

Second round required in East Timorese presidential election

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None of the 12 candidates for East Timorese president received more than 50 percent support in last Saturday's election, triggering a runoff ballot next month. The two highest vote winners will contest the second round—former military chief Taur Matan Ruak and Fretilin's Francisco "Lu-Olo" Guterres.

Votes are still being counted, due to the time it takes to report results and collect ballot boxes from outlying areas where road and communications infrastructure is poor or nonexistent. At last count, Guterres had won 28.4 percent of the vote and Ruak 25.1 percent. Incumbent President Jose Ramos-Horta had 18 percent, and parliamentary speaker Fernando "Lasama" de Araújo 17.8 percent, while the other candidates each won 3 percent or less.

It remains to be seen whether Ruak or Guterres will win next month's runoff. Ruak has been endorsed by Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao and his CNRT (National Council of Timorese Resistance) party, and he will likely be endorsed by the fourth-placed candidate, de Araújo. In 2006, de Araújo and his Democratic Party were involved in organising the provocations against the former Fretilin government that preceded an Australian military intervention. The Democratic Party is a significant force in Timor's western districts.

Fretilin's attempt to win the presidency suffered a blow yesterday when Ramos-Horta declared he would remain neutral in the runoff. Earlier reports suggested that he would endorse Guterres. Without the backing of any of the leading candidates from the first round, Guterres is likely to struggle to increase his vote. In the 2007 presidential election, Guterres won 29 percent of

the vote in the first round but polled just 31 percent in the second round.

Fretilin has been unable and unwilling to make any appeal to the widespread disillusionment and anger among young people generated by Timor's extreme poverty. The social and economic disaster in so-called independent East Timor has exposed the bankruptcy of Fretilin's promises of liberating the territory's population through the establishment of a new capitalist statelet.

In its presidential campaign, Fretilin has promoted itself as the best instrument to promote international investment and "responsibly" manage East Timor's oil and gas revenues. Fretilin accuses Gusmao of excessive public spending, endangering the country's sovereign wealth Petroleum Fund that it established in 2005 on the advice of the International Monetary Fund. The fund is now valued at nearly \$10 billion, and is mostly invested in US Treasury bonds.

The Australian government's favoured presidential candidate is undoubtedly Ruak, who established close relations with Australian and American military and diplomatic personnel while he served as Timorese military chief.

In 2006, more than 1,000 Australian troops were deployed to East Timor as part of a regime-change operation to oust Fretilin Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri. The Australian government regarded Alkatiri as too closely aligned with rival powers, including Portugal and China, and also resented the Fretilin leader for failing to accede to all its demands over the oil and gas fields beneath the Timor Sea. In the current presidential

campaign, Alkatiri has accused the Gusmao government of incompetently negotiating with Woodside and the Australian government for the development of the lucrative Greater Sunrise reserves.

Ever since 2006, the Australian government has sought to keep Fretilin out of office. If Ruak loses to Guterres in the second round, there is a greater likelihood that a Fretilin-led government would take office following parliamentary elections to be held in June. Should that take place, the possibility of a renewed Australian intervention cannot be ruled out.

More than 450 Australian and New Zealand troops remain stationed in the country, but they are due to be withdrawn in the next period. Outgoing President Ramos-Horta has repeatedly insisted that they must leave by the end of the year, but this has not been accepted by the Australian government. Defence Minister Stephen Smith yesterday declared that only in the event of “successful election outcomes” would planning begin for an “orderly drawdown” of troops, no sooner than 2013.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a think tank with close ties to the defence and foreign affairs departments in Canberra, last year issued a report calling for a contingent of Australian troops to remain permanently in Dili, which could “quickly evolve into a cohesive, active unit should there be a request at another time of possible crisis.”

The report stated: “The increasing assertiveness and probable expansion of China’s ‘soft power’ approach towards Timor-Leste (and the region more generally) has been marked by an equal assertion within Timor-Leste that it has choices in strategic partnerships ... the proximity of the country to Australia, its shared maritime boundary and its shared natural resource arrangements create for Australia a heightened sense of awareness of the degree and type of interest shown in Timor-Leste by large, growing and not necessarily benign powers.”

These “natural resource arrangements” are the treaties imposed on East Timor by the Australian government after the territory became formally

independent in 2002. These cover the Greater Sunrise gas field, which is yet to be tapped. Backed by the Australian government, the Woodside Petroleum-led consortium that has the rights to develop the project has insisted on constructing a floating gas processing facility in the Timor Sea. Prime Minister Gusmao has demanded the gas be processed on East Timorese soil. His government has hinted that Malaysian, Qatari and other foreign gas firms may be invited to construct pipelines from Greater Sunrise to Timor if Woodside refuses to do so.

If the protracted stalemate is not resolved by February 2013, the *Petroleum Economist* website recently explained, “the project’s governing treaty can be terminated, most likely setting the project back decades.” The collapse of the treaty arrangements would also revive East Timor’s border claims in the Timor Sea. Under the current arrangements, imposed through Australian government threats and intimidation, Canberra is to receive 80 percent of the revenue generated from Greater Sunrise—even though under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea it is entitled to just 20 percent.

These mercenary calculations lie behind the Australian government’s current pronouncements requiring “peaceful and democratic elections” in East Timor, just as they drove the military intervention in 2006.



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