



Timor-Leste and Indonesia. Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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This article provides an overview of the difficulties confronting East Timor, the Asia Pacific's newest and poorest nation, and an interview with Mari Alkatiri.

It may on the surface appear odd that, recently out of office, the former Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (DRTL) and Secretary-General of FRETILIN, Mari Bim Amude Alkatiri, would choose in September 2007 to visit Jakarta, the capital of the country that brutally invaded and occupied the half-island country in 1975-76, targeting especially FRETILIN (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) and its supporters in the name of anti-communism. But Indonesia has changed, or has it? And FRETILIN, now in the opposition has changed, or has it? Or, is FRETILIN hedging its bets vis-a-vis Australia, the country whom many - FRETILIN included - believe has overstayed its visit, a reference to the re-insertion of Australian military forces in East Timor in mid- 2006 outside of United Nations control.



Mari Alkatiri

To be sure, the Republic of Indonesia now has an elected president in the wake of the fall of the dictatorial New Order regime of General Suharto in the throes of the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997-98, in large part owing to the efforts of Indonesia's home-grown reformasi or pro-democracy movement. Beginning with Suharto's anointed successor, B.J. Habibie, the President who authorized a UN poll that led to independence in East Timor/Timor-Leste in August 1999, Indonesia has witnessed a sea-change in its political and social landscape, sufficient to merit in the view of some the status of a new democracy. Though Indonesia has been the site of numerous terrorist attacks, Jakarta has also won Washington's praise as a responsible ally in the "war on terror." Having replaced Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004), known for her hard-line stance on securing Indonesia's territorial integrity, in turn replacing Abdulrahman Wahid (1999-2001), known for actually succoring Aceh and Papuan rights against military hardliners, former U.S-trained General President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-), and veteran of Indonesia's war of occupation in East Timor, has hit the right chord in the West. Yet the transition of Indonesia from a military-dominated to civilian-dominated government is hardly a straight line, just as the fruits of the victory of the reformasi movement appear to have fallen to the old elite minus Suharto and family, just as the kleptokrat himself enjoys impunity protected by the military.

It is at this juncture that Mari Alkatiri traveled to Jakarta. Of course, in even more trying times, as Prime Minister of Timor-Leste Alkatiri dealt with all three Indonesian Presidents who succeeded Habibie, but undoubtedly he had the best rapport with Wahid. The Indonesia media tells us that he traveled to Indonesia at the invitation of Muhammadiyah organization, itself a supporter of the moderate National Mandate Party (PAN), to present a lecture at the Center for Dialogue and Civilizations on 11 September 2007. As a Muslim, and as a former Prime Minister, he was an obvious candidate. Muhammadiyah is the second largest Muslim organization in Indonesia with roots back to 1912. PAN was founded by Muslim intellectual

Amien Rais in 1998 in a bid to become president. Even so, and for reasons better known to himself, Alkatiri sought to cement FRETILIN links with the minority upstart Muslim party, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (Prosperous Justice Party), better known for support of traditional Islamic even Islamicist causes. Although winning only 7 percent of votes in the national elections of 2004, it is also making significant gains in elections for regional heads of government. Party President Tifatul Sembiring reportedly responded positively to a FRETILIN pitch to establish friendly relations. [1]

Alkatiri has sought to position FRETILIN as a socialist as opposed to Marxist or communist party. As he explained to interlocutors in Jakarta, he was the Muslim Prime Minister of a Catholic majority country and, that FRETILIN remains committed to socialism. Such a perspective puts a brave face upon an orientation little understood inside communist-phobic Indonesia, much less Timor-Leste where print literacy runs extremely low, and where rabble-rousers have painted FRETILIN as a godless party. But outside of elite circles and for true believers in East Timor – and there are many - FRETILIN remains simply the party which delivered (actually recovered) independence. Although rare in post-colonial Southeast Asia, where parties leading the independence struggle often remain hegemonic across decades or even generations, FRETILIN, which won two successive elections, now finds itself in the opposition.

Born out of a 24-year guerrilla struggle and a Western-backed humanitarian intervention, and surviving on a lifeline of international goodwill following the Indonesian devastation of East Timor in the wake of the ballot of 1999 and again following wrenching internal violence commencing in mid-2006, East Timor has faced hard choices in meeting regional challenges. In part, this is a reference to relations with Muslim-majority Indonesia and, in part reference to Australia, a major aid donor in East Timor but a country that has played hardball in the negotiation of contested maritime boundaries and in the sharing of oil and gas revenues, crucial for East Timor's survival. As Chief Minister under UN administration and as Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri led negotiations over the Timor Sea Agreement, winning substantial concessions from a grudging Australia, although obliged to postpone legitimate international claims on maritime boundaries as Australia withdrew its accession to UN protocols on boundaries. As Prime Minister, Alkatiri also became the target of a concerted negative Australian media campaign in the wake of leadership clashes in East Timor in 2006, leading to his resignation on 26 June.

