

East Timor: Former PM Alkatiri claims alleged assassination attempt on Xanana Gusmao was faked

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Mari Alkatiri, former East Timorese prime minister and current general secretary of the Fretilin opposition party, has alleged that the reported assassination attempt on Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao on February 11 was a fake. In an interview with the Portuguese News Network, he claimed that Fretilin has photographs showing that the vehicle, which supposedly came under fire, initially only had two bullet holes but later appeared in public with 16. Alkatiri also raised a number of serious questions regarding the related shooting of President Jose Ramos-Horta and the killing of rebel major Alfredo Reinado.

The former prime minister's statements cast further doubt over the official explanation of the events of February 11. According to Prime Minister Gusmao and the Australian and international media, Reinado was killed while he was leading an attempted coup or coordinated assassination against both Ramos-Horta and Gusmao. This, however, remains the most unlikely scenario.

Reinado, who with several of his men had mutinied in May 2006 and joined in armed attacks against government forces, had been wanted on murder and firearms charges. In mid-January, however, the former major reached an agreement with Ramos-Horta under which he would surrender to the police in return for a full presidential pardon. Around the same time, Reinado publicly released a DVD in which he bitterly denounced Gusmao, his former patron, accusing him of directly instigating the 2006 military split that led to the Australian military intervention and the ousting of Alkatiri's Fretilin administration.

On February 7, 2008 Ramos-Horta convened a meeting at his residence involving Gusmao, Alkatiri, and other parliamentarians. The president told the participants that he agreed with Fretilin's demand for fresh elections. Formed in August 2007, the Gusmao-led coalition government had been wracked by internal divisions and was becoming increasingly unpopular.

Taken together, these circumstances render the official "coup" explanation of the events of February 11 entirely implausible. Reinado supposedly attempted to assassinate a president who was preparing to both grant him a full pardon for his crimes and who had decided to support efforts to oust Gusmao's administration through new elections. Attempts by the Australian media to explain these contradictions have rested on the claim that Reinado was simply insane.

An alternative and more coherent possibility is that Reinado, and perhaps Ramos-Horta also, was set up for assassination by Gusmao or forces close to Gusmao, with the likely support, or at least knowledge of, Australian personnel in Dili. Canberra and Gusmao have both benefited from the events of February 11. The Timorese government has enacted a series of authoritarian measures to prop up its rule, while the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has used the alleged coup attempt as a pretext for dispatching more troops to bolster its neo-colonial

occupation of the oil-rich state.

In his interview with the Portuguese News Network (PNN), published March 4, Alkatiri described the alleged ambush on Gusmao as a "cheap fiction". He claimed that a Fretilin representative took photographs of Gusmao's vehicle with two bullet holes as it was parked on the street. Later, however, the same vehicle was shown in a ditch with 16 bullet holes.

The Fretilin leader also questioned the circumstances of Reinado's killing. "How is it that Alfredo Reinado is going to attack the person [Ramos-Horta] who was trying to find an elegant solution for him?" he asked. "Who was attacked first, was it Reinado or the President of the Republic? If it was Reinado, according to the first facts, he would have been dead for an hour before. If he was dead before, why did Reinado's men and those of the President of the Republic stay looking at each other until the President arrived?"

The *World Socialist Web Site* contacted Alkatiri on April 2. He said that he had nothing to add to the PNN interview, but also made clear that he was not retracting his previous statements.

Referring to the agreement between Ramos-Horta and Reinado reached in January, Alkatiri stated, "This is why it is very strange, very ironic, that Reinado came down to attack exactly the person that was trying his best to work with Reinado". The WWSW asked if Fretilin would publicly release its photographs of Gusmao's vehicle. "I am still waiting for the investigators to ask me about it and then I will deliver them to them," he replied.

In his interview with PNN, Alkatiri demanded an independent commission of inquiry, excluding personnel from Australia. "Countries that have a presence here, in the area of justice or advisors in the area of security, cannot have their elements make up a part of this commission," he told the WWSW, adding that the February attacks occurred, "with all of this [military] presence, and if the investigation incriminates the international presence or that of the UN, the tendency naturally is to cover it up". Asked about the FBI investigators currently working on the case, Alkatiri replied: "In the final analysis, they are being used. Even if they want to be serious, they can't be."

Alkatiri declined to tell the WWSW whether he believed that Australian forces were involved in the February 11 violence, and instead repeated his demand for an international investigation. "Everything has to be investigated, that's why we made it clear that an international commission for investigation can never include people from countries that are already operating in Timor-Leste."

