup attempt” to strengthen their respective positions. Gusmao imposed a 48-hour state of emergency and curfew and warned that he was going to strengthen security measures to “guarantee that Timor Leste does not become a failed state”.

In an extraordinary flurry of activity, the new Australian Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd spoke to Gusmao twice on Monday morning, convened a top level cabinet security committee and within hours had announced the dispatch of an extra 190 troops and federal police who arrived in East Timor yesterday afternoon. Together with naval personnel, Australia now has a security force of 1,000 to stamp its influence over the island. The editorials in yesterday's Australian press all declared that the new Labor government had passed his first test with flying colours.

Reinado's death is certainly convenient for Gusmao. Whether there was a conspiracy to kill the major remains to be seen. But one thing is clear: to immediately proclaim Monday's events as an attempted assassination and coup, as the Australian and international media have universally done, is to seek to block any serious investigation into this thoroughly murky affair.



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