Ironies of the situation abound. Days before the devastating violence, Alkatiri had been congratulated by the World Bank President basically for adhering to Bank policies on lean government, fiscal frugality and pro-market policies. Timor-Leste under Alkatiri was no experiment in socialism. To be sure, as Alkatiri asserts, his administration was literally reborn out of the ashes, and much was achieved in five short years. Yet, for want of capacity, the nascent administration proved incapable at project management, procurement and implementation, leaving spending gaps across the macro-economy despite the government's budget surplus. If timely government spending and foreign investment could have helped to kick start the rural and urban economy, rising urban youth unemployment and frustration at the lack of development fueled popular anger. While such ineptness could be attributed to lack of experience and managerial capability on the part of the Alkatiri cabinet, the premature withdrawal on the part of the UN successor mission was also damaging.

Alkatiri erred, however, in his cabinet appointments. The choice of Rogerio Lobato (Minister of Interior), sentenced to seven and a half years imprisonment for distributing weapons to civilians, may have been fatal for Timor-Leste. Even so, one wonders as to the efficacy of international advice and support which saw favoritism in both police and military recruitment among other anomalies. Such a bias in initial defense force recruitment favoring eastern recruits over westerners was the pretext used by a group of 600 defecting from the new nation's defense forces in February 2006. They were joined in May by Australia-trained Major Alfredo Reinado charging certain eastern officers with "incompetence" and, following a firefight near Dili later in the month against army loyalists, claiming "inappropriate actions" against western petitioners. Taking advice from the UN, Alkatiri was correct in cashiering the mutineers. Still on the lam after an August 2006 prison breakout, Reinado, who has won a large popular following in the center-west of the country, has been succeeded by both former President Jose Xanana Gusmao and former Foreign Minister/Prime Minister Jose Ramos-Horta.

Although Alkatiri was personally cleared by a UN Commission of complicity in acts of illicit arms distribution, his opponents, both internal and external – and there were many – seized upon this innuendo to bring down the government. Alkatiri complained of an orchestrated coup attempt by unnamed actors, widely believed to be the Catholic Church and Australia, if not the government then the media. Both the then President Gusmao and the then foreign minister Ramos-Horta also hardened elite divisions fueling what some observers incorrectly labeled as ethnic divisions. Gusmao was censured by the UN Commission for inflaming community divisions at the height of the crisis. Certainly Australia's Howard government was not displeased by regime change in Timor-Leste. The individual at the center of allegations that forced Alkatiri to resign was only arrested in Dili in early October 2007, a year after the evidence came to light. This was Vincente de Conceicao, alias Commander Railos, who the UN Commission determined had led 32 fighters in ambushes against Timorese soldiers killing one. The Commission determined that he was supplied with weapons by Lobato. As echoed in a high profile Australian television documentary, Railos alleged that Alkatiri was personally involved in setting up a hit squad to eliminate political rivals. For its part, FRETILIN counter-claimed that Railos carried a travel authorization letter provided by Gusmao. [2]



Jose Ramos-Horta and Jose Xanana Gusmao

(right)

Notwithstanding the human costs of the tragedy of 2006, which left some 150,000 people as internally displaced persons and earned the nation the sobriquet of "broken state," legitimacy had to flow from the ballot box. In UN-monitored elections held in June 2007, FRETILIN emerged as the single largest vote winner (29 percent) albeit short of a majority. Having been elected to the Presidency, narrowly eclipsing a rival from the Democrat Party (PD) in a first round of voting, Ramos-Horta invited the former President turned Prime Minister Gusmao to form the government at the head of his Parliamentary Majority Alliance. (In other words President and Prime Minister swapped jobs). The strongest party in this Alliance is the Social Democratic Party with links with UDT, FRETILIN's historic rival. The defection from FRETILIN of the current Deputy Prime Minister Jose Guterres and supporters worked in favor of Gusmao. Gusmao's hastily formed umbrella party has little coherence and is short on policies. PD, which comprised the de facto opposition under the FRETILIN government, remains sidelined. With good reason, FRETILIN, the majority party, regards the process whereby the government was installed as unconstitutional, but it has abandoned the idea of a legal challenge to the virtual constitutional coup carried out by Ramos-Horta while continuing to boycott the parliament. The World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the major donors are now moving to influence the new administration. Land commodification is one outcome favored by the international institutions, and the FRETILIN preference for onshore LNG processing will undoubtedly be overridden at Australian bidding. Gusmao has made known his preference to dip into the Petroleum Fund to fund government programs. The funds are not wanting as the Petroleum Fund is accruing several million dollars a month (far more than previously projected), but deliverance is hardly guaranteed under the Gusmao administration even if, as Alkatiri suggests, the new administration will basically follow the FRETILIN administration's leads. [3]



