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2006

Horta, L. (2006). Timor in crisis: Why did the violence blow up suddenly?. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 042). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/82217>

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IDSS COMMENTARIES (42/2006)

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Timor in Crisis Why did the violence blow up suddenly?

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29 May 2006

SINCE 24th May, rebel soldiers under the command of military police major Alfredo Reinaldo have been mounting attacks on East Timor's capital Dili. Various government strategic installations were targeted including the house of the Timorese defence force commander Brigadier-General Tuar Matan Ruak as well as the ministry of defence. Over 70 percent of the capital's police force deserted their posts with many joining the rebel soldiers. Of East Timor's 1500-strong defence force, only 400 men remain loyal to the government. Even the most trusted elite units such as the UIR rapid reaction force and the jungle police have abandoned the chain of command.

Yet, just a few days before these escalations, the rebel leaders and various Timorese government officials had expressed confidence that the crisis was coming to an end and that the worst was over. Even Australian Foreign minister Alexander Downer said that he thought there would not be any need for foreign intervention to stabilize the situation. But by 25th May, the first elements of Australia's projected force of 1300 men began landing in Dili, bringing with them armoured personnel carriers, tanks and Blackhawk helicopters. Malaysia also deployed a battalion of personnel while Portugal, the former colonial power, deployed a company of its elite GNR special police unit.

How did it all start?

How could a crisis that seems to be nearing its end degenerate into a situation of state collapse? How could so many soldiers and police officers abandon their posts and turn on their commanders?

There have been many reasons offered to explain the complex turmoil that has emerged -- from regionalism and political factionalism to unemployment and a culture of violence as a result of 24 years of brutal occupation. But statements by Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri that the violence had links with an attempted coup against the government have raised questions about what is actually going on in the newly-independent country.

Rebel soldiers first went on strike in March to protest against alleged discrimination in promotions. But in early May, Alkatiri said the strikes were aimed at triggering a fall of his government. On 24th May, Alkatiri reiterated that the worsening violence was linked to the failed coup attempt.

Another view has it that the trigger for the violence was the re-election of Alkatiri as

secretary-general of the ruling Fretilin party. In a breach of Fretilin's own internal rules, voting by secret ballot was replaced by open vote through a show of hands. In this manner Alkatiri was re-elected the party's leader with 97 percent of the votes.

Until Alkatiri's controversial re-election, the rebels had abstained themselves from launching attacks in the hope that Alkatiri might be defeated at the party's congress by Joze Luis Guterres, the country's ambassador to Washington and the United Nations, who is allied to President Xanana Gusmao. The rebels had stated on various occasions that they did not intend to topple the government but only wanted Alkatiri out. But the challenge from Guterres got no where. At the same time, there have also been reports of tensions between President Gusmao and Prime Minister Alkatiri, both of whom have no liking for each other. At another level, there was a reported falling out between the military chief, Brig-Gen Ruak, and President Gusmao over the president's reluctance to pursue allegations of human rights abuses by the Indonesian military before East Timor's separation from Indonesia in 1999.

What is clear is that Prime Minister Alkatiri has grown increasingly unpopular in the four years he has been in office. An unknown figure, he became the head of Fretilin by default. Most of the party's leadership were killed during the war for independence. The few surviving founding figures, such as Ramos-Horta, or longtime members such as President Gusmao, left the party in the late 1980s to become independent figures for the sake of national unity. With most of Fretilin's leaders dead or outside of the party, the relatively unknown Alkatiri, who was one of party's very few surviving founders, assumed the leadership.

Fretilin occupies an almost mythical place for most Timorese who fought for independence. Therefore, even a relatively unknown individual like Alkatiri could become PM as long as he runs on a Fretilin ticket. In other words without Fretilin, Alkatiri has no power or support of his own; the people had voted for Fretilin, not Alkatiri.

Alkatiri spent the 24 years of the independence struggle in exile in Mozambique. His style of leadership has been characterized by arrogance and confrontation which has offended many powerful groups and figures within Timorese society, such as the influential Catholic Church and the widely respected President Gusmao. In one of his mocking commentaries towards the Catholic Church in May 2005, he said he was not worried about the church's protests "since I know I'm going to hell". Such barbs have only won him more enemies, to the point that Timor's influential bishops even called him a "prostitute". Alkatiri's style of leadership has made him increasingly isolated and widely disliked by the people.

After having to intervene on various occasions to defend the Prime Minister's position -- the first in 2002 at the cost of four civilian lives -- the police and the military became increasingly uneasy at using force to protect a widely unpopular leader. The last straw came when the military was ordered to replace the police to contain the riots, leading to the death of five civilians. A growing feeling of defending a widely unpopular leader grew among the security forces, leading to the massive desertions during the crisis.

The final ingredient in the crisis was the intervention of foreign actors. Alkatiri had also taken a number of decisions that did not endear him to many Western governments, such as the hiring of nearly 500 Cuban doctors despite strong objections from the US ambassador; his visit to Cuba; his refusal to take loans from the World Bank; speculation that he was going to award the multi-billion dollar gas pipeline to Petrochina and his attempt at declaring a

national day of mourning on the day of Yasser Arafat's death. That the US was not happy was clearly demonstrated when the US ambassador openly supported the Catholic Church against Alkatiri during the 2005 street protests, even to the point of briefly attending the protest himself.

Alkatiri seems also not to be favoured by Australia, apparently because he has been trying to lessen Timor's dependence on Canberra. Prime Minister John Howard's call for better governance in Timor was but a criticism of the way the Dili government is being handled.

One thing seems to be certain, though: Alkatiri has been losing the support of the people, the military, the police, the church and the country's most influential leader. This was clearly demonstrated when President Gusmao, who has ceremonial powers, relieved Alkatiri of his security responsibilities and assumed command himself -- a decision which was resisted by Alkatiri on constitutional grounds.

The problem has reached a point where it is extremely unlikely that the crisis could be ended by the Prime Minister dramatically changing his style of leadership or resigning -- foreign troops or no foreign troops. Timor's problems are however primarily internal and will require an internal solution. No doubt foreign assistance will be required, but in the end only the Timorese can solve the problems of Timor.

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