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Fabricated charges dropped against East Timor's former prime minister

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26 February 2007

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The decision earlier this month by East Timor's prosecutors to drop all charges against former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri barely rated a mention in the Australian, let alone international, media. This was in sharp contrast to the extraordinary campaign of vilification conducted last May and June to justify Australia's military intervention in East Timor and to force Alkatiri's resignation.

The accusation that Alkatiri and his interior minister Rogerio Lobato had armed a "hit squad" to assassinate political opponents was the main charge used to oust the prime minister. While Lobato faces trial over the alleged offence, the case against Alkatiri has been dropped for lack of evidence.

Alkatiri told the media in Dili: "The false allegations, aired with extreme political bias and utmost ill-will, have been found to be baseless when subjected to judicial scrutiny." He described the accusations as "a politically motivated smear campaign instigated against my good name and character in East Timor, Australia, and elsewhere."

The former prime minister has threatened to sue the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), which first televised the allegation in a "Four Corners" program "Stoking the Fires" on June 19. The program dredged up a series of unsubstantiated claims right at the point when the Australian government and its allies in East Timor were desperate for a means to lever the prime minister from office. Alkatiri told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "The ABC damaged my image, my family and my party."

The vilification of Alkatiri began before the dispatch of Australian troops to East Timor in late May. The Australian media published story after story denouncing Alkatiri as an aloof autocrat, blaming his Fretilin government for the political unrest wracking the small nation, and openly urging his removal. Amid a series of violent provocations by rebel soldiers, the Howard government, with the support of President Xanana Gusmao, pressured Alkatiri into agreeing to the entry of Australian troops.

Canberra's barely disguised hostility to the Fretilin government reflected intensifying rivalry between Australia, Portugal and other powers for influence in Dili. In 1999, the Howard government dispatched troops to East Timor to ensure Australia would play the dominant role as the half island moved towards independence, and secure control over the substantial oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. After formal independence in 2002, however, the Fretilin government turned to other countries for assistance—including Portugal, China and Cuba—and came into conflict with Australia over the division of the Timor Sea resources.

As in 1999, Howard's decision to send Australian troops last May was motivated, not by concern for the East Timorese, but by his determination to reassert Australian interests. Alkatiri, however, refused to buckle to pressure to resign from the Australian government and media, President Gusmao and then

foreign minister Jose Ramos-Horta. Moreover, despite his threats, Gusmao did not have the constitutional power to remove Alkatiri from office without the approval of parliament, where Fretilin had a large majority. Amid this tense political standoff, the ABC conveniently broadcast the anti-Alkatiri allegations.

The “Four Corners” program was a shameless piece of political propaganda. The claim that Alkatiri was involved in arming a “hit squad” rested on statements made by his political enemies—including rebel police and soldiers who were obviously hostile to the Fretilin government. The leader of the squad—Vincente “Railos” da Conceicao—was a highly dubious character who offered no plausible reason for his sudden switch of allegiances from Fretilin to the opposition. Yet his allegations were all breathlessly reported as good coin by ABC journalist Liz Jackson.

President Gusmao immediately sent a tape of the program to Alkatiri, together with a note demanding the prime minister’s resignation. But Alkatiri denied arming Railos and refused to step down. Among other points, Alkatiri noted the self-contradictory character of the allegations. He was being accused of forming a hit squad that had been involved in attacking army units loyal to his government. It took another week of bullying, legal threats and escalating political tensions before Alkatiri finally caved in and resigned on June 26. Ramos-Horta, who had longstanding ties to Australia, was installed in his place on July 10.

The fact that prosecutors have now decided not to file charges against Alkatiri for lack of evidence is an indictment of all those involved in this political conspiracy: not only Gusmao and Ramos-Horta, but the Australian government and media, above all, the ABC. For her part, Liz Jackson went on to win a Gold Walkley, Australia’s top journalism award, for her “Four Corners” program, which, given the extraordinarily shabby standard of her “investigation”, could only have been for political services rendered.

The decision to drop any charges against Alkatiri was foreshadowed last October when a special UN commission of inquiry found no evidence “on the basis of which it could recommend that Mari Alkatiri should be prosecuted for being involved in the illegal possession or use of weapons”. The report called for further investigations to determine if Alkatiri knew about the illegal arming of civilians by interior minister Lobato. But four months later the case has been dropped.

The UN commission, which was requested by Ramos-Horta, was far from independent or unbiased. Its terms of reference were narrowly confined to specific incidents of violence in East Timor during April and May, 2006. The report made no reference to the role of the Australian government, before, during or after its military intervention. The commission ignored the fact that rebel soldiers and police were clearly guilty of taking up arms against the state and focussed instead on strictly limited cases of violence. Even then, the commission report was forced to recommend charges against Railos and another shady rebel “Major” Alfredo Reinado, who was also involved in attacking government troops. During the crisis, Reinado enjoyed a particularly close relationship with the Australian media, as well as with sections of the Australian army.

The only trial so far has been of Lobato. Railos and Reinado appear to enjoy a charmed life. Railos attended the swearing in of Ramos-Horta as prime minister last year and was filmed subsequently attending a function organised by President Gusmao.

Reinado is still at large, after managing to literally walk out of Dili’s main jail last August along with more than 50 other prisoners. According to the *Age*, Australian military officers have been involved in negotiating the terms of his surrender and thus the charges he will face. A deal earlier this month fell through after the Fretilin government opposed it as unconstitutional and discriminatory.

The dropping of charges against Alkatiri constitutes a blow to his political opponents in the lead-up to presidential and parliamentary elections due to be held this year. In what was undoubtedly a deal worked out between the two, Horta intends to stand in the presidential election in April, while Gusmao has indicated he will run for parliament at the head of a new party—the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT). The aim, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* explained, “is to knock the Fretilin party off its pedestal as the dominant political force and remove its majority in the parliament”.

Without charges hanging over his head, Alkatiri is now free to campaign on behalf of Fretilin. Murdoch’s *Australian*, which played a prominent role in vilifying Alkatari last year, sounded a warning in an editorial on February 7 that “Mari Alkatiri’s return could further destabilise East Timor”. There is no doubt that the Howard government, with the assistance of the Australian media, will be working to ensure his defeat—by all available means, including further provocations.

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