Foreign Ministers Jose Ramos-Horta and Australia's

Alexander Downer sign oil agreement on January 12, 2006

Trading Truth for Friendship

As victims of crimes against humanity, bordering upon genocide in the views of some, East Timor rode a wave of international sympathy as international norms shifted towards humanitarian intervention and the need for justice to be seen to be done. But, alongside Rwanda and the

former Yugoslavia, Indonesia was granted time to build its own prosecutorial case against those accused of crimes in East Timor during the narrow period of the election and independence in 1999. Even when the UN-backed Special Court in Dili indicted a sheet of Indonesian military figures, including General Wiranto for “crimes against humanity,” (the so-called “Masters of Terror”), [4] Indonesia did not honor the extradition warrants. Gusmao went as far as visiting Wiranto in Indonesia in a bid to ease tensions with the new nation’s powerful neighbor. In 2003, then DRTL Foreign Minister Ramos-Horta even asserted that there was no need for an international tribunal because “Indonesia had changed.”

Initially, FRETILIN and Alkatiri distanced themselves from this position, which let Indonesia off the hook in the interests of international reconciliation. Alkatiri had been strident in calling for justice at a time when Indonesian President Megawati was deflecting the judicial process in Jakarta. While Alkatiri is not explicit, the temptations to gain membership in ASEAN undoubtedly outweighed his earlier insistence on prosecuting perpetrators of atrocities. ASEAN’s trademark contribution to regionalism remains its principle of “non-interference” in the internal affairs of member countries. One can only assume that the troika of DRTL President, Foreign Minister, and belatedly former Prime Minister were read the riot act on this tacit understanding.

The so-called Commission of Truth and Friendship (CTF) founded by Indonesia and East Timor in 2005 thus emerged as the key institutional mechanism whereby the two countries would seek to bury the past. Such a formula is all the more surprising as the international community had already invested millions of dollars and years of work in sponsoring the [Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in East Timor](#) (CAVR) which handed down specific recommendations on justice for the victims of crimes against humanity. [5] The UN has consistently called for an International Tribunal to try the perpetrators of the crimes committed in East Timor. As recently as July 2007 it announced that it would not dignify the CTF owing to its amnesty provisions. As the UN spokesperson asserted on this occasion, “the Organization cannot endorse or condone amnesties for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes or gross violations of human rights, nor should it do anything that might foster them.” [6]



The Commission for Reception, Truth, and

Reconciliation in East Timor

By joining elite consensus on reconciliation, even FRETILIN is seen by many in Timor, from victims to activist NGOs, as out of touch with popular sentiment. In light of his earlier position, it is indeed surprising to many that Alkatiri would now defend the work of the CTF in Jakarta. The Indonesian people as much their leadership need to know the truth of events in East Timor. They could do worse than read the Bahasa Indonesia version of the CAVR report and act upon its recommendations.

[1] [“Alkatiri bertemu ifatel,”](#) September 11, 2007,

[2] Lindsay Murdoch, [“Timor guerilla held for assembling “death squad”](#), The Age,

[3] “Fretilin calls on Ramos-Horta to sack prosecutor general,” Fretilin Media Release, 16 October 2007.

[4] Richard Tanter, Desmond Ball and Gerry van Klinken (eds.), *Masters of Terror: Indonesia’s Military and Violence in East Timor*, Latham: MD., Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.

[5] Text [here](#).

[6] [“Timor-Leste: UN to boycott truth panel unless it bars amnesty for gross abuses,”](#) UN News Centre, July 26, 2007

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The Future of Timor Leste: an Interview With Mari Alkatiri

Andre Vltchek (Asiana Press Agency)

Q: What is the relationship between Indonesia and East Timor right now?