In the PNN interview, Alkatiri clearly implied that forces within the government may have instigated the double attack. "The President of the Republic [Ramos-Horta] had clearly said that there would be early elections in 2009," he said. "It is clear that those who govern did not like

this. These doubts need to be clarified for the good of the persons who are involved. If I were in Xanana's place, I would be the first to say that I wanted this investigation to be conducted in an independent form."

When we asked if he was suggesting Gusmao was personally responsible for the February 11 attacks, Alkatiri replied "No, I didn't suggest any name [but] I think the investigation will really make it clear." He refused to be drawn on why the Gusmao government has blocked the formation of an international investigation.

He denounced the "state of siege", under which a strict curfew is in place and meetings and demonstrations banned, as "bullshit". "It's really a way for the government to dictate its rule, he told us. "This is not a rule *of* law, it is a rule *by* law; they are using their majority to dictate their own rules."

Speaking to the PNN, he had earlier elaborated: "The emergency is being used to intimidate people. The population will get tired of these measures, particularly in the neighbourhoods of Dili. We are already returning to the time of Indonesia, with people not sleeping at home. In the neighbourhoods of Tunanara and Pité there are young people who are afraid that the police will come looking for them at night.... Those in power must believe that the best form of controlling this population is to put fear into them, [to deter] demonstrations or any other violent action. There is no right to demonstrate, there is no right to hold public meetings. I am accustomed to meeting in my house with many people, and now there are days when the police come by here to ask my security what it is that we are doing."

Alkatiri told the WWS that the ruling coalition "will pay their bill for this" at the next election, which he expects to be held in early 2009. The Fretilin leader said that when he last spoke with Ramos-Horta, three or four weeks ago, the president remained committed to bringing forward the date of the vote. Asked how he thought Gusmao would respond, he replied: "He has no options, he has no options. He has no authority to govern this country, he was not elected. We need a democratic country, not a country that is dictated by a former guerrilla."

WWS asked Alkatiri about the present role of the 1,000-troop Australian-led International Stabilisation Force. He replied, "The problem here, the main problem here, is who commands whom? Who is really commanding the force? United Nations, the government, the Australian brigadier, I still don't know.... The only thing I can say is that the force came here in 2006 under my request, at that time signed by President Xanana [Gusmao] and the president of the parliament, Lu-Olo [Guterres], but since then things are developing in such a way that I think that we need to know clearly who is commanding the force."

On the 2006 Australian intervention, which Alkatiri defended as a means of ending the police-military conflict, the following exchange occurred:

WWS: If it is true that as Reinado alleged, Gusmao instigated that conflict as part of a coup attempt against your administration—

Alkatiri: If it is true, if it is true, it will explain a lot of things.

WWS: And it would also explain a lot of things if it is true that Canberra was involved in that as well.

Alkatiri: It will explain a lot of things, everything, things that have developed domestically in Timor-Leste, with some kind of interference from outside.... I would like to also stress here that 2006, Prime Minister Howard was the only one that has made clear, very publicly clear, that he would prefer me to step down. It is already a way to interfere in the affairs of another country.

The former prime minister then said that with the election of the new Labor government: "I think we have a lot of space, political space, to work together. I am sure that a lot of changes will come. It is still too early to talk about but I am sure, yes." Asked about what changes he anticipated, Alkatiri replied, "Mutual respect between Australia and Timor-Leste and other countries is one thing, and of course more

cooperation, a bit more cooperation for the advantage of both countries." And on Rudd's response to the events of February 11, when the new Labor prime minister immediately deployed additional Australian troops, including elite SAS personnel? "He was in the government for less than 100 days and he had to respond as he did, but I am sure [that] sooner than later a lot of things change."

In reality, the Rudd Labor government will maintain the same strategic orientation as the former Howard government. The Labor Party has a filthy record on East Timor, including the Whitlam government's active encouragement of Indonesia's invasion in 1975 and the Hawke-Keating government's negotiation of the 1989 Timor Gap Treaty, under which Canberra and Jakarta carved up Timor's oil and gas resources in violation of international law. The death of Indonesia's former dictator Suharto earlier this year saw the squalid spectacle of past and present Labor ministers paying tribute to the mass murderer.

