

Further questions raised in East Timor “assassination” trial

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The ongoing trial of dual Australian and East Timorese citizen Angelita Pires and 27 men on attempted murder and conspiracy charges relating to an alleged dual assassination plot against East Timor’s President Jose Ramos-Horta and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao has raised further serious questions about the murky affair. While numerous issues remain unclear, the evidence so far presented—including forensic evidence such as autopsy and ballistics reports, as well as witness testimonies—has established that the official version of events is false.

On February 10, 2008, Alfredo Reinado—Pires’s partner and a former military-police commander who was wanted on murder and weapons charges relating to his mutinous activities in 2006—was with his ex-soldier supporters in western East Timor. Reinado met briefly with Pires that evening, and also held lengthy discussions with representatives of the Movement for National Unity and Justice (MUNJ). The MUNJ had previously functioned as the official go-between for Ramos-Horta, organising meetings between Reinado and the president over the terms of Reinado’s surrender and a presidential amnesty. During the night, Reinado and his heavily armed men drove for several hours in two vehicles to Dili.

Ex-soldier Gastao Salsinha led one group toward Prime Minister Gusmao’s house; Reinado led another to Ramos-Horta’s. After they arrived at dawn on February 11—inexplicably undetected by Timorese security forces and the nearly 1,000 Australian and New Zealand troops stationed in the country—Reinado and one of his men, Leopoldino Exposto, were shot dead. President Horta, returning from his morning walk, was subsequently shot multiple times and nearly died before receiving emergency treatment. Later in the morning, Gusmao’s vehicle was reportedly shot at but the prime minister and his staff were unharmed.

Timorese state prosecutors insist that Reinado and his men—incited by Pires—were responsible for an unsuccessful double assassination attempt. However, the evidence presented during the trial, which has been underway since last July, has instead been largely consistent with the case argued by Pires’s Australian barrister Jon Tippett, QC. This is that Reinado and his men were set up—they had been lured to Dili to be murdered after being persuaded that they had a meeting for further discussion with the president.

Leaked autopsy reports demonstrate that Reinado and his colleague Leopoldino Exposto were shot dead from point-blank range—Reinado through the eye, Exposto through the back of the head. The autopsies directly contradict the testimony of Horta’s military guard, Francisco Lino Marcal, that he shot both Reinado and Exposto—the former from a distance of 30 to 40 metres and the latter from 15 to 20 metres.

Prosecutors have been accused of attempting to cover up these

contradictions by suppressing evidence. The court was told that photographs of Reinado and Exposto’s autopsies did not exist—but images from both autopsies were later leaked to the Timorese media. One of the prosecutors, Felismino Cardoso Garcia, who had insisted that there were no photographs, appears in many of the images standing beside medical examiners over Reinado’s corpse.

The evidence of Horta’s military guard was also discredited with the release of Australian Federal Police (AFP) ballistics reports. These showed that the bullets recovered from the bodies of Reinado and Exposto were not the same ones used in the standard military weapon that Francisco Lino Marcal said he fired. Moreover, the bullets used to kill Reinado were different to those found in Exposto, suggesting that there were two shooters. Both weapons used in the execution-style killings have disappeared, with the AFP unable to match the bullets to any of the 30 firearms submitted by Ramos-Horta’s guard for forensic examination.

The AFP reports included alternative explanations to the official “coup” story. One noted that Reinado may have either “had a meeting with the President but no one else at the presidential compound knew about it”, or that “it was a successful trap to finally silence Reinado”.

Further questions emerged in an article by the *Australian’s* Paul Toohey, published shortly after the trial began last year. “A confidential UN report has witnesses stating that Reinado and his men were inside the President’s compound for at least 50 minutes before they were shot,” he wrote. “During this time, none of the nine civilians or the 13 soldiers that were present thought to notify authorities. In fact, as the report notes, nine of Dr Ramos-Horta’s 13 guards mysteriously disappeared when Reinado turned up. More than ever, it appears the official version of events is a cover-up. It now seems possible that immediately after Reinado and Leopoldino were shot, the rebels fled for the hills and were nowhere near the compound when an unknown masked gunman shot Dr Ramos-Horta.”

Obvious questions remain unanswered. What was Reinado doing in Ramos-Horta’s house for nearly an hour before he was shot? Why the apparent attempt by the presidential guard to later testify that shooting erupted as soon as Reinado and his men arrived? According to an East Timorese internet news outlet, an Irish volunteer worker staying at Ramos-Horta’s residence, Marie Claire, told the court she heard the first shots at 6.50 a.m., but when later giving a statement to police was asked to say that fighting erupted at 6.10 a.m. She three times refused to sign a printed statement that had the incorrect time.