A: Relations are very good, although we still have some pending, minor issues that have to be resolved, such as assets and the land border. We hope that these issues can be resolved by the end of this year. And of course we have the Commission of Truth and Friendship working and we

are waiting for the report on its findings.

Q: How much do you really expect from the Commission of Truth and Friendship?

A: I am already out of power and out of the government, so I can't really tell too much. But I think that if some truth comes from their work, it will be very important. Both nations need to know the truth. I also believe that the process of democratization in both countries will eventually bring solutions to the existent problems.

Q: But can a conclusion be reached given the fact that the people of Indonesia do not know what their own government and military did during the occupation of East Timor?

A: That's exactly the point. Solutions will be possible only if both sides are informed about what really occurred. The path to the solution is the truth. People have to socialize; they have to understand. I think this is the main target. If achieved, then our two countries could start afresh. Whether to seek justice or to offer amnesty, that's up to the Commission to decide. In the meantime, both governments have to deal with this issue very carefully, in order to strengthen their friendship and not jeopardize everything.

Q: But we are not talking simply about human rights violations; we are talking about genocide. One third of the population of a small nation either disappeared or died as a consequence of the occupation...

A: We still have the Commission working on the issue of the disappearances. As recently as last week I had a meeting with the Red Cross, and of course they are also working on this matter of the disappeared... This issue has to be cleared; there are still families whose members are missing. Their beloved fathers and mothers and other family members... But these things take time.

Q: How receptive is the Indonesian military and government, and even the public? How receptive are they to taking responsibility for the decades of occupation and its consequences?

A: I think this question has to be addressed to them. But I feel that they are moving in the right direction.

Q: When you meet members of the Indonesian public do they know what happened in your country? Do they realize the scale of what occurred?

A: I don't think so... I don't think so. The general public does not realize the scale. And they definitely need to know.

Q: When you meet government officials here, and the next morning you read the local newspapers, do you feel that the issue is receiving objective and detailed coverage?

A: It is not easy for officials here to deal with this issue, because Indonesia is still in a short transition from one regime to another... and they need to deal with these kinds of issues very carefully. We have to understand this.

Q: Do you see some similarities between what happened in your country and what is happening now in Papua?

A: Yes, there is some resistance now in Papua. All of us know it very well. Aceh is over, but Papua is still facing problems.

Q: Coming back to Timor Leste, what is your country's position right now? You are negotiating with the Pacific Islands Forum, you are improving ties with Indonesia, and relations with Australia are strained ...

A: This is the dilemma of a small country. We are in between two regional blocks and we really have to weigh our options. We applied to be a member of ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations], we are already members of ARF [ASEAN Regional Forum], but we are also benefiting from the status of observer at the Pacific Islands Forum. Unfortunately we can't be members of both. Yes, unfortunately; otherwise it would be easier for us. We feel divided. We would still like to cooperate with the Pacific Forum while being members of ASEAN. Maybe, one day, things will change and we will be allowed to be members of both.

Q: What is your relationship with Australia right now?

A: As prime minister I defended the interests of my people. I did nothing against Australia. But some people interpreted defending the interests of my people as going against Australia. I was never against Australia, but I was elected prime minister of Timor Leste and I had to deal with extremely complicated issues related to the resources vital to my country -- resources under the Timor Sea. I did my best to get as much as possible for my people. It's not a crime.

Q: There was a lot of arm-twisting on the part of Australia. In the end, a compromise was reached between the two countries. Are you satisfied with the conclusion?

A: Australia made a big effort to come to agreement with us. We are still not satisfied, because we think that 100% of the wealth should belong to us. But it's better to have 50% than nothing. This is the point.

Q: Did you ever feel that your country had almost no chance against such a mighty nation as Australia? Your country went to several international courts and bodies, seeking arbitration. Australia simply withdrew from the International Court of Justice's jurisdiction on the maritime boundary with East Timor.

A: Let's be realistic. This is how the world functions. But you have to struggle, and attempt to do the best for your people. Sometimes when you do it, you create enemies. But you have to be courageous. I believe that if we had gotten into the court, we would definitely have won. I am a lawyer myself and had been consulting people from many countries. I was confident. But since Australia decided to withdraw from the court -- the international court is not like some domestic court -- you can't really appeal to the court if the other country doesn't accept its jurisdiction. Such situations always favor the big powers, never the small countries. They can only struggle, until the point when they realize that they are getting as much as it is possible to get under the present rules... and then they have to accept it.

