

East Timor: Despite winning election, Fretilin likely to be ousted

By Patrick O'Connor
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East Timor's ruling party, Fretilin, won the parliamentary election held on June 30 with 29 percent of the national vote. Despite the result, however, three rival parties announced last Friday they will form a coalition government headed by former President Xanana Gusmao and his National Congress for the Reconstruction of East Timor's (CNRT). The Australian government is no doubt exerting major behind-the-scenes pressure to ensure Fretilin is ousted.

The CNRT won 24.1 percent of the vote. It has aligned itself with the Association of Timorese Democrats-Social Democrat Party (ASDT-PSD), which won 15.8 percent, and the Democratic Party (PD), which received 11.3 percent. With the allocation of seats in the 65-member parliament based on proportional representation, Fretilin is expected to secure 21 seats, the CNRT 18, ASDT-PSD 11, PD 8, with the remaining seats going to a number of minor parties.

The post-election manoeuvring demonstrates the fraudulent claims of a "democratic" vote. Held under Australian military occupation, the election amounted to little more than a necessary formality preceding the removal of the Fretilin government. No other outcome would have been permitted by Canberra, which has been pressing for "regime change" in Dili for more than a year. The formation of an Australian-backed CNRT-led coalition government marks the culmination of this campaign.

The Howard government regards the Fretilin administration in Dili as a significant obstacle. Formerly headed by Mari Alkatiri, the Fretilin government had forced a number of unwelcome concessions during negotiations over Canberra's illegal exploitation of gas reserves in the Timor Sea. Alkatiri and his colleagues had also sought to counter Australian domination of East Timor by courting Chinese and Portuguese diplomatic and economic support.

In 2006, the Howard government seized upon unrest in Dili and dispatched more than a 1,000 troops. After the Australian Broadcasting Corporation televised bogus allegations that the prime minister had armed a hit squad to assassinate his opponents, Alkatiri was forced to resign and make way for Canberra's preferred candidate, Jose Ramos-Horta. The extraordinary campaign involved the mobilisation of the most right-wing elements of East Timorese society, including the Catholic Church, ex-Indonesian backed militias, and dubious military "rebels" such as Alfredo Reinado.

Ramos-Horta was subsequently installed as president last May, despite winning just 22 percent in the first round of the presidential poll. The vote was held amid Fretilin complaints of interference by some of the 1,250 Australian and New Zealand soldiers who remain stationed in East Timor. Ramos-Horta aligned himself with the Howard government throughout the 2006 crisis and in both of this year's presidential and parliamentary elections. Not surprisingly, he welcomed a statement issued shortly after the June 30 vote by Australian military chief Brigadier Mal Reardon that foreign forces would remain in East Timor until at least 2008.

The parliamentary election outcome has made clear why Canberra placed such importance on Ramos-Horta's presidential victory. While the presidency is an ostensibly ceremonial post, the president formally appoints the government. Article 106 of East Timor's constitution reads: "The prime minister is nominated by the most-voted party or by the alliance of parties with a parliamentary majority, and appointed by the President of the Republic, having heard the political parties represented in the parliament."

Ramos-Horta is now exploiting this constitutional provision to sideline Fretilin by arrogating the authority to determine the make-up of the government. "I am the one who will make the decision, based on the spirit and letter

of the constitution, which of the various parties can persuade me they are in a position to form a government that is stable, that is long-lasting,” he declared.

The anti-democratic and anti-constitutional character of Ramos-Horta’s position was demonstrated last Thursday. Even before all the votes had been tallied, he announced that the ruling party would not form government. “I do not believe that any major party wishes to offer itself to a compromise with Fretilin,” he told the *Canberra Times*. “It is evident that a Fretilin government would not be able to have its programme, its budget, passed in parliament.”

This statement was intended to undermine coalition negotiations already underway between Fretilin and the minor parties. However, Fretilin’s secretary-general Mari Alkatiri, who was re-elected to parliament, has reserved the right to form a minority government. “We are trying to make a coalition but the law allows us to form a government even if we are a minority in government,” he stated. “The constitution says a party or a coalition with the majority in parliament and that is Fretilin.”

As far as both Ramos-Horta and the Howard government are concerned, it is simply irrelevant which party won a majority.

Xanana Gusmao, constantly hailed in the Australian press as a “revered” independence hero, won less than a quarter of the vote. In fact, his party’s performance closely corresponded with that of Ramos-Horta in the first round of the presidential election, with most of its support centring in Dili. Notwithstanding Gusmao’s cynical appropriation of the CNRT acronym—formerly that of the Fretilin-backed pro-independence umbrella organisation of the 1990s—the new party proved incapable of making a broader appeal.

In a highly provocative move underscoring his contempt for democratic norms, Ramos-Horta met with Catholic bishops from Dili and Baucau on Saturday and Sunday to discuss the formation of a new government. “I met with Bishop Alberto Ricardo and Bishop Basilio do Nascimento to consult the new government formation and listen to their opinions to help me with my decisions,” the president declared. “Hopefully by next week we will have the formation.”

The Catholic Church has long agitated for the removal of the Fretilin government due to Fretilin’s continuing advocacy of a degree of separation between church and state. In 2005 the Church organised rallies in Dili aimed at bringing down the government, and in 2006 senior Church leaders participated in the campaign against Alkatiri.

Following their discussions with Ramos-Horta on the weekend, the bishops left little doubt that they wished to see the formation of an anti-Fretilin government. “In church, the people’s voice is God’s voice, so if the people want change, I think everyone wants change,” Bishop do Nascimento declared.

Ramos-Horta is yet to formally ratify any new government. Very few details of the would-be CNRT-led coalition have yet been announced, including the division of cabinet posts. While the Australian media is presenting the formation of an anti-Fretilin government as a done deal, there are significant divisions within the ranks of the opposition parties. Establishing a stable coalition may yet prove difficult.

The installation of a CNRT-led government will resolve nothing for the East Timorese people. Gusmao has already made clear his pro-Australian orientation, while his domestic agenda will be dominated by the ramming through of pro-investment and pro-business economic reforms. These measures will only exacerbate the extreme poverty and inequality wracking the tiny half-island nation.

The right-wing agenda of the opposition parties has been facilitated by the abject failure of the Fretilin government to improve the lives of ordinary Timorese people. Fretilin won 29 percent of the vote, significantly down from the 57.4 percent it won in the 2001 election. Ruling the country since so-called independence in 2002, Fretilin has dutifully maintained the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund, despite growing impoverishment. An estimated ten percent of the population still lives in internally displaced people’s camps and, according to the UN, more than 200,000 people require emergency food assistance. About 40 percent of the population remain chronically malnourished.

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