

East Timorese government sworn in, instability escalates

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A new East Timorese government was sworn into office on June 22, following an early election held in May that was triggered by the collapse of a minority Fretilin administration earlier this year. Fretilin is now the official opposition party, after receiving 34 percent of the total vote and 23 of the 65 seats in parliament.

A new tripartite coalition called the Alliance of Change for Progress (AMT), led by Xanana Gusmão and Taur Matan Ruak, is in power, after it won 49.6 percent of the vote and 34 parliamentary seats. Ruak, the former head of the Timorese military, has been installed as prime minister.

Gusmão, the former guerrilla leader during the Indonesian occupation of the former Portuguese colony (between 1975–1999) and former president and prime minister of the new state, is reportedly preparing to serve as the Minister of State and Advisor to the Prime Minister. This position will see him retain control over negotiations for the pending corporate exploitation of the Greater Sunrise and other offshore gas fields.

The new government confronts an escalating political and economic crisis, exacerbated by rising geo-political tensions that are being fuelled by the efforts of the US and its allies, including Australia, to counter China's regional influence.

Timor's political establishment, which continues to be dominated by the "1975 generation" of independence leaders, is increasingly distrusted by ordinary people. Those aged less than 25 years comprise nearly 70 percent of the population. All they have experienced is the bitter failure of the promise that an "independent" capitalist statelet established under the patronage of various imperialist powers would deliver prosperity and national liberation.

Scheduled parliamentary elections in July 2017 followed two years of a so-called national unity

government in which Fretilin and Gusmão's National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT) shared power. Mass poverty and unemployment continued to plague Timor, and both parties saw their vote decline in the 2017 poll, with the CNRT registering an 8 percent plunge, to 29.5 percent.

Fretilin only just won in 2017, securing 29.7 percent of the vote, and went on to form a minority government with just 23 of the parliament's 65 seats. However, the CNRT and other smaller opposition parties subsequently blocked all government legislation, including the national budget. A protracted impasse was only broken earlier this year by President Francisco Guterres who triggered another election—the first time an early vote has been held in the country.

Fretilin lost despite its share of the vote increasing from under 30 percent in 2017 to 34 percent this year. This small rise did not reflect growing support for the incumbent government. Whereas in 2017 twenty different parties were on the ballot, this year just eight options were presented to voters. Minor parties formed multiple electoral coalitions in an attempt to reach the 4 percent of the vote required for a seat in parliament under the proportional representation system.

Fretilin's election campaign featured party leader Mari Alkatiri promising to create additional "special economic zones," in a bid to attract additional international investment by offering corporations more zero-tax and cheap labour havens. The pledge underscored Fretilin's evolution over recent decades—in line with bourgeois nationalist organisations around the world—from a party purporting to represent the anti-colonial and even anti-capitalist aspirations of the masses to one acting as the open and ruthless instrument of finance capital and transnational corporations.

Less than a fortnight after the new AMT government formally took power, it is already clear that Timor's political crisis has been exacerbated by the latest elections.

Beyond a shared thirst for the spoils of power, there is little uniting the three component parties of the governing AMT coalition. Gusmão's CNRT and Taur Matan Ruak's People's Liberation Party are the main forces, backed by the year-old Khunto party that was formed by several of Dili's martial arts street gangs.

The AMT is mired in numerous corruption allegations. President Guterres last month refused to swear-in 11 proposed government ministers, on the basis that some already had corruption convictions while others are under active investigation by the public prosecutor's office. The latter category reportedly included the government's proposed defence and finance ministers. Xanana Gusmão boycotted the swearing in-ceremony, in protest against Guterres's decision.

While Ruak is prime minister and Gusmão his senior "advisor," it remains to be seen how the two figures, who have previously clashed over rival economic development initiatives, will work together. In 2006, while serving as president, Gusmão helped instigate a violent split within the Timorese military and collaborated with an Australian military intervention in order to oust his rival, Fretilin's then Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri.

There are also reported tensions between the AMT government and the Timorese armed forces.

A New Zealand Defence Force commander, Kerry McKee, who is serving as a "strategic advisor" within the Timor-Leste Defence Force (F-FDTL) leadership, has raised the prospect of a military coup. In a provocative email distributed via an East Timor "riseup" listserv, McKee explained that there were personal tensions between F-FDTL head Lere Anan Timor and both Prime Minister Ruak and his proposed defence minister.

"How this will play out will be interesting to watch," McKee wrote. "[I]s there potential for the foundation of a coup d'état should Govt not perform [?] A long shot but not beyond the realm of possibility noting [Lere Anan Timor's] continued commentary on politics."

Australian imperialism is undoubtedly continuing to intrigue behind the scenes. Last March, concerned by

China's growing influence as well its ability to exploit Australia's hypocrisy over territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the Turnbull government conceded a maritime boundary covering the gas-rich Timor Sea (see: "Gas profits and China fears drive Australia-Timor boundary treaty"). The Australian government and its allied transnational energy giants are nevertheless still refusing to countenance piping the Greater Sunrise gas reserves to Timor to be processed.

At the same time, an anti-democratic, secret trial is being prepared for a former Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) officer, who is only identified as Witness K, and his lawyer, former Australian Capital Territory Attorney-General Bernard Collaery (see: "Ex-spy and lawyer face jail for exposing Australian bugging operation in East Timor"). Witness K exposed the illegal bugging of an East Timor cabinet room in 2004, by spies posing as aid workers, during negotiations for the division of Timor Sea oil and gas revenues between Canberra and Dili.

The provocative prosecution of the whistleblower and his lawyer is undoubtedly intended, at least in part, to send a pointed message to the Timorese government, ahead of a planned visit to Dili by Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop later this year.



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