

East Timor to hold presidential election

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“Independent” East Timor’s third presidential election starts this Saturday, again under the watch of hundreds of occupying Australian troops. The intervention force is due to be withdrawn from the resource-rich and strategically significant state by the end of 2012, alongside a drawdown of the UN policing and diplomatic mission. Canberra is no doubt doing everything it can to ensure a pro-Australian administration through this year’s presidential and parliamentary elections.

East Timor’s previous round of elections took place in 2007, in the wake of an Australian military intervention and orchestrated regime-change operation against Fretilin Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri in mid-2006. Alkatiri was regarded as too close to rival powers Portugal and China, and had incurred the Australian government’s wrath for resisting some of its predatory claims to the lucrative oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. The 2007 elections resulted in Canberra’s favoured candidates, Jose Ramos-Horta and Xanana Gusmao, installed as president and prime minister respectively. The campaigns were marked by repeated Fretilin complaints of Australian military provocations at their rallies and other electoral interference.

In the current election, the Australian intervention force, now about one-third of the size it was in 2007, appears to be maintaining a lower profile. But the key political issues underlying Timor’s 2006-2007 crisis—escalating strategic rivalry between Australia and China, and how to carve up the enormous Greater Sunrise gas field—have since taken on an even sharper character.

There are 12 registered candidates in the presidential election. The frontrunners are incumbent President Jose Ramos-Horta, Fretilin’s Francisco “Lu-Olo” Guterres, Democratic Party leader and parliamentary speaker Fernando “Lasama” de Araújo, and former military chief José Maria de Vasconcelos, universally known by his pre-independence nom de guerre, Taur Matan Ruak. Among

the other candidates is Angelita Pires, the former partner of Alfredo Reinado, an ex-military police commander who played a prominent role in the 2006 coup against the Alkatiri administration. In February 2008, Reinado was shot dead in a murky incident that was falsely described as an attempted coup. Pires was accused of being the plot’s mastermind, but was acquitted by the courts in 2010.

If, as is likely, no candidate secures more than 50 percent of the vote, a runoff ballot between the top two candidates will be held next month.

Under East Timor’s constitution, executive power is vested in the government formed by the prime minister, not the president. Unless one party wins an outright majority of parliamentary seats, however, the president determines which of them is to be given first opportunity to form a coalition government. In 2007, Ramos-Horta exploited this provision to block Fretilin from holding onto office. Despite Fretilin winning the most seats of any party, Xanana Gusmao’s National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT) was allowed to form a disparate ruling coalition. New parliamentary elections are scheduled for June.

Gusmao and the CNRT endorsed Ramos-Horta for president in 2007, but are now backing Taur Matan Ruak. Ruak’s campaign has focussed on his military credentials, both as commander of the FALINTIL guerrilla resistance against the Indonesian military in the 1980s and 1990s, and as chief of the East Timorese Defence Force from 2002. Uniformed soldiers have reportedly been campaigning for their ex-commander in various towns, in violation of the law. Ruak has promised to institute compulsory military service for young people over 18 years of age, reportedly declaring that “weak youth will lead to a weak nation.”

The former military chief has close relations with

Canberra and Washington. A US diplomatic cable dispatched from Dili in December 2009, later published by WikiLeaks, was headed “Political future for top Timorese general?” It concluded: “TMR [Taur Matan Ruak] is favorably disposed toward the US and has welcomed increased military to military bilateral engagement ... He is a thoughtful interlocutor [and] comfortably holds his own with colleagues from other nations, and has extensive experience dealing with the senior military leaders of the Australian, New Zealand and United Nations contingents present in Timor-Leste since its birth as a country ten years ago.”

An earlier cable, sent in May 2009 and headed “Snapshot of US military relations with Timor-Leste,” said Ruak had requested an American military and legal advisor. The cable also detailed that in November 2008, Ruak extended an offer to Admiral Timothy Keating, commander of the US Pacific Command (PACOM), to “jointly develop military training areas in Timor-Leste for use by US troops.”

The cables point to one of the primary concerns of the US and Australian governments—the growing influence of China in East Timor. In July 2007, the American ambassador in Dili, Hans Klemm, sent a cable headed “USG [US government] engagement with Taur Matan Ruak.” It raised the question as to whether Washington should deal with Ruak, given that a UN commission of inquiry into the 2006 crisis had recommended that he face criminal charges for allegedly arming civilians. The ambassador concluded that “interaction with Ruak is essential,” adding that “the Government of Australia has continued full engagement with all facets of the Timorese defense establishment.” Klemm explained: “This reflects both a conviction that close engagement is the only way to influence the institution’s direction, and the concern that disengagement would only push the F-FDTL [*FALINTIL - Forças de Defesa de Timor Leste*] further into the arms of less conscientious donors such as Beijing.”

Concern over Chinese influence is even greater now. The Obama administration has announced a strategic “pivot” to East Asia and the Pacific—involving stepped-up military and diplomatic relations with various countries aimed at undercutting Chinese influence. East Timor is embedded within the Indonesian archipelago and is close to strategically crucial naval routes, including the Lombok

Straits. Washington and Canberra have viewed with serious concern the Gusmao government’s moves to deepen Chinese-Timorese military ties. Dili recently purchased two Shanghai class naval patrol boats, declining an Australian offer, and invited Chinese military personnel to train their Timorese counterparts.

None of the candidates in the presidential race represent the interests of ordinary Timorese. Nearly 10 years after achieving formal sovereignty, so-called independence has delivered little improvement in the living standards of the vast majority. The country features what the International Monetary Fund recently described as the “most oil-dependent economy in the world.” The oil and gas revenues generate personal fortunes for a tiny minority but leave most people in extreme poverty. A recent report by the Save the Children organisation found that 54 percent of Timorese children under 5 are stunted due to malnutrition, the third highest rate in the world after Niger and Ethiopia.

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