The strange end of the 2008 “coup” affair

East Timorese president frees men jailed over alleged assassination attempts

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East Timorese President Jose Ramos-Horta pardoned the 24 men in August who were convicted on charges relating to a supposed double assassination attempt on February 11, 2008 targeting himself and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao. The men—mostly ex-soldiers and led by Gustao Salsinha—had each been sentenced to between nine and sixteen years’ imprisonment, but spent less than six months in jail.

None of them ever admitted their guilt or offered any statement of contrition for the alleged assassination attempt. Nevertheless, President Horta called on people to “let the past be the past and look ahead with confidence”. According to a report in local newspaper *Suara Timor Lorosae*, a spokesman for Gusmao said the prime minister approved of Horta’s pardon because “it was good for the country’s stability”. The spokesman added that the government called on Salsinha and his followers to “keep contributing to the peace and stability in the country”.

This turn of events followed a failed attempt by Timorese officials to appeal the acquittal of Angelita Pires, who was the chief accused in the assassination trial.

Pires was alleged to have been the mastermind behind the coup plot, for having urged her partner Alfredo Reinado to try to kill the president and prime minister. Reinado was an Australian-trained former army major who mutinied in mid-2006, together with Salsinha and hundreds of other soldiers known as “petitioners,” in rebellion against the then Fretilin government.

On February 11, 2008 Reinado was shot dead at point blank range at President Horta’s residence. Pires was found not guilty by Dili’s District Court in March, after her Australian barristers argued that there had never been a coup or assassination plot and that Reinado had instead been lured to Dili to be killed. Dili’s Court of Appeal in June upheld the verdict after concluding there was not enough evidence to support the prosecutor-general’s case.

Taken together, Horta’s pardon of those convicted for the alleged assassination attempt and the collapse of the case against Angelita Pires demonstrate that no-one within the Dili establishment believes the official “coup” story.

Overwhelming evidence emerged in the course of the trial of Pires, Salsinha, and the others that contradicted the prosecution’s case. According to the official account of what happened on February 11, 2008, Reinado led his men into Dili in the early hours of the morning and went to the president’s residence, where he and one of his followers, Leopoldino Exposto, were killed in a shoot-out with Horta’s guard. At the same time, Reinado supposedly ordered Salsinha and some other men to kill Gusmao.

Ballistics evidence conducted by the Australian Federal Police established that Marcelo Caetano, Reinado’s colleague who was accused of shooting Horta, was in fact not responsible for the serious wounding of the president. Horta’s guards were found to have lied—one of his men claimed to have shot and killed Reinado and Exposto in self defence from a distance. In fact they were killed execution-style, Reinado through the left eye and Exposto through the back of the neck.

Salsinha and his men—trained soldiers—allegedly ambushed Gusmao’s vehicle on an isolated and narrow road but somehow failed to inflict any wounds on the prime minister or his entourage, despite firing 14 rounds at the car. Forensic examination indicated that the shots fired at Gusmao’s vehicle came from a different direction than from where Salsinha’s men were located at the time. Other ballistic and forensic evidence and witness testimonies similarly demolished other key aspects of the official coup plot account.

All the available evidence accumulated since the February 11 events is consistent with the suggestion raised by the *World Socialist Web Site* from the outset—that Reinado was set up to be killed. There is now little doubt that the ex-major went to

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Horta's residence on the understanding that he had an arranged meeting with the president. There is also little doubt that the alleged ambush on Gusmao's convoy was staged.

Beyond this much remains unclear. But the key beneficiary of the affair in East Timor was Gusmao himself.

Reinado and Gusmao were on good terms in 2006. Gusmao, then the country's president, welcomed the mutiny of Reinado and the petitioners against Fretilin's Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri. Even after Reinado and his men murdered several loyalist soldiers, Gusmao issued friendly greetings to the ex-major and reportedly paid for one of his hotel bills.

The petitioners' violent protests provided the pretext for a renewed Australian military intervention and a filthy regime change operation targeting the Fretilin government. The Australian political establishment considered Alkatiri and his colleagues as too close to rival powers, including China, and too demanding with regard to concessions for continued Australian access to the lucrative energy resources in the Timor Sea. In mid-2006 Reinado was hailed in the Australian press, while Canberra worked closely with Gusmao.

By 2008, however, the situation had changed—for both the Australian government and Gusmao. Reinado had not only outlived his usefulness but was publicly threatening to reveal what he knew of the prime minister's role in instigating the 2006 crisis. This threat was beginning to destabilise Gusmao's disparate coalition government. By early February, President Horta had urged the prime minister to allow early elections, as demanded by Fretilin. Gusmao adamantly rejected this call. February 11 instantly transformed the prime minister's declining political fortunes. Reinado was removed from the scene. Horta survived serious gunshot wounds, but afterward repudiated the demand for an early election and ever since has deferred to Gusmao on every significant political issue.

All the key figures involved have remained silent. Salsinha and his men have said nothing about what has happened—this is clearly part of the quid pro quo, worked out with Horta, for their early release from prison. Angelita Pires has maintained her own and Reinado's innocence but is yet to provide a full account of her involvement in the February 11 affair. According to reports, she is now writing a book as part of her efforts to promote Reinado as a nationalist rebel leader. Timorese opposition leader Mari Alkatiri has also failed to disclose everything that he knows about the events surrounding Reinado's death. Fretilin, his party, is more concerned with maintaining political stability on behalf of domestic business interests and international investors than in exposing those responsible.

In Australia, news of Horta's decision to free Salsinha and his colleagues was briefly reported. The wider issues regarding the so-called coup affair were buried entirely, consistent with the extraordinary media blackout surrounding the 2008 events. No Australian journalist covered the trials of Pires, Salsinha, and the others, and it appears that no journalist has since attempted to interview those pardoned by Horta.

The refusal of the Australian media to investigate what happened on February 11 is indicative of the issue's sensitivity for the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Serious questions remain outstanding regarding Canberra's role in the events. How did Reinado, who was being monitored by the Australian military, manage to drive for several hours from his rural base to President Horta's house in Dili without being intercepted by Australian troops in the country? How did Australian intelligence operatives not pick up any of Reinado's numerous mobile phone communications in the lead up to the violent clash?

There is every possibility that elements within the Australian military and intelligence apparatus knew that Reinado was being set up by Gusmao, or forces close to Gusmao, and did nothing to intervene, calculating that the ex-major's death would improve the position of the Australian neo-colonial intervention force, which remains in the country. The 2006 intervention did not resolve the underlying cause of the crisis confronting Australian imperialism in East Timor and the South Pacific—Beijing's rapidly expanding economic, military and strategic weight in the region, which is eroding Canberra's hegemony.

The possibility of Australian government and military involvement in the February 2008 events remains a great unmentionable in official political and media circles. The same goes for the calculations behind the 2006 intervention and the ongoing troop presence. Every section of the press, together with each parliamentary party, including the Greens, maintains the lie that Australian operations in the impoverished country are "humanitarian".

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