



Timor Leste's Upcoming Elections An Assessment

Loro Horta *

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After months of speculation and postponement, the Timorese government and the United Nations had finally agreed upon a date for the hosting of the country's first elections since independence 5 years ago. Many hope that the ballot may finally put an end to the ongoing political crisis that has rocked the nation to its foundations. Because the upcoming elections may prove decisive for the future stability of Timor Leste, they are therefore relevant for the overall security interests of neighbouring countries.

The contenders

The elections are likely to center on a contest between two major political forces, both in turn being supported by a vast array of small social and civic organizations. On one side of the spectrum will be the current President Xanana Gusmao making a bid for the post of Prime Minister and his ally, Ramos Horta, the current PM, aiming for the post of President. Their most serious opponent will most certainly be former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and Fretilin.

To run for PM, Gusmao has recently formed his own political party, the CNRT. His party is likely to form a coalition with various minor parties, such as the Democratic Party (PD) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD). Gusmao can also most likely count on the support of the influential Catholic Church and its powerful bishops. The power of the Church is overwhelming. Its priests and nuns are present in every aspect of native life down to the smallest social issues. Another source of immense power available to the Church are its various charities and schools, allowing it significant levers for social mobilization.

While Gusmao may face the greatest challenge to his hope of becoming PM, Horta too will have his challengers. Francisco Guterres (Loholo), Fretilin's president, will be challenging Ramos Horta for the presidency. While a relatively obscure figure, he is known for his modesty and dedication to the party. Like Alkatiri he has as his main weapon Fretilin's well disciplined machinery.

The other side

At first glance it may seem that the elections are a foregone conclusion -- that the nation's most influential leaders such as Gusmao and Horta and its most powerful social organizations like the Catholic Church have joined forces to deal with the "communist devil" Alkatiri once and for all. However, Alkatiri seems unimpressed by the powerful coalition amassed against him. In early February, in his typical confrontational style, Alkatiri announced that he was running for prime minister and was going to once and for all show who the people of Timor supported. He vowed to defeat his opponents resoundingly and to put an end to "hypocrisy".

While it seems unlikely that Alkatiri will be able to defeat the powerful coalition arrayed against him, we should expect him to do much better than from someone as isolated as him. A combination of factors, some residing in the man's personal qualities, and others the result of chance and circumstance, may just see him survive again.

As a person Alkatiri is far from being your likeable character, always with a serious expression and a rather offensive sense of humour. However, he is still in control of Fretilin, the country's only real political party. Regardless of the controversy surrounding his re-election last year with 98 percent of the vote at the party's last congress, Alkatiri still remains Fretilin's secretary general. Due to its role in the struggle for independence, the party still retains a considerable following. In 2005 the party won 31 out of the 32 areas contested in regional elections.

Owing to its 24-year struggle as a guerrilla force against Indonesian occupation, Fretilin has developed a party structure unmatched by any other force in the country. The party apparatus runs all the way to the village level with political cadres present even at the smallest villages. Only the Catholic Church comes close to such an organization. Fretilin's years of struggle and hardship have given its members a strong and tenacious sense of belonging and loyalty. Like other leftwing former guerrilla movements, Fretilin is a far more disciplined and organized force than any of the other parties. Its machinery can become a powerful asset in the hands of a skilful, albeit not very popular leader.

Alkatiri is known for his remarkable organizational qualities and discipline. Long working hours are one of his trade marks. While East Timor's incompetent opposition leaders spent their time in Dili's cafes, Alkatiri has moved on the offensive. At the end of February, well before the elections, Alkatiri has toured nearly all of the country's 13 districts galvanizing the masses and mobilizing party members.

Alkatiri has in his hands a powerful weapon forged during 24 years of war at the cost of 200,000 lives. Gusmao and Horta, on the other hand, will be supported by an array of small and incompetent parties that are likely to ride on the charisma of the two leaders. However, both men have no choice but to enlist their support and hope that the parties just stick to the formality.

A new factor that may improve Alkatiri's chances is the regional issue of the east-west divide that emerged with a vengeance after the military crisis of April 2006. Fretilin has traditionally had a strong following in the eastern side of the island where most of the fighting for independence took place. After the military crisis many in the east felt that President Gusmao was sympathetic to the mainly western rebel soldiers. This perception may have a negative effect on Gusmao's election, by leading certain sections of easterners to vote for Fretilin out of retaliation for Gusmao's perceived bias.

Alkatiri is also likely to get some support from the most radical and nationalist Timorese by portraying himself as a patriot fighting for the interests of the people against Australia and its local puppets. Indeed, in recent times Alkatiri has adopted an increasing nationalistic rhetoric, claiming that he was toppled in a conspiracy orchestrated by foreign and domestic actors. Considering the significant levels of anti Australian sentiment among many Timorese, such tactics should not be discounted.

The power and reputation of Fretilin and Alkatiri's energetic leadership are such a powerful combination that many opposition parties and pseudo political groups have been fomenting violence in an attempt to postpone the elections. Reinaldo's attacks on police stations and the

subsequent riots triggered in Dili by the Australian operation to capture him may be part of such attempts. .

Conclusion

While it's very unlikely that Alkatiri will be back as prime minister of tiny troubled Timor – Leste, it is also quite improbable that he will go out without a fuss. Many are furious at what they perceived to be his irresponsible and selfish act of contesting the election. His candidature may turn the election into chaos and violence all because of his ego, some cry. But, in the end, in a true democracy, Alkatiri has all the right to run for office. Gusmao and Horta better get ready for a fight, for they have a serious opponent to confront.

** Loro Horta is currently based in Beijing. He previously worked for Timor Leste's Defence Department. He graduated from the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, NTU, with an MSc (Strategic Studies) in 2006.*