The *Australian* article also cast doubt on the alleged ambush of Gusmao’s convoy: “A non-AFP intelligence report seen by the *Australian* states that the only ‘visible shooter’ in the Gusmao roadside ambush was wearing ‘civilian clothes, a sports jacket with a hood’. All the rebels were

wearing military fatigues.”

If the cited “confidential UN report” and “non-AFP intelligence report” are accurate, Reinado’s men were responsible for neither Ramos-Horta’s near-fatal shooting nor the alleged attack on Gusmao’s vehicle. Who then was responsible—and what was the motive? Who stood to gain from the elimination of Reinado and Ramos-Horta? Who has benefitted from the so-called “double assassination”?

Australian media blackout

These are questions yet to be raised anywhere in the Australian press. Toohey’s article in July last year was the last to note any of the jarring contradictions in the official version of events. Since then a media blackout has been imposed. After the first week’s proceedings, it appears that not a single Australian journalist has attended the Pires trial, with Timorese and Portuguese outlets providing the only coverage. In November, the Qatar-based television news network Al Jazeera broadcast a report, noting that the proceedings were “mired in controversy, suspicion, and doubt about whether this was a genuine assassination attempt, or in fact some kind of setup designed to rid East Timor of its lingering rebel problem”.

The lack of interest on the part of the Australian media cannot be explained by a lack of newsworthiness. The trial of an Australian citizen for orchestrating an alleged coup d’état or double assassination plot against the president and prime minister of a neighbouring state ought to be, on any objective measure, a major story.

But if Reinado was set up, all the indications point to Canberra’s closest ally in Dili—Prime Minister Gusmao—as the most likely culprit. The former guerrilla independence leader and the right-wing cabal that surrounds him had the most to gain by the death of both Reinado and Ramos-Horta. Pursuing this line of investigation further raises the question as to whether Australian forces in Timor acquiesced in the plot—and whether foreign security forces were stood down on February 11 in order to permit Reinado and his men to reach the presidential residence.

The Pires trial appears to be another instance in which the media simply buries important stories that threaten to cut across the economic and strategic interests of Australian imperialism in the Pacific region. In this regard there are parallels with the official silence on the failed frame-up of former Solomon Islands’ attorney general Julian Moti on bogus rape charges. (See: “Australian government frame-up of Julian Moti collapses as court throws out charges”)

Reinado’s dubious record as a “rebel” soldier was closely bound up with the political calculations of the Australian government. Reinado was trained by the Australian military in Canberra, before he mutinied in May 2006. He joined the “petitioners”—a section of the military headed by Salsinha and backed by Gusmao that instigated violent protests against the elected Fretilin government of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri. The petitioners’ campaign was seized upon by ex-Indonesian militia forces, criminal gangs, right-wing opposition parties, the Catholic Church—and the Australian government.

Canberra used the unrest as a pretext to dispatch more than 1,000 troops.

The ABC and other Australian media outlets promoted lurid and baseless claims that Alkatiri had armed death squads to assassinate his political opponents. The prime minister’s real “crime” was that he had forced Canberra to make unwelcome concessions on the carve up of the Timor Sea lucrative oil and gas reserves, and had come to be regarded as too close to rival powers Portugal and China.

In 2007, presidential and parliamentary elections took place under the watch of the Australian military. Ramos-Horta was installed as president, while Gusmao headed an unstable and disparate coalition government resting upon the same political forces that were mobilised against Alkatiri in 2006.

Reinado initially enjoyed the support of Gusmao and the Australian forces. Despite being officially charged with murder relating to his activities in the May 2006 crisis, the former major and his men were able to move around East Timor’s rural western districts with effective impunity. The situation changed, however, in late 2007 and early 2008. Reinado released a widely circulated DVD in which he accused Gusmao of orchestrating the 2006 crisis and threatened to reveal further details. Its release triggered a major crisis for the Gusmao government.

In a cross-party meeting of MPs held on February 7, 2008, President Ramos-Horta agreed with the opposition Fretilin’s demand that fresh elections be called to resolve the political impasse. At the same time, Ramos-Horta was finalising an amnesty deal he had personally negotiated with Reinado in meetings held in remote jungle districts in western East Timor. In return for his surrender and disarming, Reinado would be pardoned for all his crimes.

