

# Timorese activist: Xanana doesn't offer a progressive alternative

Monday 2 July 2007, by [BOYLE Peter](#), [FREITAS Tomas](#) (Date first published: 29 June 2007).

**East Timor is holding parliamentary elections on June 30. Many commentators predict former president Xanana Gusmao's new party, the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT), will form government, ousting the current ruling Fretilin party. However, a new government is unlikely to bring an end to the severe social and economic crisis besetting the country, Tomas Freitas from Luta Hamutuk ("Struggle Together"), a Timorese activist group that monitors the state budget and the petroleum fund (now worth US\$1.4 billion), told *Green Left Weekly's* Peter Boyle. Freitas is also a member of the Consultative Council on the Petroleum Fund, which is comprised of government and civil society representatives.**

The corporate media in Australia says that Fretilin was becoming a violent dictatorship and has lost the confidence of the Timorese people. Is this true?

The campaign of the opposition parties is about all the unresolved conflicts from the crisis last year. For instance, the unresolved problem of the 600 soldiers who left the army — the Petitioners' Group — the unresolved conflict with [former East Timorese army major] Alfredo Reinado, the internally displaced people camps, etc. The opposition parties blame Fretilin for all these conflicts, but it is not the only party responsible for the clashes last year.

In some areas Fretilin members have been intimidating people, but the opposition parties also do this. Recently 13 houses of Fretilin members were burned by opposition supporters.

Some individuals in some parties — Fretilin and opposition — give money to martial arts youth gangs to intimidate other parties. Both sides play this game.

Meanwhile, Reinado is distributing a CD that condemns [former prime minister Mari] Alkatiri, [President Jose Ramos] Horta and Xanana [as "communists"] and there are rumours that he is trying to get support from the US. He is quite popular in the west and he is dangerous. Some soldiers from the Petitioners' Group have joined him. He will be a problem for the next government.

## **How corrupt is the Fretilin government?**

We cannot really see corruption at the ministerial level, but in the civil service there is corruption, especially in the customs, immigration, public works, transport and procurement departments.

But if the opposition forms a new government this is still going to carry on. It is hard to control because the problem is the low salaries of civil servants and other Timorese workers. Who can survive on \$80 a month?

The UN and World Bank say they want to fight corruption but they insist that the Timorese wages remain low while their advisers get paid very high salaries.

Some of the opposition parties, including the Socialist Party of Timor (PST), want to use more of the money going into the petroleum fund to address the economic crisis, especially in agriculture. They say that the money should be spent now because people are starving and East Timor cannot afford to put it into the petroleum fund.

The government has a contract with the major donor countries (who provided \$15 million for last year's budget) that requires the money to be spent on their terms, including paying for specialists and advisers that they send. Since 1999, the agriculture office has been run by these overseas "advisers" from the World Bank and foreign donor countries.

There are only three or four Timorese with any senior role. The agriculture minister says that it would be possible to go and spend more of the petroleum fund directly on agriculture only if we were willing to give up the foreign donors' budget support by breaking our agreement with them.

Only 80% of the money for agriculture in the budget is spent. So even spending the funds for agriculture already provided in the budget is being blocked by this bureaucratic agreement with the donor countries. As well, the government doesn't even know how to spend the money for agriculture.

Xanana blames the Fretilin government for the crisis but it is his fault as well. He was the one who agreed to have a donors' meeting with so much power. He supported the national development plan. Fretilin has only implemented his policy!

The plan failed because of the question of human resources. It totally depends on advisers from outside and it keeps Timor dependent.

The UN, UN Development Program and World Bank are still there running things and the crisis is their fault too. They say the Timorese police and the troops are "not professional" but they gave training to these police and troops.

### **Who do you think will win the parliamentary elections?**

Fretilin will win the biggest vote, based on the results of the presidential elections, but it won't have a majority and it is hard for them to form a coalition government. So an opposition coalition will probably form a new government and Xanana hopes to be prime minister.

The real power in this coalition will be the Timorese Social Democratic Party-Social Democratic Association [PSD-ASDT], led by Mario Carrascalao [governor during Indonesian occupation] who is pro-foreign investor.

### **If Xanana wins do you think there will be any big change in policies?**

I think there will be a change. Horta has said we want to cooperate with World Bank, we want to cooperate with the UN even on the question of an oil pipeline coming to Timor or not [Australia has pushed for a pipeline to go to Darwin, which would rob East Timor of the income associated with processing the oil]. All these problems will come out.

It may not be more pro-Australian, but it will be more conservative and more pro-business. When Horta was elected president he was upset that the Australian government did not send a special delegation to the ceremony and in his speech he talked about better links with Indonesia, Portugal and other countries but not Australia.

Also Xanana has some advisers who very strongly want to have the oil pipeline come to Timor. He

doesn't attack Fretilin on the petroleum fund because he agrees with it. He is better than Horta on this issue.

**What do you think of the role of Australia in East Timor today? Should the troops stay or leave?**

They should leave. Both sides of the conflict in Timor don't like Australia anymore. Reinado supporters in the western side are angry with Australian troops and in the eastern side they are angry after Australian troops killed two young men. Just Horta wants to keep the Australian troops!

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**P.S.**

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