During Howard's 11-year term in office, the Labor Party backed the government's every move in Timor. The Labor opposition supported the Howard government's crude strong-arm tactics during negotiations on the exploitation of the Timor Sea's petroleum with the former Alkatiri administration, at one point even joining the government in ejecting Greens' Senator Bob Brown from parliament after he issued some limited criticisms of Canberra's stance. Labor endorsed both the 1999 and 2006 military interventions, which were driven by the Australian ruling elite's determination to secure control over the lion's share of Timor's oil and gas and to shut out rival powers, above all Portugal and China. Rudd's additional troop deployment in February was motivated by his determination to further advance this neo-colonial strategy.

Not a single media outlet in Australia has reported Alkatiri's statements to the PNN. This extraordinary self-censorship is indicative of the critical role played by the establishment media as an active accomplice of Australian imperialism in East Timor and throughout the South Pacific. It continues to repeat the official "coup" and "assassination" version of the events of February 11—which virtually nobody in Dili believes—as good coin. Elementary questions have still not been raised, obvious avenues for potential investigation ignored, and important statements from leading public figures suppressed.

Alkatiri is not alone in raising serious questions regarding Reinado's killing and the alleged ambush on Gusmao's vehicle.

Mario Carrascalao—the former Indonesian-appointed Timorese governor and now leader of the Social Democrat Party that forms part of Gusmao's coalition government—gave an interview with Portugal's *Lusa* news that was published on February 19. Carrascalao said that "strange things" were happening in East Timor, and questioned how it was that Gusmao's vehicle supposedly came under fire without anyone being hurt. "Whoever knows that road [where the alleged attack occurred], knows that nobody escapes an ambush," he said. "[But] nobody was injured."

Carrascalao also said he believed that Reinado did not attack Ramos-Horta and that someone had instead set a "trap" for the former major. He raised the possibility that either "the Australians", the petitioners, or another section of the Timorese military was responsible. "Any of these three hypotheses is feasible," he concluded.

As with Alkatiri's allegations, no section of the Australian media reported Carrascalao's remarks.

Carrascalao also provided a number of details on the meeting held at Ramos-Horta's residence on February 7, where he was one of the participating parliamentarians. Along with government MPs, a dozen senior Fretilin representatives attended. Carrascalao told *Lusa* that after an hour of discussion, Ramos-Horta declared that he no longer believed that Gusmao's government was capable of resolving Timor's problems and that fresh elections ought to be held. Gusmao responded by insisting that his government would continue to govern alone. Ramos-Horta concluded by saying that further meetings should be held to try to reach an

agreement.

These meetings, however, never eventuated. The so-called coup attempt occurred four days later, followed by Gusmao's announcement of the "state of siege".

Late last month President Ramos-Horta gave several interviews, providing his first account of what led up to his wounding on February 11. While Ramos-Horta, like Alkatiri, undoubtedly knows much more than he is publicly saying about the circumstances surrounding the alleged dual assassination attempt, his statements are significant.

Speaking with Fairfax's Lindsay Murdoch, he explained that he was on a morning walk when he first heard two sets of gunshots. Murdoch reported: "Horta said he had initially looked at two Timorese army soldiers who were with him and said 'yes, the shots are from the house'. But he then encountered the Dili manager of the ANZ bank, who was riding a bike."

Ramos-Horta told Murdoch: "He [the manager] said in a casual and relaxed way that the ISF [Australian-led International Stabilisation Force] was doing an exercise near my house. Well, that being the case, I felt relaxed and decided to go home." In another interview, with East Timor's TVTL, Ramos-Horta said: "He [the ANZ manager] told me that the ISF were having an exercise near my residence. He asked whether I was informed about it or not, but I replied to him that I had never received any information that [sic] what the ISF were doing near my house. I became angry because if the ISF were doing exercises near my house without my knowledge, it is a bit [sic] mistake."

According to the president, he then approached his house and saw a bullet-riddled Timorese army vehicle but did not see any Australian troops. By this time Reinado was already dead after being shot in the head, according to some accounts, up to an hour earlier. Ramos-Horta then encountered what he called "one of Alfredo's men in full [military] uniform" who shot him in the back as he turned to flee. Ramos-Horta was hit with "dum-dum" bullets—which are banned under the Geneva Convention because they expand and fragment on impact—and later underwent six operations in an Australian hospital.

