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Timor-Leste's new PM No Easy Way Out

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ON 25 June 2006, Timor-Leste's embattled prime minister Mari Alkatiri announced his resignation amid the worst crisis for the world's youngest nation since its independence in 2002 which led to the deaths of 38 people and created nearly 150,000 internal refugees.

Since then, frenetic negotiations were undertaken for the choice of a new prime minister. After two weeks, Jose Ramos Horta, the country's foreign minister and later also defence minister, took over as prime minister of the troubled nation. His nomination was widely welcomed by East Timor's most influential groups such as the Catholic Church and also, more significantly, by many members of Fretilin, the ruling party which originally supported Alkatiri.

Will Ramos Horta lead without resistance?

The international reaction to his nomination was generally positive. Alexander Downer, the foreign minister of Australia, Timor's immediate neighbour to the south, called Ramos Horta "a good choice and a personal friend". While not publicly commenting on the nomination, ASEAN's key members such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand seemed happy with the outcome, as demonstrated in the editorials of their newspapers. So it seems that Ramos Horta has all the domestic and international support that he could hope for. Or has he?

The new premier seems to be a far more consensual figure than Alkatiri. Ramos Horta has also long been a close ally of President Xanana Gusmao who is reported to have insisted on his nomination. Ramos Horta also enjoys the support of senior figures in the highly influential Catholic Church such as Bishop Belo and Bishop Don Basilio. However, Fretilin remains the largest and most-organized party in East Timor and Alkatiri remains its secretary general.

The current caretaker government will retain its functions until new elections are held in April or May next year. The elections will be dominated by Fretilin which has two of its members as vice prime ministers. One of them is Estanislao da Silva, the minister for agriculture and close ally of Alkatiri who has also been a harsh critic of Ramos Horta in the past. How effective will this caretaker government be and how well will Ramos Horta lead a government that is dominated by Fretilin members, some of whom have had very strong reservations towards him?

And when elections are finally called, what would Ramos Horta do? Will he run for PM and under what circumstances will he do so? Will he return to Fretilin as many of its members want, or will he and Gusmao form their own party? One thing is certain -- Alkatiri has recovered some of his lost popularity by resigning and preventing thousands of his supporters from continuing the unrest. In a responsible manner, he ordered them to return to their homes and promised to dedicate himself to the party and win next year's elections.

Alkatiri's continuing power

Alkatiri is a man of remarkable organizational skills while his arrogance and lack of sensitivity earned him a lot of unnecessary enemies. No one has ever questioned his nationalism and patriotism and despite some media reports to the contrary, he is a man of great integrity and honesty.

He is also still in charge of Fretilin, the party that in last year's regional elections annihilated the country's incompetent opposition by winning in every but one of the 32 regions. Unless Ramos Horta returns to Fretilin or forms an alliance with Xanana, or forms a political party with the tacit support of the Catholic Church, Alkatiri may once again be able to return to power. He will be able to get himself re-elected by using the power of Fretilin to compensate for his personal lack of support. In such an eventuality, East Timor may well face a similar crisis or perhaps a more catastrophic one.

One must keep in mind that while Alkatiri on his own cannot match the support that Ramos Horta has, let alone Xanana Gusmao, he is still in control of the nation's major political force. Its power was vividly illustrated when it was able to mobilize some 10,000 supporters to march on Dili on the day of Alkatiri's resignation. This despite strong intimidation against party members and the fact that by this time Alkatiri had become increasingly isolated within his own party. In contrast, the rebel soldiers could only gather a mere 2,000 protesters.

As long as Alkatiri remains in control of Fretilin he will remain a formidable force. So Ramos Horta will have to ponder very carefully his next move for he has a shrewd and worthy opponent to reckon with, one who despite his relative obscurity has managed to struggle on against far powerful forces both internally and externally. Alkatiri is a survivor, a descendant of the fierce nomadic tribes of Southern Yemen -- a man who should not be underestimated.

New premier's added problem

However, Alkatiri may not be Ramos Horta's only problem. Indeed, his real problem may turn out to be the dozens of groups that came together to oppose Alkatiri. They range from rebel soldiers, disgruntled police officers, former pro-Indonesian militias, opportunistic politicians and organized gangs.

Many of these groups, while claiming to be fighting for president Gusmao, have their own dubious agendas. This was clearly demonstrated when rebel Major Tilman gave Gusmao an ultimatum to dissolve parliament and call new elections or "face the fury of the Timorese people". The irresponsible way in which the rebel leaders used and abused the regional and ethnic divisions to further their cause, creating an ethnic divide that never existed before, raises serious questions about the credibility of these groups.

While Major Tilman may just be bluffing, it is highly unlikely that he has any chance to challenge the powerful coalition made up of President Gusmao, Horta and the Church which has the blessing of the international community. People like Tilman and other candidates who are petty war lords have the potential to cause further unrest if they are not properly dealt with. The same groups that helped to bring about the collapse of Alkatiri have an equal capability to severely undermine the country's stability regardless of who is the prime minister. The 57-year-old Ramos Horta, a Noble Peace Prize winner and the nation's voice abroad for three decades, will need all the help he can to steer his troubled nation in the difficult times ahead.

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