Q: There is still great disappointment and bitterness regarding developments in the country among many FRETILIN members [Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor]. But where does FRETILIN stand now, what is its position in Timor Leste?

A: We won the recent elections. We had five years of very difficult governance from war and independence, because the situation we inherited was very complex. We had to start from zero, but some people didn't understand that we had no state, no institutions. Of course we had the Constitution and government -- an elected President and Parliament -- but the state as an institution -- no. We had to build everything from nothing, including the legal framework. Without having a real state, you cannot develop coherent socio-economic policies. This is the point. But it is very difficult to explain it to the people who have very high expectations from the moment of independence. To summarize, FRETILIN provided the country with extremely high expectations but we could not satisfy those expectations in a very short time. People fought for 24 years to get their independence. After they won it, it was impossible to achieve everything overnight. We had to build the nation and the state simultaneously.

Q: In your opinion, how successful was the process of building the nation and the state? Was it, after all, a success, given that it took place in such a short time?

A: Even with the crises of 2006, it was a success. Many things were done. We achieved very solid macro-economic and fiscal management. We created a legal framework and we gave the country functioning institutions. Everything was done based on the rule of law. And you cannot do this overnight. I still believe that in four years we achieved more than many other countries did in 10 to 20 years, especially when it comes to the efforts of state building. We inherited the country with absolutely no money. No single penny belonged to us and at the beginning we had to work only with donor money. Thanks to successful negotiations with Australia we now have our own budget. And suddenly it is easy to promise things to the people. But from 2002 until 2005 it was still impossible to make any realistic promise.

Q: With the revenues from oil and gas, how dramatic will the changes be in Timor Leste?

A: If the revenues are well managed, the entire social and economic situation will change dramatically. Now we are really able to respond to the needs of ex-combatants. They can receive a house and some pension. We are in a position to deliver.

Q: FRETILIN is historically a left-wing movement. When I discussed this issue with President Xanana Gusmao a few years ago, he was already moving away from Marxism. But to what extent is FRETILIN still a left-wing, socialist force?

A: FRETILIN has never been a Marxist movement. As a movement and as a front, it tried to include everybody. And if you include everybody, you cannot be ideological. Secondly, who in 1981 declared FRETILIN to be a Marxist-Leninist party? It was Xanana himself.

Q: But then he denied it...

A: Exactly. Soon he realized that he had made a mistake. Then he tried to change everything, just to show to the people that he was no longer a Marxist. Despite everything, the present-day FRETILIN is a full member of the Socialist International.

Q: What does it mean practically, in Timor Leste?

A: Practically FRETILIN, as any other party that wins elections, has to tackle real problems -- poverty, and the need for better education and healthcare. Our Constitution promises free education and free healthcare. But the main issue is to eradicate poverty in the country. You cannot survive as a government if you cannot progress on these issues. Today, in Dili, they are discussing plans for the new government and it is already obvious that it will be nothing else than a clear copy of the plans implemented by my government earlier. They keep saying that they will change this and that, but in reality there will be no major changes, just continuity. The only difference is that they can now promise more than us, because they have funds.

Q: Where is it all going to lead?

A: We had already started to implement new policies in 2005 and 2006. We paid more attention to community development, ex-combatants, veterans, widows and orphans. As soon as oil revenues began to arrive, we increased the budget twice and now three times. And we started with the programs dealing with rural development. We also began the process of decentralization, with pilot projects in four districts.

Q: Education remains the main challenge. Timor Leste's two official languages are Portuguese and Tetum How is this and other problems worked out in the schools?

A: From our population of about 1 million, at least 300,000 children and adults have to go to school, every day. It means that we need at least 6,000 to 7,000 qualified teachers. We got 300 teachers from Portugal and we are trying to get many from Indonesia. One problem we have is the language. Many people still don't speak Portuguese well, while their Bahasa Indonesian is degenerating.

Q: Despite all the problems your country is facing, do you remain optimistic?

A: Yes, definitely. Our entire country passed through very difficult period. All of us should learn lessons from the crises and try to resolve them politically. On the international level, we are squeezed between two giants -- Indonesia and Australia. We need to have good relationships with both. But with Indonesia it is not an option -- it is a must.

MARI ALKATIRI (born 26 November 1949) was the first prime minister of an internationally-recognized East Timor. He served from May 2002 until he resigned on 26 June 2006 following weeks of political unrest in the country. He is the secretary-general of FRETILIN. backing but is opposed by Australia's Howard Government.

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