

Former military chief wins East Timor's presidential election

Patrick O'Connor
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Taur Matan Ruak, the former head of the East Timorese armed forces, won Monday's president election, defeating rival Fretilin candidate Francisco Lu-Olo Guterres. Results are yet to be formally reviewed and announced, but Timor's electoral secretariat has reported that Ruak received 61.2 percent, and Guterres 38.8 percent.

The presidential vote was East Timor's third since being granted formal independence in 2002. The last ballot, held in 2007, was held in the wake of an Australian military intervention spearheading a regime-change operation against then Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri. The Fretilin leader had come to be regarded as too close to Canberra's rivals, including Portugal and China, and was regarded as an obstacle to Australian oil companies' access to the Timor Sea's lucrative energy fields.

The 2007 elections effectively formed part of the Australian government's drive to keep Fretilin out of office. The campaign was marked by numerous complaints of interference and provocations by some of the 1,250 Australian and New Zealand troops stationed in the country. Canberra's favoured candidate, Jose Ramos-Horta, defeated Lu-Olo Guterres.

This year Taur Matan Ruak was clearly the Australian government's preferred choice. As military chief from 2002 to 2011, Ruak developed close ties with both Australian and American military figures, as documented in US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks (see: "East Timor to hold presidential election").

He has become president as Canberra prepares to

"transition" its remaining 400 troops out of East Timor. More than 1,000 UN police officers, mostly from Portugal and Malaysia, are also due to be withdrawn beginning later this year.

Like most East Asian countries, politics in East Timor is increasingly dominated by the US-China strategic rivalry. Beijing has increased its diplomatic presence in Timor in recent years, constructing many of the country's official buildings, including the presidential palace and foreign affairs office, and has also offered military aid such as naval patrol boats. The Obama administration's "pivot" to East Asia and the Pacific, aimed at countering China's growing influence throughout the region, has seen Washington press for closer relations with Dili.

During the election campaign, on April 4, US Navy Secretary Ray Mabus visited East Timor and held meetings with President Ramos-Horta and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao. While few details were revealed about what was discussed, a new "military cooperation plan" is being prepared that involves the US navy and air force providing "capacity building" training for the Timorese armed forces.

Ruak's presidential campaign was marked by its militarist character. Despite resigning from the armed forces last year, he appeared in election posters and other material dressed in military fatigues. He has pledged to introduce compulsory military service for young people. Ruak also appealed to veterans of the guerrilla war waged against the Indonesian military between 1975 and 1999, promising jobs and larger pensions. Both Ruak and Lu-Olo Guterres spent the 24 years of Indonesian rule over Timor as guerrilla

commanders in the mountainous jungles.

Ruak benefitted from the endorsement of Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao and his National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT) party. The president-elect also won the backing of the Democratic Party, whose leader Fernando “Lasama” de Araújo finished in fourth place in the first round of the presidential election, with nearly 18 percent of the vote.

Incumbent president, Jose Ramos-Horta, also won 18 percent in the first round. The Timorese media reported last month that Ramos-Horta told his staff that a president “who comes from a military background will not be good for the nation”, but he did not publicly endorse either Ruak or Guterres.

Under the Timorese constitution the president does not have executive power, but the repeated Australian media references to the position being “ceremonial” are incorrect. The president can veto any proposed legislation the government passes through parliament. He also has the crucial authority of nominating an elected member of parliament to form a coalition government following elections to the legislature. In 2007, Ramos-Horta used this power to block Fretilin from negotiating a coalition arrangement with other parties. He instead authorised Gusmao’s CNRT to form a government, even though the CNRT won substantially fewer votes than Fretilin. Ruak is likely to do likewise after parliamentary elections due later this year, potentially giving Gusmao another five years in office.

In an article published in the *New York Times* on Monday, Ramos-Horta boasted: “Timor-Leste is a different country today than it was 10 years ago or even five years ago. Its double-digit growth for four straight years has made it one of the strongest economies in Asia. Unemployment has plummeted, and we are on track for 100-percent adult literacy by 2015.”

All these claims are absurd. East Timor remains one of the most impoverished countries in the world. Unemployment has “plummeted” from about 50 percent a few years ago to an estimated 20 percent now. The country’s “double-digit growth for four straight

years” is based on record government spending, much of it in the form of cash handouts to selected constituencies such as war veterans, widows, newlyweds, and others. These payments, driven by Gusmao’s desperate attempt to secure a social base for his government, have fuelled inflation, which is estimated at between 10 to 20 percent annually.

More than 90 percent of government revenue derives from the Bayu Undan gas field in the Timor Sea, which according to some estimates will run dry in about 12 years. Larger gas reserves in the Greater Sunrise fields remain untapped due to a protracted standoff between Dili and Canberra over where to construct a gas processing facility.

Fretilin has proven unable to capitalise on the widespread opposition to the Gusmao government and the mounting frustration, especially among young people, over continued poverty and unemployment and mounting social inequality. When it was in office between 2002 and 2006, it ruthlessly sought to advance the interests of international investors and heed the demands of the International Monetary Fund.

Fretilin’s perspective of establishing an “independent” capitalist state has proved a dead end for the East Timorese working class and rural poor. A decade after formal independence the tiny half-island remains completely subservient to the major and regional powers, and ruled by fractious elites who have enriched themselves at the expense of the majority of the population.



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