

East Timorese government steps up repression in aftermath of alleged “coup attempt”

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East Timorese Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao has seized upon the crisis sparked by the February 11 wounding of President Jose Ramos Horta and killing of former major Alfredo Reinado to enforce a number of repressive measures aimed at consolidating his unstable government. A spokesperson for Gusmao's government announced on Monday that the “state of siege”—which involves a 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew and a ban on demonstrations and unauthorised meetings—has been extended to March 23. More than 200 people have already been arrested, mostly for violating the curfew, although opposition parliamentarians and journalists have also been targeted.

The Gusmao government's rush to utilise authoritarian forms of rule raises yet again the many outstanding questions concerning the events surrounding Reinado's killing. According to the official version promoted by the government and the Australian and international press, the rebel soldier was shot dead after he and his men attempted to either kill or kidnap both President Ramos Horta and Prime Minister Gusmao as part of a failed coup attempt. This account represents the least likely explanation for what took place on February 11.

While details remain murky, what is known points to the possibility that Reinado was set up for assassination. The rebel soldier had earlier threatened to publicly release details of Gusmao's alleged role in directly instigating a mutiny of soldiers (the “petitioners”) in 2006. The mutiny sparked a political crisis that culminated in the intervention of hundreds of Australian troops and the ousting of the former Fretilin government. Reinado's allegation was issued via a DVD that was widely circulated in January throughout East Timor.

The old adage, *cui bono* (to whose benefit?), remains a standard rule in criminal investigations. In light of what has transpired over the past fortnight, the undisputed primary beneficiaries of Reinado's death have been the Australian-led foreign military forces stationed in East Timor and Gusmao himself.

The prime minister's adoption of dictatorial-style powers has been met with sharp criticism within the country's parliament. A number of Fretilin parliamentarians opposed the extension of the “state of siege” on the grounds that the constitutional requirement for a “serious disturbance or threat of serious disturbance to the democratic constitutional order” no longer existed. During the debate, opposition even emerged from within Gusmao's CNRT party. “I and my friends are really disappointed with the implementation of the ‘State of Emergency,’” CNRT parliamentarian Cecilio Caminha declared. “In the ‘State of Emergency’ there are no rules that permit the security apparatus to attack civilian houses at night, and to forbid people from holding meetings and demonstrations.”

Fretilin has accused Gusmao of using the crisis to undermine its position. On February 19, the party's parliamentarian and media spokesman Jose Teixeira was detained in Dili after six car loads of armed

Timorese police allegedly took him from his home. Teixeira later claimed that police had no arrest warrant and acted without the knowledge of the senior police investigating officer. He was released the next day after Mari Alkatiri, Fretilin's general secretary and former Timorese prime minister, lodged a complaint. “This is political persecution—Teixeira is an effective media spokesman and someone in authority wants to shut him up,” he declared. “It is a disgraceful attempt to politicise the police force and use the investigation into the shooting of the president for party-political gain.”

Both Timorese police and Australian soldiers have also targeted journalists.

On February 23, the *East Timor Post's* senior layout editor, Agostinho Ta Pasea, was arrested while en route to the Dili printing presses with a computer file of the newspaper's weekend edition. *Post* editor Mouzinho De Araujo told the *Australian* that Ta Pasea was stopped at 2 a.m., beaten by military police and then taken to a police station where he was assaulted again. De Araujo said his staff member was held for 11 hours on the grounds that he had violated the curfew, before being released with cuts and bruises on his face. “Maybe, it is because our newspaper has been tough on [the] authorities,” the editor said. Ta Pasea's detention delayed the publication of that day's *Post* edition. The Secretariat of State Security later issued a formal apology for the police officers' use of what it described as “unjustified force”.

The incident came a few days after *Time* reporter Rory Callinan and photographer John Wilson were detained by Australian troops for three hours at gunpoint outside of Dili as they were attempting to reach the village of Dare. The Australian-dominated International Stabilisation Force (ISF) was conducting an operation in the area, supposedly in pursuit of Reinado's followers allegedly involved in Ramos Horta's shooting. Journalists were refused entry through an ISF roadblock and were told they were barred from the “media free area”. Callinan and Wilson then walked for an hour through a jungle trail to try to access Dare by foot.

Callinan later told the *Australian* that when they neared the village: “Two Australians jumped out of the bushes wearing ‘camo’ paint, pointing their guns, ordering us to get down. We were told to hand over our mobile phones, all our camera equipment and passports and told to sit without talking. The guy said: ‘We're detaining you for your own safety and I can't tell you more.’ I said, ‘So we can't move?’ He said, ‘I'm telling you, I am detaining you. I can physically detain you if I want, but I choose not to at this point.’ We were wondering why they were letting dozens of East Timorese wander about with no apparent concern for their safety.”

The two men were held in the jungle for three hours, until sundown, when they were told they would be allowed into Dare. After they later walked back to Dili they were held again for breaching curfew. “They

confiscated our gear again,” Callinan said. “We said, ‘But you’ve already detained us for three hours, which is why we are in breach of the curfew....’ The East Timorese with us were saying this was the sort of thing that happened under Indonesian times.”

The incident underscores the neo-colonial character of the Australian occupation of “independent” East Timor. Utilising the political crisis for its own ends, the Rudd Labor government has bolstered the size of the intervention force and declared that Australian forces will remain “for as long as they are required.” As with the previous deployments in 1999 and 2006, the latest operation is above all driven by Canberra’s determination to maintain its domination over the strategically significant and oil-rich territory, and to shut out rival powers such as China and Portugal. Rudd and Gusmao appear to have reached a mutually beneficial arrangement in which the Timorese leader gives the Australian military a free hand, in return for the Australian government’s continued political backing. Rudd and his ministers have maintained a strict silence in relation to the Gusmao government’s recent authoritarian measures.

