

Four Corners and the Coup in Timor Leste

6 December 2006

By Tim Anderson

The presentation of a Gold Walkley Award to journalists responsible for the ABC Four Corners program 'Stoking the Fires', demonstrates the shallowness of Australian public reflection over the Australian role in the coup in Timor Leste.

The Four Corners program became a central element of coup propaganda, helping force the resignation of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, after accusing him of ordering a 'hit squad' to assassinate his political rivals. Although a UN report dismissed these 'hit squad' allegations, they have been repeated many times since, helping poison the political climate in the lead up to Timor Leste's May 2007 elections.

Walkley Award winners, Liz Jackson, Peter Cronau and Lin Buckfield, knew from the start their 'evidence' was tainted and lacking in credibility. They also hid important facts from their audience. Because the 19 June program played such an important role in the coup, it deserves some closer analysis. It will be useful to look at the program's aim, identification of issues, use of sources, and choice (and omission) of events.

The ABC website identifies a "key question" for the program: "What – who – is causing the present turmoil?" This was indeed an important consideration. Pursuing this, however, would have required a broader view of events.

A more specific question was seized on by the program - could evidence be found to implicate Prime Minister Alkatiri in "stoking the fires" of the violence? The coup leaders (Alfredo Reinado, Rai Los), local opposition figures, and much of the Australian establishment (*The Australian*, Prime Minister Howard, CARE Director Tim Costello, ABC journalists), directly or indirectly, had been urging President Xanana Gusmao to sack Prime Minister Alkatiri.

Yet, as Liz Jackson observed, Alkatiri had the support of the Parliament and it seemed Xanana did not have the constitutional power to remove him. "The only provision that would force the Prime Minister to step aside is if he were charged with a serious criminal offence." Here was a challenge.

For all the criticism, there was no evidence of criminality by Alkatiri. The Four Corners team set out to 'fill the gap'. The principal source would be coup participant, Vicente 'Rai Los' Da Conceicao. The major political beneficiary of the coup, the then Foreign Minister, Jose Ramos Horta, would provide moral commentary.

Liz Jackson's commentary thus begins: "Alkatiri is a terrorist, a communist, a Muslim, say the men at this rally" and again "People say of the Prime Minister that he has an arrogant and aloof style and is a Marxist". The accusations were vague, but insistent.

She was backed up by Jose Ramos Horta, who constantly asserted that Alkatiri should step down because the repeated allegations were damaging: “Can we afford this increasing loss of credibility? ... [and later] If I were to receive just 10 percent of the criticisms that the Prime Minister has received ... I would have stepped down long ago.” He adds, modestly, that “many” people are saying he should be Prime Minister.

Four Corners then introduces some key sources, but it does so dishonestly. It does not explain these individuals or their roles in the violence. Alfredo Reinado is introduced as a Major in the Military Police, and leader of “a rebel army faction [which] took their cars and guns to the hills in solidarity with the petitioners”. Reinado calls for Alkatiri’s resignation, and for him to face trial for his supposed crimes.

By the time of this interview, however, Reinado has not just ‘gone to the hills’ (as Xanana also put it), but had initiated the 23 May attack on an army team at Fatu Ahi in which, the UN says, “five people were killed and ten injured”. The beginning of the attack and Reinado’s open fire orders were shown on SBS television.

The following day groups linked to Reinado made a concerted attack on army headquarters at Taci Tolu (in Dili), and on the home of army commander Taur Matan Ruak, killing “as many as nine people”, according to the UN. None of this is mentioned in a program supposedly finding out ‘who or what’ is causing the ‘present turmoil’. After the coup, Portuguese police will initiate the arrest of Reinado and have him charged with murder.

The major piece of incriminating evidence against Alkatiri, however, comes from an interview with Vicente ‘Rai Los’ Da Conceicao. Rai Los is introduced as leader of “a group of men who say they were given weapons on the orders of Alkatiri”. Rai Los and the others explain themselves as a ‘Fretilin Secret Security Team’, under the orders of Interior Minister Rogerio Lobato. There is indeed evidence that they have obtained government weapons.