Gusmao, therefore, faced the prospect of the former major returning to Dili a free man, potentially revealing incriminating details of behind-the-scenes events in 2006. At the same time, the prime minister and his allies were threatened with losing office less than a year after they came to power. It strains belief that Gusmao and the various business and mafia elements aligned with his government would have remained passive in the face of these threats. Similarly, there was much at stake for the Australian government. Alkatiri’s return as prime minister would have undone all of Canberra’s efforts over the previous two years.

Moreover, the prosecution in the Pires trial is yet to establish a credible motive as to why Reinado would attack Ramos-Horta—the one man willing and able to grant him amnesty. It has emerged in the course of proceedings that Reinado and the president had a meeting scheduled for February 17 in the town of Gleno, south west of Dili. If Reinado had really intended to kill or kidnap the president why did he not wait a few days for Ramos-Horta to again travel in secret to the rebel force’s stronghold? Why would he risk detection and confrontation with Timorese security forces, UN police, and Australian and New Zealand soldiers by driving through Dili?

MUNJ and Ramos-Horta’s guard

Reinado’s men have testified that they understood that a meeting had been arranged with Ramos-Horta for the morning of February 11. This has been corroborated by other witnesses.

How Reinado might have believed he had a meeting with Ramos-Horta is unclear, although suspicion has fallen on the MUNJ, which before 2007 went by a different name—the National Front for Justice and Peace (FNJP). The organisation was one of the most prominent of several gangs based in Timor’s western districts that participated in the violent anti-Fretilin government protests in 2006. Led by former Timorese soldier Major Augusto “Tara” Araujo, the FNJP played a key role in organising the initial protests by the “petitioners”. Even after Alkatiri resigned, the group called demonstrations to demand the former prime minister’s arrest. The FNJP appealed to Gusmao to assume unconstitutional powers as a presidential dictator, demanding he dissolve the government and shut down parliament.

At the beginning of 2007 the group insisted that scheduled presidential and parliamentary elections be called off. One of their senior members, Dili coordinator Vital Dos Santos, was nevertheless elected to parliament as a candidate for the Democratic Party of Fernando “La Sama” de Araujo. Several other MUNJ members also have close connections with right-wing parties. Augusto “Tara” Araujo was last month reported to have been proposed as a replacement for Mario Carrascalao as leader of the Social Democratic Party. Another MUNJ leader, Augusto Junior Trindade, was employed in President Ramos-Horta’s office from mid-2007.

In 2006-2007 FNJP/MUNJ demanded that the pursuit of Reinado cease and that his murder and weapons charges be dropped. Significantly, it demanded the withdrawal of the Portuguese National Republican Guard police force from East Timor, but said nothing about the Australian military presence. Canberra’s overriding preoccupation has been to sideline its rivals for influence in Dili, including the former colonial power Portugal. In 2007 Ramos-Horta granted MUNJ official status in his negotiations with Reinado; members of the group subsequently received public monies and vehicles. Reinado and his men reportedly used MUNJ four-wheel drives to travel to Dili on February 11, 2008.

The president has remained silent on these issues. In initial statements after his release from hospital in 2008, Ramos-Horta was clearly shaken by the attack. He was critical of the Australian military’s failure to intercept Reinado, said he wanted to resign from office, and revealed that he still feared for his life. It was not clear whom he feared might attack him again, given that Reinado was dead and his supporters were negotiating their surrender at the time.

Soon after, however, Ramos-Horta shifted his stance. He ceased raising questions about how the attacks had happened, withdrew his support for new elections, lined up with the public scapegoating of Pires for the February 11 events, and indicated he would issue post-trial pardons for Salsinha and his men. The president has refused to testify in court, only issuing a written statement.

Gusmao has likewise decided to evade cross-examination. The prime minister will not be questioned about the alleged attack on his vehicle. The Australian intelligence report that the shooter was not one of Reinado or Salsinha’s men has added significant weight to the charge levelled by former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and other political figures that the entire incident was staged. The obvious implication is that Gusmao was seeking to cover up his own role in events.

Gusmao’s Australian wife, Kirsty Sword, took the stand as a witness last December. No Australian or western media covered her testimony. Some East Timorese reports claimed that there were differences between her testimony and her dramatic public statements at the time. She

described hiding her children under the family bed as armed rebels raided her home on the morning of February 11. In court, Sword reportedly claimed a loss of memory on certain details.

The unravelling of the official cover-up of the events of February 11 2008—in which the central figures of the East Timorese state were involved—can only compound the country’s ongoing political turmoil.



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