

East Timor's presidential election goes to second round

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Presidential elections in East Timor on Saturday saw a large vote against the incumbent Fretilin President Francisco “Lu-Olo” Guterres, who received just 22.16 percent. He won two and a half times as many votes, 57 percent, in 2017.

The result reflects both bitter infighting within the Timorese ruling elite as well as escalating hostility among poverty stricken ordinary people towards the entire political establishment.

Former president and prime minister José Ramos-Horta won 46.58 percent of the vote, far higher than any of the other 15 candidates. Under the Timorese electoral system, a second-round vote is triggered if no candidate wins more than 50 percent. This will be contested by Guterres and Ramos-Horta on April 19.

The last presidential election, held five years ago, required only one round, with Guterres winning 57 percent of the vote. This came after he was both nominated by Fretilin, Timor's oldest bourgeois nationalist party, and supported by former president and prime minister Xanana Gusmão and his National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT) party.

A CNRT-led coalition government, involving the minor KHUNTO party and People's Liberation Party, governed the country from 2018 to January 2020. Gusmão then attempted to trigger fresh elections by instructing CNRT parliamentarians to vote against their own government's budget, after President Guterres refused to swear in several CNRT parliamentarians nominated as ministers, because of corruption allegations. Gusmão, however, was outmanoeuvred by Fretilin when it cobbled together a majority coalition with minor parties and ousted the CNRT from power.

For the last two years, Gusmão has campaigned against the government throughout East Timor. The former guerrilla leader during the struggle against the

Indonesian occupation between 1975 and 1999 has postured as a humanitarian “man of the people,” organising food aid and other charity projects. He has also issued demagogic appeals to the young people—with those under 30 comprising around 70 percent of the population—and their concerns over continued unemployment and poverty.

The social crisis has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's response to it. East Timor has not been as badly affected as other former colonial countries. There have been a total of 22,800 confirmed cases, with 129 deaths. This year, daily confirmed cases spiked at 178 (on a 7-day rolling average) on February 14, but have been in the single digits for most of this month.

While the real numbers are certainly higher, a worse situation was prevented by border controls imposed over the last two years and relatively stringent public health measures, including lockdowns, enacted when infections spiked during different “waves.” The government failed, however, to provide adequate resources and compensation for people affected by lockdown and other measures—including university students in Dili who were prevented from returning to their home villages but then went hungry while isolating in their accommodation without any food or basic supplies being provided.

Gusmão has denounced all public health restrictions, at the same time promoting various conspiracy theories about COVID-19, including the lie that it is no worse than the flu.

Ramos-Horta won Gusmão's endorsement last January, after explicitly agreeing to the condition that if elected he will quickly disband the parliament and trigger new elections. If, as appears likely, Ramos-Horta wins the second round of the presidential

election, the government will be dissolved a year earlier than scheduled. Gusmão hopes to again become prime minister as head of a CNRT-led administration that locks Fretilin out of power.

Regardless of the immediate outcome of the presidential and parliamentary contests, the Timorese ruling elite is confronting an unprecedented crisis.

The bourgeois nationalist perspective of developing a supposedly independent East Timor has proven completely bankrupt. Ever since achieving formal sovereignty 20 years ago, the small half-island of less than 1.5 million people has been dominated by major transnational corporations, above all the oil and gas giants, and finance capital, represented through the World Bank and IMF. While a tiny layer that comprises the Timorese elite has enriched itself, the vast majority of workers and rural poor continue to endure enormous poverty.

The economy has been underwritten by oil and gas revenues that have comprised more than 90 percent of state revenue over the last two decades. Now, however, this vital source of money is under threat as the energy fields dry up. The major Bayu-Undan fields are expected to be exhausted within the next 1-2 years. Long-promised riches from the untapped Greater Sunrise gas field have little prospect of ever eventuating as Australia's Woodside Petroleum and other energy giants refuse to commit the necessary capital.

In desperation, the Timorese government has pursued other projects over the last two years. These have included offering the near-empty Bayu-Undan fields as a site for the untested "carbon capture and storage" technology for Australian gas corporations seeking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Smaller oil exploration projects have also been undertaken on the Timorese mainland and just offshore, though these have so far proven unviable commercial projects.

The threatened collapse of state revenues coincides with a sharpening of global geo-political tensions. Dili has long attempted to balance its relations between the US and China. The Timorese military, for example, accepts hardware and equipment from Beijing while also engaging in regular training exercises with American Marines and other forces. Such hedging is becoming increasingly untenable, with US imperialism stepping up its aggressive encirclement of China.

Both Washington and its close ally Canberra have long standing ties with Ramos-Horta, and are no doubt hoping that he wins the presidency and tilts Timorese foreign policy in line with their interests. Ramos-Horta notoriously hailed the 2003 US illegal invasion of Iraq, and in 2006 was installed as Timorese president courtesy of an Australian government- and military-led "regime change" operation against a previous Fretilin administration led by Mari Alkatiri.



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