

East Timor: Official “assassination” claims collapse

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After just one week, the official version of the February 11 events in East Timor—that army rebel Alfredo Reinado, attempted a “coup” and “double assassination” against President Jose Ramos-Horta and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao—is in tatters. As *Australian* journalist Paul Toohey noted last Saturday, “virtually no one in East Timor believes it [the assassination plot]”.

While much remains unclear, one thing is certain. The alleged plot has been exploited to bolster the hand of two players: Gusmao and his unstable coalition government, and the Australian government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

Rudd flew into East Timor last Friday and immediately declared that Australian troops would remain there indefinitely. The night before, Rudd told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Lateline” program that the events in East Timor were “murky” and his visit would help the Australian government ascertain the facts.

Rudd’s brief stopover was no fact-finding mission, however. It was a show of force. After a perfunctory meeting with Gusmao, Rudd convened a media conference and vowed to stand “shoulder-to-shoulder” with Gusmao’s government. Flanked by Australian Defence Force chief Angus Houston and Australian Federal Police chief Bill Keelty, he denounced “this brutal and violent assault on the democratically elected leaders of this wonderful country”.

Rudd spent most of his four-hour visit being photographed with Australian soldiers and police. He said they would stay for as long as the Timorese government requested, repeatedly claiming that this would be at the invitation of the “democratically elected” Dili government. It is clear, however, that the events have been used to prop up Gusmao’s government and reinforce its political and security dependence on Canberra.

Australian soldiers took control of sections of Dili and nearby towns, patrolling in armoured vehicles, setting up roadblocks, searching vehicles and enforcing a nighttime curfew. Gusmao then extended a declared state of emergency for another 10 days until February 23. Apart from imposing an 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew, the declaration bans demonstrations and gatherings, and expands police powers.

In a particularly sinister move, about 80 SAS commandos were among the 340 Australian military and police personnel dispatched to East Timor last Tuesday (counting the crew of a naval warship, the HMAS Perth)—taking the total Australian security contingent to more than 1,100. The SAS units have been sent into East Timor’s mountains to hunt down Reinado’s surviving supporters, several of whom have alleged that Reinado was “set-up” and killed by East Timorese soldiers outside Horta’s house. According to media reports, the SAS has been authorised, at Gusmao’s request, to use lethal force.

For all the official and media hype about “assassination” plots, the fact is that both men who were actually targeted—Reinado and Ramos-Horta—had struck a peace deal just four weeks earlier. It has been established that Reinado was killed at Ramos-Horta’s villa well before the

president came under fire, and at least 90 minutes before Gusmao’s vehicle was allegedly shot at by unknown assailants, some 10 kilometres away.

An anonymous friend of Ramos-Horta’s told the Associated Press that a gun battle raged for around 30 minutes before Ramos-Horta returned from his customary morning walk. After being warned of gunfire, Ramos-Horta refused a ride from a passing vehicle and walked back to the house, escorted only by two bodyguards with pistols. This sequence of events was confirmed by unnamed military sources, who told the *Age* that, half an hour before Ramos-Horta’s arrival, Reinado was shot in the face by a member of a team of guards who had arrived to relieve the night guards and saw Reinado in the house.

An examination of Reinado’s body, which was released to his family for burial last Thursday, revealed that he had been shot three times, through the left eye, left breast and neck. His bodyguard, a former military policeman Leopoldino, was also killed. By contrast, Ramos-Horta, who remains hospitalised in a serious condition in the northern Australian city of Darwin, was shot in the back. Relatives, friends and associates of Reinado have alleged that he was shot by a waiting party of soldiers from the Timorese military, the F-FDTL.

According to the *Australian’s* Toohey, two of the men who were with Reinado on February 11 have told Reinado’s adoptive father, Victor Alves, that F-FDTL troops shot Ramos-Horta from behind while they were hiding inside the residence’s compound. Among those insisting that Reinado was lured to the house to be assassinated is Angelita Pires, a Timorese-born Australian woman, who was dramatically arrested yesterday in connection with the February 11 attacks.

It remains unclear how Reinado entered Ramos-Horta’s house, and why he was there. It is quite possible that he was at the residence, with Ramos-Horta’s explicit or tacit permission, to seek further talks with the president. Radio Timor Leste reported that Reinado was not an attacker but had been a guest in Ramos-Horta’s villa for up to a week, and had run out of the house to try to stop the attack.

A motive for the shootings became clearer when photographs were published in the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* last Saturday of Reinado and Ramos-Horta standing smiling together with supporters after a clandestine meeting on January 13, where a deal had been struck to end the two-year rebellion by Reinado and some 600 “petitioners”—disgruntled former soldiers.

Ramos-Horta had gone unarmed and without security to the mountain village of Maubisse to discuss the plan, brokered by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva. It was agreed that Reinado and his men would surrender to house arrest, and be tried on charges of murder and armed rebellion, but be pardoned by Ramos-Horta under an amnesty to be declared on May 20, the sixth anniversary of the formal independence of the former Portuguese and Indonesian colony.

East Timor’s Economics Minister Joao Goncalves told the Fairfax-owned newspapers that the rendezvous was relaxed and friendly, and a

deal was essentially done. After a lunch of goat, lamb and chicken, washed down by wine, Reinado and Ramos-Horta parted with a handshake, agreeing to meet again within days.

In an apparent move to undercut the deal, however, Gusmao reportedly arranged a meeting with disaffected and sacked soldiers, some loyal to Reinado's ally, Gastao Salsinha. The prime minister allegedly offered the rebels a compensation package of three years' salary or reinstatement to the army, an offer that threatened to isolate Reinado.

