

Unraveling the East Timor Assassination Story: Republic's rebel with friends in high places

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Introduction. All is not as it appears in Dili, that “pestilential place,” as described early last century by Joseph Conrad in his classic novel, Victory. The question posed by Bob Boughton is certainly valid, namely, how did one man – Alfredo Reinado – hold hostage the fortunes of this young nation? The answer is certainly murkier than the standard democratic elections narrative which, remarkably, saw in 2007 a constitutional crisis leading to the reversal of roles of the President and Prime Minister in East Timor. As Boughton highlights, it is important to pay attention to personalities and politics.

The real coup in Dili was undoubtedly the 2006 removal of power of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, which reversed Fretilin’s fortunes.



Mari Alkatiri at a Fretilin rally

Undoubtedly, too, the defection from Fretilin of the current Deputy Prime Minister Jose Luis Guterres sapped Fretilin support. Founder of a breakaway Mundanca or change group, Guterres actively courted a bloc of political parties, Partido Democratico (PD) included, with the stated ambition of driving Alkatiri’s “Maputo-group” from power. PD leader, Fernando “Lasama” de Araujo, a former cell mate of Xanana Gusmao in Cipinang prison in Jakarta and resistance activist, was a key ally in delivering the youth vote, especially among those educated in Indonesian language.

Once the reality set in that the Alkatiri Fretilin government was about playing hardball with the Australians on the Timor Sea Agreement on dividing up oil revenues, and declined to go down the road of

debtor state by accepting international loans, it appears that certain international actors began to actively court an acceptable counter-elite to replace both Alkatiri and Fretilin. But the conspiracy ran deeper than that in consideration of the murky role of the Australian media, the Catholic church, the actions of Dili's bad boy gangs and the malicious yet effective whisper campaigns that, incongruously, tarred Fretilin with the communist brush. To be sure, Fretilin made mistakes. Arming a militia or guard was one, and blindly following World Bank leads on agriculture was probably another. But in sacking the army rebels, the Fretilin government was also heeding United Nation's advice.

We need not ascribe such agency to Reinado, as Boughton suggests, to believe that the man possessed some dark secrets as to pacts and pardons entered into by the current President and Prime Minister, respectively, perhaps as recently as one month before the assassination and his death in the shootout that followed. But, as a rogue, he was obviously a dangerous card to play. Japan Focus commentator.

As a frequent visitor to East Timor since 2004 for periods ranging from a few weeks to three months, the more I learn about the internal politics of this fractured country, the more dismayed I become at the failure of many commentators, including UN observers and the International Crisis Group, to analyse the underlying politics behind the violence.

At the heart of the conflict is a political struggle. At stake is the kind of economy and society the country will become.

Reinado was an actor in this struggle, but he did not act alone. When he and his heavily armed group deserted from the army in May 2006, he was taking part in a co-ordinated movement whose aim was to overthrow the democratically elected Fretilin government of Mari Alkatiri, and set the country on a different development path from the one Fretilin had marked out.



Reinado at his mountain hideout, 2007

The mayhem in Dili on February 4, in which rebel soldier Alfredo Reinado was shot dead and East Timor's President Jose Ramos Horta badly injured, raises a fundamental question: How was Reinado, a minor military figure, allowed to become and remain such a dangerous force in Timorese politics?

Reinado's rebellion was supported by others who sought the same end, including the second largest political party at that time, Partido Democratico, former supporters of integration with Indonesia - some of whom had been

members of the Indonesian-backed militias in 1999 - disaffected veterans of the anti-Indonesian resistance, and elements of the Catholic Church.

Despite two attacks by Reinado's group on the loyalist army in May 2006, in which 10 people died, he retained the support of PD. Others who were convinced of Fretilin's illegitimacy lent their weight to the myth that Reinado was some kind of misunderstood folk hero, articulating the aspirations of a people downtrodden by a cruel, Marxist government. They included sections of the Australian media, the academic and international aid community, and Kirsty Sword-Gusmao, the Australian wife of then president Xanana Gusmao.

When Gusmao and Ramos Horta forced Alkatiri to resign in June 2006, Ramos Horta became prime minister and Fretilin lost control of the security and defence apparatus, though it continued to participate in government.

Despite the recommendation of UN investigators that Reinado be apprehended and charged with multiple counts of murder, Ramos Horta and Gusmao sought to block the arrest of Reinado, because they needed PD's votes in order to wrest power completely from Fretilin in the 2007 elections, and PD needed Reinado, since both drew support from the same population base west of Dili.

Reinado was not the only armed rebel who continued to enjoy impunity. Vicente Railos, whose allegations on the ABC's Four Corners helped bring down Alkatiri - allegations ultimately withdrawn by the Gusmao-appointed prosecutor for lack of evidence - had joined Reinado in attacking the army headquarters.

Railos became an organiser for CNRT, the party Gusmao formed to contest the elections. Paulo Martins, the disgraced police commander who also took part in the rebellion was given a place on the CNRT ticket.

Under the guise of engaging in "dialogue" with these dangerous anti-democratic forces, Gusmao and Ramos Horta refused to move against them, in order to cement the votes they needed - first for Horta to win the presidency, and then for Gusmao's party to form an alliance including PD to take government.



Reinado with rebel soldiers

When Alkatiri's government was overthrown by an armed rebellion, much of the international community portrayed this as a successful

people's power revolution. When the votes of PD, Reinado's closest political ally, helped secure Ramos Horta and Gusmao an electoral victory over Fretilin, many foreign commentators celebrated this as a victory for multi-party democracy.

The hollowness of that democracy was exposed for all to see last Monday, in a classic case of blowback.

In the days leading up to Reinado's final move, his old supporters and defenders, including PD's leader Fernando Lasama - now acting President in Ramos Horta's stead - Prime Minister Gusmao and President Horta were considering a proposal which Fretilin had helped draft to solve the army "petitioners" problem, the initial pretext for the 2006 rebellion.



Ramos Horta and Reinado meet one month before the attack

This may well have brought an end to the insecurity that forces thousands to struggle to exist in refugee camps. But the deal required that Reinado would be brought to justice and early parliamentary elections held.

For almost two years, the Australian public has been told that Fretilin's removal was a victory for democracy, when really it was achieved through violence and a corrupt, unconstitutional and anti-democratic political movement. Reinado became a central player in that movement, but he only survived because of his powerful political

backers.

Arrest warrants have been issued for those believed to have taken part in Monday's attacks. In fact, the net should be cast much wider. All who supported Reinado now have a case to answer.

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