

East Timor: Alleged 2008 “coup” plotter accuses Prime Minister Gusmao of political manipulation

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Gastao Salsinha, one of the leading participants in the so-called “coup” attempt in East Timor on February 11, 2008, has spoken out against Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao in an interview with Dili newspaper *Tempo Seminal*. Salsinha is a former lieutenant in the Timorese military. In 2006, he led a mutiny of about 600 soldiers known as “petitioners”, precipitating an Australian military intervention and the ousting of then Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri. The “rebel” soldier has now alleged that Gusmao and other government figures, “played us as if they played cards”.

The interview, conducted on December 27, is Salsinha’s lengthiest public statement since he was sentenced to ten years imprisonment for allegedly trying to kill Gusmao in 2008. He was subsequently pardoned by President Jose Ramos-Horta and released last August after spending just six months behind bars. In his interview, Salsinha maintained his silence regarding the events of February 11, 2008.

During the 2008 trials of Salsinha, the 26 other accused men, and Angelita Pires, overwhelming evidence emerged disproving the official account of an attempted coup or double assassination against Gusmao and Horta. All the available evidence pointed instead to the likelihood that Gusmao, or forces close to the prime minister, had set up former Major Alfredo Reinado to be killed, possibly along with Horta. Reinado had turned up at Horta’s Dili residence, after being led to believe that a meeting had been scheduled between him and the president, and was shot through the eye at point blank range. Horta himself later suffered near-fatal gunshot wounds in still unexplained circumstances.

(See: “Leaked autopsy report shows alleged ‘coup’ leader Reinado shot at point-blank range”)

Salsinha entered Dili with Reinado on the morning of February 11. While Reinado and most of his allied ex-soldiers went to Horta’s residence, Salsinha led a smaller group towards Gusmao’s home. As the prime minister was driving towards Dili, his vehicle was allegedly ambushed and supposedly shot multiple times, although none of the occupants was wounded or killed. Serious doubts quickly emerged over the “ambush”. Fretilin’s Mari Alkatiri later maintained that it had been staged, while forensic evidence and witness statements tendered during the trials indicated that the shots could not have been fired by Salsinha or his men. The former lieutenant has consistently denied attacking Gusmao, but has never issued a full account of what happened that day.

When he surrendered to Timorese authorities in April 2008, Salsinha was assured by President Horta and the Gusmao government that he would be quickly freed if convicted. There is little doubt that the offer was made on condition that the former soldier kept his mouth firmly shut.

Salsinha’s *Tempo Seminal* interview points to the re-emergence of tensions between him and Gusmao. Asked how he felt about being pardoned last August, he replied: “For those [who] we can say are in power, there has been no justice applied with respect to them. Because of this we say [that] some things are not quite right yet and many things are still not as they should be.”

Salsinha complained that he and the others who were imprisoned did not receive “recuperation” cash payments of about \$A8,000 that were issued by the government to other petitioners, and that no financial support had been provided to his wife and children while he was in gaol. He also maintained that he and the other petitioners should still be regarded as members of the armed forces. Salsinha revealed that he had delegated a team of eight petitioners who met with Prime Minister Gusmao last month and issued him a letter containing their demands. The former lieutenant added that he planned to “consolidate” the petitioners again, and bring them together to “discuss again the issues”.

Salsinha’s carefully worded accusations against Gusmao’s dealings with the petitioners represent a shot across the prime minister’s bow. Speaking of the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections, he told *Tempo Seminal*: “A number of parties used the petitioners as their instruments for their own political campaigning. They used the petitioners’ name all over the place to get the support of many people. Then after they got into power, they rejected the claims of the petitioners, and even referred to them as rebels.”

Asked exactly who he was referring to, Salsinha replied, “Those who are now in power.” He continued: “It is clear that we fell victim to some politicians. We can say, not only did we fall into their trap but we fell right into it, fell right into it. Because it was all their gamesmanship. They played us as if they played cards. To promote their own interests. Because alone they would not have been able to achieve their objectives. But we became like a bridge for them to come and go. Once they reached their goal, they denied us and said we were rebels.”

Salsinha clearly knows much more than he is letting on—including about Gusmao’s role in the petitioners’ mutiny of 2006. Gusmao seized on, and possibly directly instigated, the split in the military in order to bring down the Fretilin government and seize executive power himself. He worked hand in hand with the Australian government, which utilised the 2006 crisis for its own predatory ends. Canberra deployed

hundreds of troops in order to maintain its domination over the oil and gas rich state and to orchestrate the removal of Fretilin’s Mari Alkatiri, who had come to be regarded as too closely aligned with rival powers such as China.

The precise role played by Gusmao in the filthy behind-the-scenes manoeuvres that led up to, and followed, the Australian military intervention is yet to be established. In late 2007, Alfredo Reinado accused Gusmao of being the “main author” of the 2006 affair and of “creating” the petitioners’ protest (see: “Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao accused of instigating 2006 political crisis in East Timor”). Just weeks later, Reinado was shot dead before he could provide any further details.

Salsinha is no doubt aware that he is playing a dangerous game in publicly attacking the prime minister. His re-entry into Timorese political life is yet another expression of the enormous crisis that continues to wrack the impoverished state.

More than ten years after winning so-called independence, East Timor’s parliamentary factions more closely resemble rival mafia gangs than political parties. Dili is a nest of intrigue, with Australia, Portugal, China, Malaysia, Japan, and the US among those engaged in constant manoeuvring to secure a slice of the multi-billion dollar oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. Hundreds of Australian troops remain stationed in the country, a law unto themselves, not subject to UN or any other multilateral command and enjoying complete immunity from local law. Amid escalating social inequality and poverty, which are among the worst in the world, the stage is being set for the eruption of further social and political conflicts and upheavals.



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