They make the program’s dramatic accusation: they were under orders from Alkatiri and Lobato to “totally destroy petitioners .. to terminate opposition leaders .. to exterminate the military leaders like Major Alfredo [Reinado], Major Tara, Major Tilman” and others.

These claims formed the basis of Liz Jackson’s earlier radio report (‘E Timor Prime Minister denies new 'hit squad' claims’, 10 June) which said that Mari Alkatiri organised: “a group of armed civilians ... [who] shot or bashed four people who were organising a peaceful protest calling for his resignation ... [and] that forces loyal to the Prime Minister carried out a massacre of 60 unarmed protesters in April, and dumped their bodies in a mass grave .. incidents [which] appear consistent with accusations this week that Mr Alkatiri had recruited a hit squad with specific orders to eliminate his political opponents.”

In relation to these claims, the UN report of October said that “no massacre occurred” and that it “does not accept that ... the Prime Minister gave instructions to Rai Los to eliminate his political opponents”. The massacre rumour was started by coup plotters.

The story by Rai Los was tainted evidence, and the Four Corners team knew it. First, the interview took place on the farm of an opposition family, the Carascalao. Second, Rai Los had come to them fresh from the attack on the army at Taci Tolu.

Liz Jackson refers to, but does not properly explain, Rai Los's involvement in this incident: "Rai Los says his team had used their weapons in a gun battle with the regular army .. he says four people were killed, and this is why he decided to abandon his loyalty to Mari Alkatiri."

This is an obvious lie. The Rai Los group participated in the 24 May attack on government loyalists in the army at Taci Tolu. They were not supporting Alkatiri. The UN puts composition of the coalition responsible for the single biggest armed attack during the coup attempt, as "police officers from Liquica District, petitioners and armed civilians of the Rai Los group".

The Four Corners program, claiming to get to the bottom of the turmoil in the country, has no explanation of the Fatu Ahi and Taci Tolu attacks. Instead, it selectively refers to the shooting of rioting army deserters ('the petitioners') and anti-government gang members on April 28, and to the 25 May revenge shooting of a number of police by soldiers.

Four Corners staff have privately argued that they did not call the Rai Los group a "hit squad", or assert that Alkatiri had set it up. They say the story had pointed out that Rai Los had "no proof" of his claims. They argue, though, they had stronger evidence of Rogerio Lobato's distribution of arms, a fact born out by the criminal charges and the UN findings.

However the paraphrase 'hit squad' has been taken up widely by the media, including the initial ABC report from Liz Jackson. To say the program made no allegations, and just reported the claims of their sources, is to hide behind these sources. Journalists always choose which sources to use, which to elevate and in which context to place them. In this story Four Corners gave great prominence to the 'hit squad' claims. That, of course, is what made the program influential.

Finally, distinguishing between the 'hit squad' claims and the distribution of arms issue draws attention to another deceit of the program: it did not make this distinction. Rather, it sought to collapse the two issues. Yet they are indeed separate.

The legitimacy (or otherwise) of arming para-militaries to defend the government – when the police force had collapsed, and sections of the police were taking part in the coup – is presumably an issue that will be argued by Rogerio Lobato's lawyers, as he faces his current charges. It is not an unreasonable argument. Yet the claim that Lobato apparently armed the Rai Los group, which turned against the government and attacked loyalists in the army, certainly raises questions about his judgement.

However the claim that there was a 'hit squad' to assassinate political opponents is a different matter to arming irregular forces to defend the government. Four Corners relies

on that distinction now; but in June 2006 collapsing the two stories was central to its deception.

The award winning Four Corners program presented a partisan and dishonest picture of the crisis, but a picture consistent with the wish of the Australian Government and corporate leaders to remove the democratically elected head of government of a friendly neighbouring state. As Australians, we need greater reflection on our own role in this affair.