Preview of the 2007 East Timor Presidential Elections

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Introduction

Helen Hill, of Victoria University, writes that the forthcoming presidential election in East Timor will be crucial:

> "because they will either bring to a halt the undercurrents of violence that have wracked the country for a year, or they will lead to an escalation of that violence."

She explains the constitutional and political background and lists the eight candidates and their backgrounds. Hill expresses doubt about the certainty that many foreign observers have shown about the chances of the present Prime Minister, Nobel Prize winner Jose Ramos Horta, succeeding his ally, the current President Xanana Gusmao.

Hill concludes by noting that "hostility towards Australian troops, particularly as they refused to come under United Nations ('blue beret') command, has been an underlying theme" of the campaign.

Essay - Preview of the 2007 East Timor Presidential Elections

The second Presidential, and first Parliamentary, elections in East Timor are crucial for the five year old nation because they will either bring to a halt the undercurrents of violence that have wracked the country for a year, or they will lead to an escalation of that violence.

The campaign proper got going in mid-March 2007 and continued through early April leading up to the election on 9 April 2007, which follows the Easter celebrations. Eight candidates fulfilled the conditions for getting on the presidential ballot paper, the most important being to produce at least 5,000 signatures on the nomination paper.

The eight candidates are (in the order in which they will appear on the ballot):

- Francisco Guterres ('Lu-Olo')Currently President of the Parliament and the candidate of Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente (FRETILIN - Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor), the original pro-independence party and current majority party in the Parliament. Graduating from high school under the Portuguese, just before the Indonesian occupation began, Guterres was involved in the resistance for 24 years, and has just began to study Law at the Timor National University.
- Avelino CoelhoIndonesian-educated Secretary General of the Partido Socialista de Timor (PST - Timorese Socialist Party), the most left-wing party in Timor-Leste, with Marxist tendencies.
- Francisco Xavier do AmaralFirst President of Timor-Leste, from 1975 to 1978, now representing a regional (and some would say feudal) party he founded in 2001, the Associação Social Democrática Timorense (ASDT - Timorese Social Democratic Association). Do Amaral ran unsuccessfully for the Presidency against Xanana Gusmao in 2002.
- Manuel TilmanLisbon-trained lawyer who spent many years in Macau, parliamentarian for Klibur Oan Timur Aswain (KOTA - Sons of the Mountain Warriors), a party of traditional chiefs founded in 1975, often referred to as a 'monarchist' party but refers to itself as a 'pro-welfare' party.
- Lucia LobatoParliamentarian and lawyer for the Partido Social Democrático (PSD - Social Democratic Party), a party formed in 2001 by Mario Carrascalão, Governor of Timor Province under Indonesia, largely made up of former Indonesian civil servants and former UTD members. The only female candidate.
- Jose Ramos HortaPrime Minister, and a founder of FRETILIN but since the 1980s, a member of no party. He was nominated by the controversial President of Uniáo Nacional de Resistencia Timorense(UNDERTIM - National Union of Timorese Resistance) Cornelio Gama ('L7') (who got 7,000 signatures to get Horta's name on the ballot paper).
- João CarrascalãoFounding President of the original pro-Portuguese party União Democratica Timorense (UDT - Timorese Democratic Union), the first political party founded in East Timor in 1974
- Fernando de Araujo ('Lasama')Founding member of the Partido Democratica (PD - Democratic Party), the second largest party in the Parliament, formed just before the 2001 elections by students who had been part of the resistance while studying in Indonesia.

Timor-Leste is a constitutional Republic with four sovereign institutions: the Presidency, the Parliament, the Public Service (executive) and the Judiciary. Both President and the legislature are elected directly by the people through a general election every five years. The Prime Minister is the head of Government and chooses and presides over the Council of Ministers. The President is head of State, but a semi-symbolic figure, having a limited number of powers to act as a check and balance on executive power. The President has a veto over legislation, but that can be overridden by an absolute majority of the parliament or by two thirds of those present, depending on the subject matter.

While the President is popularly elected, the Prime Minister is selected from the party with the largest number of seats in the Parliament. The Parliament is elected by proportional representation

with the whole country as one electorate. When the Constitution was being drafted in 2001-2 the separation of powers was regarded as a good thing, a guarantee against dictatorship, which many felt was necessary following 24 years of Indonesian occupation.