The ISF’s actions in Dare also raise the question as to what Australian troops were doing, that they did not want the media to monitor. The status of the Australian military’s supposed pursuit of Reinado’s wanted men remains unclear. More than 1,100 Australian troops, including at least 80 elite SAS personnel, are now on the ground in East Timor or stationed on naval warships offshore. Gusmao has reportedly authorised these forces to use lethal force. Yet despite the Australian military’s vast array of surveillance technology and extensive knowledge of Reinado’s group, amassed over the last two years, the occupying troops have apparently been unable to track down any of the alleged would-be assassins of Ramos-Horta.

Events since February 11 make clear just how convenient Reinado’s death was for both Gusmao and Canberra.

The former major’s accusation that the prime minister had deliberately instigated the petitioner’s protests in 2006 was seriously undermining Gusmao’s already unstable three-party coalition government. Just as Reinado’s accusations were circulating throughout East Timor, the government passed its first budget, slashing food rations for the 100,000 internally displaced refugees and cutting pensions. At the same time, the government boasted that it was lowering corporate and investment taxes to among the lowest levels in the world.

These measures, which will further increase social inequality in the deeply impoverished country, drew widespread opposition from ordinary Timorese and inflamed tensions and infighting within the government. Rumours spread in Dili that Fernando “La Sama” de Araujo, leader of the Democratic Party and now acting president, would withdraw from the coalition. Gusmao meanwhile was refusing to deny Reinado’s allegations and threatened to arrest those journalists pursuing the story. Alkatiri demanded that Gusmao resign and that fresh elections be called.

There is evidence indicating that President Ramos-Horta was preparing to publicly endorse such demands. According to the Timor News Line web site, which translates Timorese media reports into English, on February 11 (the same day Reinado was killed) the *Diario Nacional* reported that: “Fretilin Secretary General, Mari Alkatiri, said President Jose Ramos Horta and the UN Secretary General have agreed with Fretilin’s proposal of holding another election in the country”.

The latest issue of the Indonesian *Tempo* magazine features an interview with Alkatiri in which the former prime minister claims there was a connection between the events of February 11 and a meeting allegedly convened by President Ramos-Horta a week earlier.

“There was a meeting of politicians at Horta’s residence a week before the shootings,” Alkatiri said. “Attending the meeting were members of the Timorese Reconstruction National Party (CNRT) led by Xanana Gusmao, the Social Democrat Party, the Timor Social Democrat Party Association (ASDT) and the Fretilin Party ... President Horta welcomed the proposal

of the Fretilin Party to the UN Secretary-General. Essentially it united all parties under the Parliamentary Majority Alliance (AMP) with the Fretilin, and forming an inclusive government, a national unity government. Fretilin itself refused to join in the national unity government like this one. The initiative was taken to resolve the problem of Alfredo Reinado, deserters led by Salsinha Gastao and also the refugees.”

Asked if any of Timor’s “party elites” were involved in Reinado’s killing, Alkatiri refused to directly answer or mention Gusmao by name, but said, “I will just say that the person behind Horta’s shooting perhaps disagreed with the President’s initiative to form a new government and hold another election.”

If Alkatiri’s account is true, it places in fresh perspective the secret deal struck between Ramos-Horta and Reinado just four weeks before the rebel soldier was killed. On January 13, the two men brokered a deal whereby Reinado would first submit to house arrest and then soon after be amnestied by Ramos-Horta. Could it be that the president, formerly a close ally of Gusmao, regarded the break-down in relations between Reinado and the prime minister as an intolerable threat to the agreement he had just brokered, which required the formation of a new coalition administration between Fretilin, the ASDT, and elements of the CNRT?

If so, the official version of Reinado’s killing becomes even more implausible. The former major would have been attempting to assassinate or kidnap Ramos-Horta, who had not only guaranteed his freedom, but was also preparing to lend his weight to the ousting of Gusmao, whom Reinado was accusing of being a criminal and a traitor. On the other hand, if the scenario suggested by Alkatiri’s statements is true, Gusmao would have had an even more powerful motive to eliminate Reinado, and trigger a political crisis through which he could extend his authority.

The possibility of such a conspiracy raises immediate questions regarding the Australian government’s role. There is little possibility that Australian authorities—which include highly placed government and military advisors as well as an extensive network of intelligence agents and informants—would have been ignorant of the various political ructions in Dili. The prospect of a return to a Fretilin-led government would have sounded alarm bells. The former Howard government, with the unstinting support of its Labor opposition, as well as the entire Australian press, expended considerable resources ousting the Alkatiri administration in 2006. Its protracted “regime change” campaign was driven by concern that the Fretilin government was too oriented towards rival powers and was unwilling to accede to all of Australia’s demands for possession of swathes of the Timor Sea’s oil and gas reserves. Gusmao’s recent moves—both in the lead up to the events of February 11 and since—were no doubt known, if not directly instigated, by Canberra.

None of these issues has been canvassed in the Australian press. Not a single outlet has even reported Alkatiri’s statements in *Tempo*. To the extent that any political assessment has been attempted of the events surrounding the shootings outside Ramos-Horta’s residence, Reinado’s potential motivations are simply put down to insanity, thereby excusing the logical implausibility of the official version. The media’s performance is consistent with its role in 1999 and 2006, when it functioned as the primary promoter of the Howard government’s military operations, under the banner of “humanitarian intervention” and “democracy”.



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