

# **East Timor: the crisis beyond the coup attempt**

---

## **Recommended Citation**

"East Timor: the crisis beyond the coup attempt", APSNet Policy Forum, February 11, 2008, <https://nautilus.org/apsnet/timor-crisis/>

---

# **East Timor: the crisis beyond the coup attempt**

## **Introduction**

Richard Tanter, director of the Nautilus Institute Australia, writes that "while the violence of the attempted coup in East Timor is shocking, it should not be a surprise. East Timor has been moving into multi-dimensional crisis for several years." Tanter argues that "the present crises in East Timor have at least three axes that have led to today's events: rule by the gun; increasing and apparently intractable impoverishment and corruption; and deeply eroded legitimacy of all the major political players." Tanter concludes that "Australia faces a profound dilemma of avoiding on the one hand a turn to de facto colonial take-over and the other hand either useless hand-wringing or a delusional hope that with enough troops and money East Timor will right itself. East Timor, more than any other post-Cold War UN-led peace-building operation was the model of global stewardship. Unless the triple crises of East Timor are effectively addressed in short order the effects will be felt far wider."

## **Essay: East Timor: the crisis beyond the coup attempt**

The failed military coup attempt in Dili by Alfredo Reinado led to his own death, the wounding of a number of his colleagues, and the wounding of one of the two targets of the coup, President Jose Ramos Horta. While the violence of the attempted coup is shocking, it should not be a surprise. East Timor has been moving into multi-dimensional crisis for several years. For a variety of reasons, most foreign observers have been averting their eyes from this growing crisis, leaving their audience surprised when violence finally broke out again.

For the most part, foreign media attention fell away from East Timor once the moment of drama and crisis in mid-2006 appeared to pass - with very little systematic political and economic reporting by

either journalists or the growing tribe of foreign academic researchers. Some foreign observers acted as if the three decades of independence struggle were still ongoing, with the same cast of villains and heroes centred around Indonesia and the Fretilin of 1975. Others looked only at the enclave of Dili and spoke only to the internationally-politically literate elite, and ignored the growing poverty and alienation of both the rural poor and the urban underemployed. Perhaps secret reporting inside government, especially in Australia, has been more comprehensive and responsible, but the activities of the ADF over the past year showed little sign of close supervision by a government deeply concerned to help resolve the fundamental issues and avoid turning bad blood to worse.

The attempt on Horta's life and Reinado's death will result in violent public clashes between the supporters of each. What is less likely to be correct is the prediction by some observers that once the rioting is over, Reinado's death will clear the political air, take the steam out of the problem of the petitioners and the army more generally, and allow President Horta and Prime Minister Gusmao to get on with the business of running the country more effectively than former prime minister Mari Alkatiri. In fact, Mr Gusmao will be trying to govern in a vastly more volatile and threatening environment than that faced by Mr Alkatiri, and in the recognition that violence will surround their lives for much longer.

The present crisis in East Timor has at last three axes that have led to today's events: rule by the gun; impoverishment and corruption; and deeply eroded legitimacy of all the major political players.

Post-independence East Timorese politics has been ruled by guns for at the last three years. It was the mutiny by the "petitioners" within the Timorese army (F-FDTL) that initiated the violence in mid-2006 that resulted in the government's request for international military and police assistance. The removal of the Fretilin-led government and the subsequent electoral victory of the new government led by Xanana Gusmao took place under the guardianship of a United Nations-aided Australian and New Zealand International Stabilisation Force. There are currently 780 ADF and 170 New Zealand Defence Force personnel in the ISF, and 1,473 police from some 20 countries in the United Nations police force.

Alfredo Reinado had a complex relationship to the remaining group of armed former petitioners, and the question of how to deal with both legitimate demands and violent intimidation remains, more than ever, the first task of the government. It was catastrophic to allow those plausibly legitimate demands of the ex-military to be unresolved for more than a year and for the wannabe warlord to continue swaggering around the country in a sinister media farce. Reinado was a highly unstable and somewhat charismatic thug who was able to accept the projected hopes of many of those for whom independence brought more disappointment and poverty. Reinado's violent demise will in fact provide for little comfort. In a country where guns are endemic and intimidation by machete effective enough for many political purposes, a new Reinado is likely to appear in due course.