Last December, Gusmao issued an ultimatum to Reinado, demanding his immediate surrender. Reinado responded in January by releasing a DVD statement, accusing Gusmao of being the puppet master and "author of the petition" behind the army rebellion and violence that led to the Australian military intervention in 2006 and ultimately forced the resignation of Fretilin Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri.

Reinado's allegations were extensively reported in East Timor, but blacked out by the Australian media. Alkatiri asked Gusmao to answer the allegations in parliament, but Gusmao refused. When local reporters pressed Gusmao, he warned that if they pursued the story and interviewed Reinado, they could be arrested.

Reinado's claims rang true. As the WSWS has documented, communications were held between Gusmao, Reinado and Vincente Railos, another principal figure in the 2006 rebellion. Railos, whose allegations against Alkatiri on the ABC's Four Corners triggered Alkatiri's resignation, subsequently became an organiser for CNRT, the party Gusmao formed to contest the 2007 parliamentary elections.

Reinado's accusations had the potential to not only lead to criminal charges against Gusmao, who was president in 2006, and end his term as prime minister, but also raise questions about Australia's involvement in the destabilisation and ousting of the Fretilin government.

During last year's presidential and parliamentary elections in East Timor, Gusmao and Ramos-Horta sought to block Reinado's arrest. They needed the support of the second largest political party at that time, the Democratic Party, to gain majorities and complete Fretilin's ouster from power. Like Reinado, the Democratic Party drew its support from the western half of East Timor.

At the time he was killed, Reinado still held a written guarantee of protection. The *Australian* last week cited an October 18 letter written by the Australian commander of the International Stabilisation Force (ISF), to Reinado's lawyer, Benny Benevides, assuring him of the rebel leader's safety. "Your client is hereby assured that, subject to his complying with any pre-agreed arrangements during the dialogue period, your client's movements will not be interfered with," the letter stated.

Ramos-Horta was not the only political representative holding talks with Reinado. As recently as February 6, three government MPs met Reinado in Ermera, only to have the meeting disrupted by the arrival of Australian troops. Fretilin MP Domingos Sarmiento last week demanded an explanation from the three MPs, asking which government leaders had told them to meet Reinado.

The official story that Gusmao was also an assassination target on February 11 has been called into question by reports that any shots fired at his vehicle were aimed only at its tyres. United Nations investigators then appeared to switch the official story, telling journalists that the plot was intended to kidnap, not assassinate, the two political leaders. This claim is no more credible than the initial one.

Particularly since Alkatiri's removal in 2006, Gusmao has been a linchpin of Australian policy, having shifted from the president's post to the prime minister's in 2007 with Canberra's backing. Fretilin won the most votes of any party at the 2007 elections, but Ramos-Horta invited Gusmao's newly-created CNRT to form an anti-Fretilin coalition.

Despite Rudd's support, Gusmao's government remains insecure, with Fretilin stepping up demands for new elections. Fretilin has condemned the government for failing to prevent the February 11 attacks, with

Alkatiri saying that if he had still been in office, people would have been calling for him to resign. Political tensions have been fuelled by the circulation of a highly suspicious document that claims that Fretilin offered Reinado \$US10 million to assassinate Ramos-Horta and Gusmao.

Popular disaffection with Gusmao has grown because his government has proven unwilling and incapable of doing anything to address the poverty and misery of ordinary people. Some 100,000, mostly Fretilin supporters, still live in squalid displaced persons' camps, and about 80 percent of the workforce are unemployed or in subsistence agriculture. Six years after so-called independence, East Timor's people remain among the poorest on earth, even though billions of dollars worth of oil and gas are being drilled beneath the Timor Sea.

On the back of its first military intervention into East Timor in 1999, the Howard government eventually bullied the Alkatiri government into accepting ongoing Australian control over the major share of the undersea fields, while the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and world banks insisted that Timor's oil and gas revenues be placed in a petroleum escrow fund, to prevent so-called over-spending on social programs. The petroleum fund currently stands at more than \$US2 billion, but even when it reaches its optimistically estimated peak, decades from now, the annual investment returns will only amount to \$2,500 per person. Last year, the IMF predicted that poverty would continue to worsen in East Timor for several years.

Behind the scenes, sections of the Australian security establishment are calling for a deeper intervention into East Timor, along the lines of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), whereby the Howard government took effective control over key posts in the state apparatus, such as the police, courts, prisons and treasury. In a "strategic insight" paper issued last November, the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) suggested: "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."

Australian foreign editor Greg Sheridan gave voice to these neo-colonial aspirations in a column last week, urging the Rudd government to take a longer-term view of its involvement in East Timor. "[I]f we are the new metropolitan power in the Melanesian world, guaranteeing security, dispensing vital and ongoing aid, keeping the international order benign, monitoring the spread of infectious disease and everything else, then we need to make a long-term investment in national skills in this area," he wrote. None of these calculations has anything to do with assisting or uplifting the living conditions of the Timorese masses. While Rudd pledged an indefinite military presence last Friday, he offered only vague and unspecified economic assistance. Since 1999, according to ASPI estimates, Canberra has spent \$4 billion on military and police operations in East Timor, but just \$550 million on Official Development Assistance. In any case, the main purpose of "aid" is to bolster Australian interests, as well as the profits of locally-operating Australian companies.

The Australian corporate and political elite's preoccupation is to strengthen its grip over the resources-rich and strategically-located neighbouring half-island and prevent rival powers, notably China, from gaining sway. The ASPI report referred to concerns that "China has a large embassy in Timor-Leste and is a major aid contributor". Rudd's exploitation of the February 11 events underscores his government's underlying commitment to the course charted by the Howard government in 1999.



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