

Australia not flavour of the month in East Timor as elections loom

by Warwick Fry

The election campaign in Timor Leste has heated up. Eight Presidential candidates have announced themselves, the two front-runners being Fretilin's Lu'Olo, and the independent Jose Ramos Horta.

Mari Alkatiri, the Secretary of the Fretilin party, said in an interview for Nim-FM, "I have no doubt that Fretilin, as a party, will win with a vast majority, an absolute majority, in the next election, and I am sure that our candidate for President will win in the first round."

Most Australian observers assumed that Jose Ramos Horta would walk it in, but are having second thoughts after seeing the turnout to his first election rally. He opened in Dili, where his main support base is thought to be, expecting a crowd of 6,000. Only 500 turned up. Lu'Olo, on the other hand, opened his campaign in a small village, his home town of Ossu, to a crowd of 10,000 supporters.

Part of this may be due to Horta's (and former President, Xanana Gusmao's) conciliatory position on the Timor gap oil negotiations. Alkatiri stood out for a better deal after Australia walked out of an agreement to have the boundaries settled by the International Court of Justice in 2002.

Alkatiri said, "The object of the negotiation is billions and billions of dollars worth of resource. And no one could really expect of me, as the Prime Minister elected by



the Timorese people to lead the country to defend their interests, (in a way) different to the interests of the people. And I also believe that the Australian government is there to defend the interests of the Australian people. But the question is one of international law. We need to resolve our differences, based on the rule of law, on dialogue and negotiations, and that is what we did, and I keep on defending the interests of my people."

Asked whether there were plans for East Timor to build its own refinery, Alkatiri said, "Yes. This is part of our policy, part of our dreams, to have the plant here in Timor Leste, and we like to convert these dreams to reality, as we managed to do for our dreams of independence, and we fought for independence, and we brought independence to the country."

Horta and Gusmao were also more conciliatory on bringing to justice Indonesians suspected of war crimes during the occupation, and the militia violence of 1999 during the

independence referendum. Horta is also perceived as being more closely aligned with Australia, whose image has been tarnished by the behaviour and image of its troops (as well as its recalcitrance on the Timor gap treaty).

Jim Dunn, a long time supporter of East Timorese independence (since 1975), and author of "East Timor - a rough passage to independence" and presently in East Timor as an advisor to Horta, said in a phone conversation that he is regarded with mistrust by



most Timorese now, until he starts speaking in Tetum. Jim also reports in his blog page <<http://jasdunn.bigblog.com.au>> that Australian troops are not allowed to fraternise with the Timorese, and are only ever seen heavily armed, and this is not to anyone's advantage.

The Howard government, in its inordinate desire to displace the main wing of the Fretilin party, may have shot itself in the foot. The 'pro-Australian' candidates are now handicapped by the Australian presence. What should have been an asset is now a liability. The Australian troop presence there is essentially flawed by the fact that the Howard government refuses to

make them part of the UN presence. This sets them apart and inevitably gives rise to suspicions that Australia has its own agenda. And the behaviour of Australian troops has not helped. Apart from the five Reinado followers killed in an armed shoot out, Australian troops have killed and wounded another five unarmed civilians. Two of those killed were from a 'pro-Fretilin' refugee camp. In the most recent incident, reported in the Age, an Australian soldier pulled a gun on Alkatiri's bodyguard.

Dr Alkatiri, who was among many witnesses to the incident, said an ADF vehicle attempted to push into the Fretilin convoy but was refused entry. He said an Australian soldier pointed a gun at the driver of a vehicle while another soldier pulled a passenger from the vehicle, trod on him, and put a gun to his head. When the Fretilin member attempted to resist, the Australian soldier yelled, "Fuck you. I'll kill you."

"One of my bodyguards tried to intervene but was ordered to stand back at gunpoint. The Australian soldiers only retreated when ordered to do so by their commanding officer," added Dr Alkatiri.

"Our convoy was returning from a successful rally which was entirely peaceful. Fretilin members naturally were unarmed and posed no threat whatsoever to the Australian soldiers. The behaviour of the Australian soldiers was completely unacceptable and unjustifiable."

Alkatiri threatened legal action against "Four Corners" after a Four Corners documentary last year was instrumental in forcing his resignation from the Prime Ministership. Asked whether it was proceeding, he told Nim-FM, "I am in touch with lawyers in Australia, trying to get their opinion, trying to get their agreements on the ways for going ahead with this process. Up to now I have had a few people working on this. Surely it

says that we have (a case for) defamation, based on these problems, when Xanana decided to put pressure on me to resign, and then the crisis went on and on and on, up to now. I believe, I'm sure. It was a coup attempt, and of course it failed."

Asked what he saw as Fretilin's main achievements over the last few years Mari Alkatiri answered, "Building a state, a National State, over the last few years. It's no small achievement. But of course, it is no small feat for a people who have so few concrete things in terms of infrastructure. But, to build

up to 280,000 to 300,000 children going to school. We have a University with more than 8,000 students. We have more than 1,000 students around the world studying for different degrees, and this is an achievement, because we have really started to invest our knowledge and our effort, and build the state," he said. Rebel 'commander' Reinado, and some of the smaller opposition parties have accused Alkatiri of being a communist, but he laughed off the suggestion. "I've already made it clear publicly. Of course, if being



Photos, courtesy the Timor Post, front page March 27, 2007, show Alkatiri's car being stopped by Australian troops (top and bottom).

a state is the paramount accomplishment. You cannot build a country without a state as a strong institution, with a culture of democracy, the rule of law; this is really the most important thing for the first years of government.

"But besides this we had a lot of achievements. We initiated our governance without a penny, a single penny. Now we have an oil fund with more than one billion dollars. We have schools everywhere. We have

Leftist means you are a fighter against poverty, I am left. Because, I can never keep this kind of difference between conditions of styles of life. But for sure I am not communist. let's make it clear. For sure I'm not Fascist. I'm somewhere to the left of the right side."

"Fretilin is a party that's dedicated to eliminate poverty in Timor Leste, and to have good relations with all neighbours, with Australia," he said.



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