

East Timor's election held under shadow of Australian military

By Mike Head
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Today's parliamentary elections in East Timor are being conducted amid continuing Australian interference and pressure to secure the defeat of the Fretilin government, which has been in office since formal independence was declared in the former Indonesian territory in 2002.

The Howard government has made no secret of its determination to see East Timor's ex-president, Xanana Gusmao, and his newly-formed National Congress for the Reconstruction of East Timor, or CNRT, obtain enough seats in the 65-seat assembly to form a coalition government with other anti-Fretilin groups. Apart from Fretilin and the CNRT, 12 other formations are standing for election.

Canberra's "regime change" agenda began last year, with the ousting of Fretilin Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and his replacement by Gusmao's ally, Jose Ramos-Horta. Last month, the Howard government backed the election of Horta as president, even though he won only 22 percent of the votes in the first round of the poll. In tomorrow's election, it is intent on ensuring that Fretilin loses its current commanding parliamentary majority of 55 seats out of 88.

That message was spelt out most bluntly on June 8, when Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer publicly condemned a defence plan, called Force 2020, drawn up by the Fretilin government, to expand the country's armed forces to 3,000, and acquire naval ships and aircraft to protect its oil and gas interests in the disputed Timor Sea area between Timor and Australia.

Downer seized upon a sensationalised report in Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper, which accused East Timor's military of planning to buy "missile-equipped warships" without parliamentary approval, to denounce the plan as "completely unrealistic". Downer declared that he was confident that East Timor would not proceed with the proposal because it "cannot afford to". He insisted the tiny state should instead "focus its resources on developing its economy, education and health services".

Alkatiri, who remains Fretilin's secretary-general, issued a statement on June 16 "strenuously objecting" to "political interference" from the Australian government and media, which was intended to "discredit Fretilin" and ensure that Australia maintained its influence over government decisions in East Timor. Fretilin party president Francisco Guterres, popularly known as Lu Olo, added: "We find it incredible that the Australian foreign minister would say that we cannot have armed helicopters and small but effective warships to patrol our offshore petroleum and fisheries. After all, doesn't the Australian Defence Force now operate in our country, with exactly such equipment?"

CNRT spokesman Dionisio Babo Soares immediately denounced Fretilin for displaying "its continued attitude of arrogance toward

Australia". Soares praised Australia for making a "substantial financial investment into the country by supporting troops here to help East Timor re-establish the law and order destroyed by the Fretilin government and parliamentary majority". By jumping to Downer's defence, the CNRT reinforced its willingness to meet the requirements of Australia, the dominant US-backed regional power, and its relations with the Indonesian military and government.

Various anti-Fretilin interests coalesced to form the CNRT just three months ago, on March 28. Its election candidates include a former official of the 1975-99 Indonesian occupation of East Timor, ex-district commissioner Virgilio Marcal, and others active in fomenting police, military and militia unrest against the Fretilin government over the past two years. One such CNRT candidate is former police chief Paulo Martins, who was named by a UN inquiry for the unauthorised arming of a force last year that later attacked the home of army commander Brigadier General Taur Matan Ruak.

In its election campaign, the CNRT has pledged to boost business profitability, attract foreign investment, and implement the pro-market agendas of the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. The group claims that these provide the only means for overcoming the dire poverty suffered by the vast majority of the population. CNRT election posters even hold out the prospect of transforming East Timor into a Singapore-style mecca of high-rise development. The CNRT has accused Fretilin of being "communist," "Marxist" and "totalitarian" and of standing in the way of "best practice economic principles to promote growth".

At the same time, the CNRT is trading heavily on its acronym, which was devised in a cynical attempt to trade on the high profile status of the previous CNRT, the National Congress for Timorese Resistance, a Fretilin-backed front formed with Gusmao and Horta in 1998 to push for autonomy after the fall of General Suharto's military regime.

The CNRT's election slogan—"We liberated the country... now we liberate the people of East Timor"—is calculated to twist the popular desire for political sovereignty into electoral backing for a program that will tighten the grip of Australian and other transnational corporations and financial institutions over the half-island's resources, particularly its considerable oil and wealth reserves. This will take place at the direct expense of the living standards, social conditions and basic democratic rights of ordinary people.

The organisation is also counting on Gusmao's image as the figurehead of the struggle against Indonesian rule. In the local media, as well as in the Australian and international media, Gusmao is routinely described as the "independence hero". CNRT secretary-general Soares said his group had deliberately chosen to

woo voters with the “Xanana factor,” as well as “the name CNRT”.