In many ways the constitutional job descriptions were built around the person of Xanana on the one hand, who made it clear he did not want to be balancing budgets, doing tricky personnel work or negotiating development policy but wanted to be in direct contact with the people, and on the other hand around the person of Mari Alkatiri (or someone like him) who did not mind remaining in the background but having his finger on the pulse of economic development. In other words the jobs of President and Prime Minister, as envisaged by the writers of Timor-Leste's Constitution, were designed for two different types of people, with different but complementary strengths. In many ways Xanana and Alkatiri were two excellent candidates for those two jobs. Until 2006, together with Jose Ramos Horta as Foreign Minister, they made a triumvirate who had worked together for more than two decades to help shape the Timorese state. Their joint action to convince Australia to allocate 50% rather than 18% of the revenues of the Greater Sunrise oil field to Timor (when most Timorese believed they had a right to 100% of it) was the high point of their co-operation. This was followed quickly by the establishment of the Petroleum Fund to invest all of Timor's revenues from the Timor Sea oil and gas. But soon after, the mutiny within the army, Australian warships patrolling Dili during the FRETILIN Congress, and accusations and counter accusations all served to put them at odds with each other. The issue of how to spend the oil revenue had barely began to be addressed when Alkatiri was pressured to resign.

Given that the winner of the 9 April 2007 election will take on a predominantly symbolic role, supposedly unifying all the people of Timor-Leste and being above politics; what is surprising is that so many party leaders have nominated. The Presidential election in 2002 was held after the 2001 Constituent Assembly election, so that by the time of the presidential election the Prime Minister was already known. Back then the presidential election was also seen as an opportunity for a symbolic figure who had played a key role inside the country during the struggle, who might not have a great deal of management skills, but was a great communicator, and able to unite the country to work together for reconciliation and economic development.

This time however, the presidential election precedes the parliamentary elections, and is taking on a very different character. It looks as if several parties are using the presidential elections as a try-out for the parliamentary elections. In 2002 Xanana Gusmão was not a party member but was supported by the overwhelming majority of parties. Xanana comfortably beat Xavier d'Amaral, head of a small regional party. This year the large number of candidates makes the outcome particularly hard to predict as it will be difficult for any one candidate to achieve the 50% of the vote required to avoid going to a second round. (If none of the candidates reaches 50% of the vote, a second vote between the top two candidates will be held on 9 May 2007.)

On 17 February 2007, Hamish McDonald reported in the Sydney Morning Herald that he had been told by staff members of both Prime Minister Jose Ramos Horta and President Xanana Gusmão that the two were in fact trying to engineer a 'job swap'. [1] This would involve Ramos Horta running for the Presidency, and Xanana Gusmão running for parliament as the leader of a new political party. This party would be named the Congresso Nacional de Reconstrucáo Timorense (CNRT - National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction). Of course, these initials play on the fact that they are the same as those of the coalition under which all the parties worked together during the occupation: the original CNRT, which was an umbrella group, the Conselho Nacional de Resistencia Timorense (National Council of Timorese Resistance). FRETILIN has always made it clear it would support Xanana Gusmao as long he remained 'above politics'. It was Xanana's decision to side with the opposition parties and announce his intention to oppose FRETILIN that has really changed the

political configuration in Timor. Ever since McDonald reported that he believed Ramos Horta will win a number of journalists have referred to him as 'the front-runner' with little indication of where his votes will come from.

Two puzzling problems dog Ramos Horta's candidacy. One is that sometimes he does not really look as if he wants to win. Two weeks before announcing his own candidature Horta was suggesting the Defence Force commander Taur Matan Ruark as the next President. And in his last commentary made to the media before announcing his candidature on 17 February 2007, Horta sounded as if he was only running for election because he had been asked to do so by governments in Germany, Indonesia, Australia and Malaysia. He seemed to be saying he still had regrets about not being able to run for the position of UN Secretary General, for which several countries had nominated him. He added that if he did not run for the presidential election he would continue to work for the country

> "in many areas such as ambassador, professor, within NGOs or preparing to be the candidate for the Secretary General post in 2012".

Ramos Horta's second problem is the lack of a party apparatus to go out and do the organizing for him at his rallies and events. The group UNDERTIM, which got him the signatures to get on the ballot paper is a somewhat unreliable group led by Cornelio Gama (commonly known as 'L7') and Cristiano da Costa, a former critic of Ramos Horta. In addition, Horta has chosen Dr Dionisio Babo Soares as his spokesperson. Babo Soares' main job is Chair of the Truth and Friendship Commission, an unpopular body established by the governments of Indonesia and East Timor to bypass reconciliation which has drawn the ire of the Catholic Church.

This lack of an organizing base for Horta was sharply illustrated by the disappointing turnout at his opening rally in Dili. The ABC referred to it as a 'small but adoring crowd', while a local blog claimed there were only500 present when 6,000 had been provided for.

While Ramos Horta has 'celebrity' status due to his Nobel Prize, his somewhat arbitrary way of announcing policy as Prime Minister has made many of his colleagues wary of supporting him. Most members of the Dili political class had already promised to support other candidates by the time he announced his candidature leaving disgruntled ex-guerillas as his main power-base, together with a few of the FRETILIN dissidents (the so-called 'Mudanca' group).