The International Crisis Group report on [Timor-Leste: Security Sector Reform](#) systematically reviewed the now extensive and deep set of discontents and failings in the army and police that need urgent East Timorese and international political attention. Fundamental decisions taken under UN authority in the run-up to independence to bequeath the country two separate armed groups - an arguably unnecessary military and a compromised police force - need urgent review. Decisions taken by the Alkatiri administration and still unresolved by prime minister Gusmao need equally urgent review. Of these the situation of veterans and the petitioners' group, and intra-military regional issues are best known. But the desirability of an effectively unregulated intelligence body of 95 personnel trained by the Australian Secret Intelligence Service raises questions about both level and character of Australian intelligence and the motives of those Timorese political leaders who authorised the body.

Looked at one way, the Reinado 2006 rebellion and 2008 coup attempt should be seen as the first attempt by a part of the Timorese military to adopt the standard operating procedure of militaries in developing countries: simply take power directly. It failed in this case, but the possibility of a repeat performance by another disaffected segment of an over-armed, unintegrated and unnecessary military force may give Timorese political leaders occasion for further thought about security sector re-structuring.

The flourishing of guns apart, what has proved most dismaying has been the deepening of poverty, unemployment and underemployment, especially outside Dili, but also within it. The unbelievable destruction of infrastructure accompanying the Indonesian withdrawal was a heavy economic burden, but the failure of the flow of highly visible and publicised large amounts of international aid to stimulate economic recovery has added to that burden. When Dili is awash with money from foreign aid programmes and the spending of foreign personnel, it is hardly surprising that negative inferences are drawn by the unemployed living cheek by jowl. Failures of infrastructure development and distribution of allocated government budget, especially outside Dili - and in some cases, reportedly deepening decay - provide understandable grounds of discontent. A KKN culture (korupsi, kolusi dan nepotisme) originated in Indonesian times, but its survival eight years after the Indonesian departure requires new explanations beyond blaming the appalling past.

Most difficult of all for both the Alkatiri and Gusmao governments is the question of oil and gas revenues. This is not so much now the niggardly attitude of the Howard government to the split of Timor Sea revenues, important though that was and remains. Rather, there is a fundamental dilemma for any Timor Leste government about how and when to introduce the large hydrocarbon revenues now accruing in an overseas government trust fund. The trust decision was a fundamentally wise one in principle: better the money accrue and be invested to provide a future fund for all Timorese than be frittered away on current needs. Yet faced with growing and immediate needs, the calls to dip into the fund are understandable. What is not yet clear is whether the Gusmao government and its advisors can see a viable middle course that will not lead to yet new disasters. But certainly Reinado's death will not end the calls to free up at least some of that money.

At heart though, the problems of East Timor are about political legitimacy and political forms. Xanana Gusmao is no longer the untarnished symbol of national unity he was when he emerged from Cipinang Prison in 1999 and assumed the presidency subsequently. Knowing that full well, he stepped somewhat courageously into the partisan position of prime minister, but with far from overwhelming support and without a nation-wide political apparatus. The Fretilin leadership of the previous government is equally tarnished, both inside and outside the country, though foreign demonisation of the admittedly less than fully competent Mr Alkatiri was both disingenuous and somewhat unhelpful in the wider scheme of things.

Domestically what is less clear is what political forces lie beyond internationally politically-literate political class that dominates Dili politics and international media commentary. One part of this question concerns the middle and lower levels of Fretilin: is there a basis for a political revival beyond the discredited Mr Alkatiri and his colleagues that may give voice to the poor? Another part of the question derives from suggestions that continuing to view the politics of East Timor through the essentially western prism of electoral party politics - and its predecessor, the political alignments of the independence struggle - is to fundamentally misconstrue the influences of still thriving non-modern political frameworks on the modernist expectations of the state. The combination of Reinado's popularity and the material foundations of patronage politics in a thriving culture of KKN and foreign aid in themselves suggest this should be taken seriously - fantasies can be both modern and non-modern in character, and both ways can be material for political

manipulation, especially in hybrid political forms.

Either way, the weight of the past can be neither avoided nor blamed. The primary task is one for East Timorese political leaders - in the first instance Mr Horta and Mr Gusmao, but beyond them a new generation yet unseen.