At the CNRT’s final election rally on June 26, Horta declared that without “Xanana,” it would be impossible to unite the country.

For its part, Fretilin has largely stood on its record, despite the fact that after five years of so-called independence, East Timor’s masses remain among the poorest in the world, with nearly half the children suffering from stunted growth and terrible mortality rates for women giving birth. Fretilin has downplayed a UN Food and Agriculture Organisation report that a food crisis is looming for up to 220,000 people, or one-fifth of East Timor’s population, because of drought and locust plagues.

Like the presidential elections, the parliamentary ballot is being held under a virtual Australian military occupation, augmented by the presence of 1,500 Portuguese para-military police. Australian troops were sent back into East Timor last June, the second intervention since 1999, on the pretext of protecting its people from militia violence and alleviating a refugee and humanitarian crisis. But a year on, nothing has improved for ordinary people, 100,000 of whom are still living in makeshift camps. Instead, the Howard government and the Australian media have made clear that nothing will improve unless Gusmao succeeds in forming a government.

In the final days of the election campaign, a June 24 incident in the capital, Dili, highlighted the intimidating role being played by the Australian military. Australian-led soldiers let loose a number of warning rounds in the direction of East Timorese troops in Dili. The Australians said they believed they were being attacked after hearing shots from East Timorese soldiers who were trying to control a rock-throwing crowd. Australian commanders later claimed that the altercation had been accidental, but a parliamentary committee vice president, Clementino dos Reis, observed that the event would “only traumatise the population”.

Just before the incident, Australian army chief Lieutenant General Peter Leahy visited Dili on June 18 and reiterated that Australian troops would remain in Timor for the foreseeable future, well after the elections. Horta has facilitated an ongoing Australian presence by requesting that the force stay until next year at least.

The formation of a CNRT-led coalition is being portrayed in the media as a near certainty, although Fretilin is expected to form the largest bloc, and the CNRT is thought likely to obtain only about 25 percent of the vote. One *Canberra Times* columnist, Deakin University academic Michael Leach, opined that such a CNRT coalition could even achieve a “super majority” of 44 seats, giving it the power to amend the 2002 constitution. Leach said Gusmao would likely offer Democratic Party leader, Fernando de Araujo, the post of deputy prime minister.

Alkatiri has rejected Gusmao’s call for a unity government, accusing Gusmao of being responsible for inciting last year’s violence that provided the trigger for renewed Australian military intervention. It is beyond doubt that the Howard government has encouraged anti-Fretilin elements, having deliberately starved East Timor of badly needed aid funds in recent years. In June 2005, for example, 13 leading non-government organisations in East Timor were stripped of AusAID grants and placed on a “blacklist” for having criticised Australia’s refusal to negotiate a maritime boundary with East Timor.

Canberra’s hostility to Fretilin was triggered primarily by the organisation’s resistance to the Howard government’s seven-year bullying operation, from 1999 to 2006, to force East Timor to accept Australia’s theft of much of the multi-billion dollar oil and gas fields

beneath the Timor Sea. If the undersea border with Australia were drawn according to the median line principle of international law, the fields would all belong to the tiny state. The final agreement imposed on East Timor in January 2006 left it with about 60 percent of the disputed resources north of the median line, worth an estimated \$US24 billion over several decades. In 2000, the Howard government had initially demanded East Timor receive just 22 percent, worth some \$8.4 billion. Under the final deal, the Fretilin government agreed to forgo its legitimate boundary claims for 50 years, that is, until after the reserves have been exhausted.

Until his removal, Alkatiri also persisted in seeking to build a pipeline from the giant Greater Sunrise project, in order to pump its gas to Timor for processing, rather than to the more distant northern Australian city of Darwin. He also threatened Australia’s stranglehold over the Timor Sea by trying to find alternative companies, backed by rival powers, to explore for oil and gas and build related facilities in East Timor. These included major French, Italian, Portuguese and Chinese companies.

But if the Australian-backed CNRT does succeed in gaining office, it will largely be a product of the political dead-end of Fretilin’s own bourgeois nationalist program. While the organisation sought to minimise Australian domination, it ended up inviting last year’s intervention and capitulating to Australian official and media demands for Alkatiri’s removal, while calling off angry protests by Fretilin supporters against Canberra’s operations. Far from having any real difference with the underlying free-market agenda, its own perspective of an independent state on a tiny half-island has inevitably meant, in the era of globalised production, shoring up a local business elite, and subordinating ordinary workers, youth and rural villagers to the dictates of global capital.

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