Horta cannot really attack FRETILIN's candidate 'Lu-Olo' very strongly, because if he loses this election and FRETILIN wins the parliamentary election, (which most commentators agree they will), Horta could well be looking to the FRETILIN government for a job, either as Foreign Minister again or as some sort of Roving Ambassador for Timor-Leste.

Ramos Horta's strong support for the Catholic Church has been a somewhat controversial issue in his campaign. He has promised $10 million to the church, if elected. Many feel this sort of policy threatens Timor's constitutional guarantees of separation between church and state, but others point out that the President does not have this sort of control over the budget anyway. Horta has never been a particularly devout member of the church. However during the current campaign he has been covering himself with Catholic symbolism, so much so that it begins to look hypocritical. All told, Ramos Horta is by no means assured of victory

Most of the other candidates are not well-known in Australia. Partido Democratico candidate Fernando Araujo 'Lasama' has visited many times. The ABC showed a one hour documentary on FRETILIN candidate Francisco Guterres 'Lu-Olo' just before independence. [2] Lu-Olo and Mari

Alkatiri have been travelling the country together speaking at large meetings, campaigning on their record and showing a film of what they regard as FRETILIN's achievements. These include the ending of school fees in government schools, the introduction of free hot meals at lunchtime in primary schools, the introduction of Cuban doctors to the rural areas, the scholarships in medicine for 300 Timorese students to study in Cuba, the beginning of the Medical Faculty at the National University, the winning back of some of the revenues from the Timor Sea from Australia, the establishment of the petroleum fund, and the initiation of a hydro-electric power plant at the eastern end of the island. This last achievement is regarded as a liability and ecological disaster by some of the other parties, but the other initiatives show how seriously FRETILIN had taken up the expressed concerns of most people for health and education at the time of writing up the Development Plan.

Lu-Olo has been careful in his campaign to say he will be a 'President for All', in other words, not just FRETILIN members. His campaign also evokes his background of participation in the struggle for independence which is somewhat similar to Xanana's.

Partido Democratico has an impressive website and a fairly well-developed policy manifesto, obviously in readiness for the Parliamentary elections where they should see a number of members returned. However a surprising omission from their policy is anything substantial on education or health, two areas which most Timorese regard as the top priority issues.

What then of Xanana Gusmão, the charismatic leader who could do no wrong in 2000? In many ways Xanana has not been served well by his followers and supporters. The media (particularly the Australian media) treated Xanana as if he was super-human, the exact inverse of their attitude to Mari Alkatiri. Even benign stereotypes like this never help the people they portray. Sooner or later people would realise Xanana was human, that he could make mistakes.

In many people's eyes the first mistake Xanana made as President was to embrace General Wiranto in Bali in May 2004, and to agree with the Indonesians to the setting up of a Truth and Friendship Commission (TFC), which in effect allows impunity for many of the major perpetrators of violence in Timor in 1999 and in the years of the occupation. Its timing was also particularly unfortunate as it impeded the proper consideration of the report of Timor's own *Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação*(Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation - CAVR) in late 2005. [3] The Australian media has often referred to the TFC as similar to South Africa's Truth and Reconiliation Commission whereas it is the CAVR which is much more similar as it requires admission of guilt and a request for forgiveness before a pardon can be given. The TFC, on the other hand, dispenses forgiveness en mass and is seen by human rights activists and the Timorese Catholic Church as dangerously giving away the possibility of a later reconciliation, when the political will in both countries has been achieved.

The second reason for Xanana's support being lower than five years ago is his perceived role in promoting the so-called 'East - West' divide. In a speech on 23 March 2006 on the crisis in the Defence Force Xanana agreed that there had been discrimination in the army, based on regional distinctions, Loro Monu (west) and Loro Sa'e (east), and for the first time in East Timor identified those differences as political. While foreign observers were slow to realise what was going on, that speech became a 'dog whistle' to many groups around Timor-Leste and later that day, according to many observers, there was an atmosphere of regional rivalry running through all the Timorese institutions which had not been there before. While this speech and its impact has not been widely discussed in the Australian media, the International Crisis Group considered it a major obstacle to Xanana contesting the Presidency again and Lo'Olo discussed it on an ABC interview in early April. [4] Fortunately the regional rivalry is now diminishing and most of the current violence is between rival gangs known to each other. [5]

Like Ramos Horta, Xanana has the problem of finding a base for his new party. The party closest to him, the PD, is somewhat disgruntled that he would not join them, and has started his own party instead. The only body of possibly free-floating individuals with political expertise who might give him some person power are the Grupo Mudanca. They are a disaffected group of FRETILIN members who tried to remove Mari Alkatiri and Lu-Olo from the leadership of FRETILIN last year. They failed, not as is commonly reported, because the Congress failed to have a secret ballot, but because they were really only half-hearted about it and had not gone to all the District Congresses to recruit supporters first. So that even when one of their number, Vicente 'Maubusy' Ximenes, was boasting on Australian television that they would get 80% of the vote, they knew they would fail and were grateful for an excuse to withdraw.