Ramos-Horta told ABC Radio that immediately after being shot, "I heard them [the soldiers with him] cursing the ANZ bank representative, blaming him for what happened because he misled us into going to the house. Because of that I was worried that they could take reprisals against him, so I told them, 'no, don't think that,' because he also didn't know, he thought it was a military exercise because it never occurred to him, or to me, that my house was under attack."

Ramos-Horta raised further questions regarding the Australian military's failure to capture those involved in the shoot-out. "I didn't see any ISF elements or UNPOL [police] in the area ... normally they are supposed to show up instantly, and in this case of extreme gravity they would normally seal off the entire area, blocking the exit route of the attackers. That didn't happen. As far as I know, no hostile pursuit of the attackers was made for several days. How did Mr Alfredo Reinado happen to be totally undetected in Dili when the ISF was supposed to be keeping an eye on his movements?"

Ramos-Horta has declared his support for a commission of inquiry to investigate these questions.

Asked by ABC Radio why he thought the rebel soldiers would want to shoot him, Ramos-Horta replied: "Not the slightest idea. Because I was the only leader in the country they said they trusted. Mr Alfredo Reinado told me a month before, and he told all other individuals who talked with him, that I was the only leader he knew who was not involved in the crisis of 2006. I was the only one they trusted and I was the only one who spent months often travelling to the bush area, to the mountains, to the valleys, meeting with them to try to find a dignified solution for the country, that is acceptable to all."

Ramos-Horta nevertheless insisted that the attack was an assassination

attempt. Reinado, he told the Fairfax press, "was a very unstable person, never consistent with what he said ... he does something else the next day while under the influence of his intimate associate and lover Ms Angie Pires and others who were behind him. While I managed to create a certain climate of confidence among him and his men, there were some elements behind him who would manipulate and influence the situation."

Angelita Pires, a dual East Timorese-Australian citizen, acted as Reinado's lawyer and representative in Dili. Arrested on February 17, she is alleged to have known about preparations for the alleged attacks on Ramos-Horta and Gusmao, but has denied the charges. She has also released a public statement rejecting Ramos-Horta's allegation that she had manipulated Reinado.

When the WWSW asked Alkatiri about Pires's role, he replied: "I don't want to really comment on a single person, because a lot of people, even the most important people, were always with Reinado."

As with so many aspects of this affair, the closer one examines Pires and her connections, the murkier the situation appears.

Pires, who spent most of her life in Australia, appears to have had a very close working relationship with senior Australian officials in Dili. Until February 1—ten days before the shoot-out at Ramos-Horta's residence—she was an employee of an AusAID contractor, Enterprise Challenge Fund (ECF). An article in the *Australian* on February 20 stated: "Local officials claimed she was dismissed from the ECF program because of her alleged links with rebel leader Alfredo Reinado. It is believed AusAID had raised concerns about Ms Pires late last month, but that a decision had already been made to sack the 42-year-old by the program's manager, Coffey International, on the advice of their local officials. AusAID last night confirmed Ms Pires had a history of working for Australian-funded contractors in East Timor, but declined to comment on the circumstances surrounding her dismissal."

Pires claims to have acted as a go-between, coordinating Reinado's movements with the Timorese security agencies and the Australian military. The ISF confirmed this when it told the *Australian* that it had met her "in a public place in Dili" in January to ensure that Reinado's men and the ISF knew each other's general movements. The Australian military also said that she was "not a paid informant of the ISF and no money or gratuities were ever passed to Ms Pires".

This statement appeared to be in response to rumours in Dili regarding the source of a large sum of cash reportedly found on Reinado's dead body. "It was not \$29,000. It was not \$31,000. It was exactly \$30,000, in \$US100 notes," the *Australian* quoted a senior East Timorese government source as saying in an article published March 18.

The same article revealed that Gusmao held Pires responsible for the break-down in negotiations between Reinado and the government that preceded the public release of the former major's DVD accusing the prime minister of instigating the 2006 crisis. According to the *Australian*'s government source, a meeting between Gusmao and Reinado in Dili had been arranged in early December, but the former major never showed up. "Angelita Pires called and said, 'He's not coming,'" the source said. "The prime minister was very upset and very disturbed that a third party was throwing stones into this. Alfredo never called us to explain. She called. She was saying the real plan was to arrest Reinado and then shoot him dead in front of the prime minister."

Pires has reportedly indicated that she believes Reinado was subsequently set up on February 11. According to the *Age*: "After the attacks, Pires told friends Reinado was lured to Mr Ramos Horta's house to be assassinated because he was about to reveal plots by powerful political figures."



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