However the corrosion of legitimacy and hence political challenge goes further still, since East Timor is not a fully autonomous state, and it is foolish and insulting to behave as if it is. The United Nations mission formally continues. In relative terms the foreign organisational and personnel presence is enormous. Security is essentially maintained by foreign police and military. And most important of all in the end, the government budget, absent the hydrocarbon revenues, is very largely dependent on foreign aid. A week before the coup attempt, Loro Horta's careful review of the irritations - and worse - of the Australian military presence in East Timor titled [Aussies Outstay Their East Timor Welcome](#) spelled out what many Timorese had been reporting privately for some time - that the Australians were coming to be seen as high-handed and bullying, even with senior political figures. Others have found the apparent confusions and restrictions of Australian military and policing policy difficult to understand - the farcical failure to capture Reinado in 2006 being the most commonly-cited example. In the absence of detailed reliable and regular reporting and clear knowledge of requirements imposed by the governments concerned, it is not clear how fair these comments actually are. But what is very clear is that the Australian and New Zealand intervention in 2006 has been much less successful than that of INTERFET from 1999 onward, and has been politically costly for Australia within East Timor at the same time as it has failed to deliver on its security objectives.

The Australian Prime Minister Mr Rudd has announced that another company of Australian troops will immediately be sent to East Timor, together with another 70 Australian police. However, the unparalleled peacetime deployment of substantive Australian military forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, Solomon Islands as well East Timor (and a number of minor deployments as well) means the small Australian military is over-stretched. This is particularly important in the politically sensitive areas of intelligence and command. Compared to the 1998-1999 period of lead-up to INTERFET, Australia's military intelligence organisations have vastly more on their plate - and are consequently limited in the intensity and duration of attention that can be given to the now much more politically complex East Timor environment for the ADF. This increases the burden on those charged with carrying out the East Timor mission. More troops may be temporarily needed and deployable, but that is neither politically (in either East Timor or Australia) nor militarily feasible in the long-term.

In fact Australia faces a profound dilemma of avoiding on the one hand a turn to de facto colonial take-over and the other hand either useless hand-wringing or a delusional hope that with enough troops and money East Timor will right itself. The democratically elected government must be supported, but increases in the aid and military budget will not in themselves solve the problem.

But perhaps the greatest threat arises for the United Nations. East Timor, more than any other post-Cold War UN-led peace-building operation, was the hopeful model of global stewardship. A new state form was invented for the UN-supervised transition to democratic independence. The UN has re-committed to its mission in East Timor, though with less hope than eight years ago. Yet since East Timor remains the operative model for UN-executed and UN-aided crisis interventions, much more is riding on an effective resolution of both the immediate and deeper crises than the survival of East Timor as a civil polity and the concerns of its neighbours. If the long-term UN-aided Timorese state fails, there is no alternative model for global stewardship out of genocidal conflict waiting in the wings. Unless the triple crises of East Timor are effectively addressed in short order the effects will be felt far wider.

## About the author

Richard Tanter is Senior Research Associate at Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability and Director of the Nautilus Institute at RMIT. He has written widely on Japanese security policy, including '[With Eyes Wide Shut: Japan, Heisei Militarization and the Bush Doctrine](#)' in Melvin Gurtov and Peter Van Ness (eds.), *Confronting the Bush Doctrine: Critical Views from the Asia-Pacific*, (New York: Routledge, 2005). His most recent book, co-edited with Gerry Van Klinken and Desmond Ball, is *Masters of Terror: Indonesia's Military and Violence in East Timor in 1999* [second edition].

Other policy forums by Richard Tanter:

- [Nuclear fatwa: Islamic jurisprudence and the Muria nuclear power station proposal](#), Austral Policy Forum, 13 December 2007, 07-25A
- [The Re-emergence of an Australian nuclear weapons option?](#) 29 October 2007, Austral Policy Forum 07-20A
- [The Abuses of Realism and Australian Security Interests: the 2007 Defence Update](#), Richard Tanter, Austral Policy Forum 07-14A, 12 July 2007.
- [The new security architecture: Binding Japan and Australia, containing China](#), Richard Tanter, Austral Policy Forum 07-07A, 15 March 2007
- [Ten questions about East Timor for which we need answers](#), Richard Tanter, Austral Policy Forum 06-18A 8 June 2006
- [The MSDF Indian Ocean deployment - blue water militarization in a "normal country"](#), Richard Tanter, Austral Policy Forum: 06-10A 30 March 2006

Short biography: [Richard Tanter](#)

Contact e-mail: [richard.tanter@rmit.edu.au](mailto:richard.tanter@rmit.edu.au).

## 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](mailto: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.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

Produced by the [Nautilus Institute at RMIT](#), Austral Peace and Security Network (APSN). You can review the archives - 2005-2008. You might like to [subscribe](#) to the free twice weekly newsletter.

---

View this online at: <https://nautilus.org/apsnet/timor-crisis/>

Nautilus Institute

2342 Shattuck Ave. #300, Berkeley, CA 94704 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

[nautilus@nautilus.org](mailto:nautilus@nautilus.org)