Xanana could find some of this group an asset, but then they might also be a liability - as they were to FRETILIN. They are a set of individuals, each with a different reason for falling out with the FRETILIN leadership, and as a result Grupo Mudanca lacks a clear strategy or vision for the country and does not have a great deal of unity. For example Vitor da Costa, who has joined Ramos Horta's campaign, was sacked by Ana Pessoa as Head of the Civil Service Academy. Vicente Maubocy Ximenes had aspirations for a job as Minister for Tourism and turned against Alkatiri when he was beaten to a Vice-Ministry by another University of Queensland graduate, Jose Texeira. Egidio de Jesus was sacked as Vice-Minister for Public Works due to the continual breakdowns in electricity supply (believed to be due to corruption and sabotage), while Jorge Teme was brought home early from his diplomatic posting in Canberra due to a breach of discipline. He will find it hard to campaign enthusiastically for Ramos Horta, his old boss, but has launched himself into Xanana's campaign.

The word 'Mudanca' means 'change' and the group is often portrayed in the Australian media as a 'reform group' of some kind and as 'moderates' in comparison to the leadership, whom they always characterise as the Maputo Group. However there is another, more serious, group which is interested in bringing about a different sort of change within FRETILIN, from the bottom up rather than by replacing a few top leaders. This is the *Grupu Estudu Maubere* (GEM). Not all its members are FRETILIN members, but their aim is to involve more local FRETILIN members in policy-making, policy debate and development activity such as the Millennium Development Goals, youth work, sustainable agriculture and promoting the participation of more women in the party. Many of its members work for NGOs, the National University, or are students and don't want to become party members yet. Nevertheless the GEM engages quite directly with the leadership of FRETILIN in seminars and conferences, and seems to be a strong supporter of the development vision of Mari Alkatiri.

The election campaign has, generally speaking, been free of violence with the backdrop of low level gang violence still continuing in limited geographical regions. This is despite the fact that the Australian media has created an impression that it has been a violent campaign. All Australian government funded aid-workers apart from those doing emergency work have been required to leave, many of them against their will. Officially this is on grounds of safety and security, but at the same time large numbers of election observers are travelling in the opposite direction, pouring into Dili from the European Union, the Portuguese speaking countries, Asian human rights organizations and even Australian friendship cities, to observe the conduct of the poll. They will fan out to the rural areas before the election.

In a last minute bombshell, spokesman of the independent National Election Commission (CNE), Father Martinho Gusmão, publicly endorsed one of the candidates, Fernando Araujo 'Lasama'. This could well seal the fate of Jose Ramos Horta's campaign, as he and Lasama are basically looking towards the same group of voters for support. However this action could well rebound against

Father Gusmão himself and the Church in general, as there is a great desire among most Timorese to keep religion separate from politics. Ramos Horta in a final speech announced he 'couldn't lose': either he will win the election or 'win his freedom' and walk out of politics. Ramos Horta has also to some extent suffered from the impression that he is the candidate the Australian government would like to see as the President and this has not helped him. Hostility towards Australian troops, particularly as they refused to come under United Nations ('blue beret') command, has been an underlying theme, although in general most Timorese are happy to see peacekeepers in the country.

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Other policy forums by Helen Hill:

- Why is Australia fighting in New York to keep control of the Peacekeeping Force in Timor-Leste?: Helen Hill, Austral Policy Forum 06-29A 21 August 2006

End notes

[1] Gusmao's new party shakes East Timor's political foundations, Hamish McDonald, Sydney Morning Herald, 17 February 2007.

http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/gusmaos-new-party-shakes-east-timors-political-foundations/2007/02/16/1171405446826.html

[2] East Timor: Birth of a Nation, Episode Two: Lu Olo's Story, ABC Television

http://www.abc.net.au/etimor/epis2.htm

[3] Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation.

http://www.cavr-timorleste.org

[4] East Timor: Election campaign continues despite some violence, Connect Asia, Radio Australia, ABC, 28/03/2007

http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/connectasia/stories/s1883453.htm

[5] See James Scambary, with Hippolito Da Gama and Joao Barreta, A Survey of Gangs and Youth Groups in Dili, Timor-Leste, A report commissioned by Australia's Agency for International Development, AusAID, Dili, 15 September 2006.

http://www.timor-leste.org/justice_security.html
http://www.timor-leste.org/justice/Scambury_Report_Youth_Gangs_Dili.pdf

Nautilus invites your response

The Austral Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to the editor, Jane Mullett: austral@rmit.edu.au. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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