

Interview with General Secretary of Fretilin, Mari Alkatiri, in Dili on Sunday, November 6 2006

By John Loizou

Is it possible to quantify how much the coup has cost East Timor's economic development?

It's very, very difficult to do that now. It will delay the execution of the current budget – the budget of this fiscal year - and the budget for the last fiscal year. But above all it has destroyed some institutions and suspended others. The result is that East Timor's major problem now is its lack of leadership and State authority. As you can very easily see, there is no State authority in East Timor now; the leadership is getting weaker and weaker and there is an urgent need to recover from the crisis. This will only happen through a joint effort of the leadership.

Who do you mean when you say the leadership?

The real national leadership in this country totals no more than five people. The president, Xanana Gusmao, the current prime minister, Jose Ramos Horta, the president of the parliament, the commander of the army...and myself of course. It's very difficult for me to say this but it's a reality that as secretary general of the country's major political party, I still have a role to play.

But is this happening? Is there an effort to create a concerted effort among this five?

Not yet.

There is much effort by many people – Timorese and non-Timorese to make it possible - to make it happen but up till now no result.

What's the major impediment?

I still don't know. But I think it's linked to a lack of capacity by some to recognise their mistakes in a concrete and objective way and not as a general statement and a lack of capacity also to recognise that our major mistake as leaders was to start fighting each other as the result of much manipulation promoted by others.

Who are these 'others'?

This crisis was the result of a conspiracy. I have no doubt about that.

By who or whom?

I can't really identify individuals but from the facts you can conclude that it was a conspiracy. It started long ago. It started in 2001, 2002 and it's going on and on every year against the government.

Last year, as you know, the Catholic Church organized the people for demonstrations for three weeks and they failed. Since then they were always trying to get support from institutions and individuals within the country. Always with the same purpose: To force the government to step down.

You are saying that the Church did this?

The Catholic Church. But the Catholic Church was not alone. I don't say it was the 'whole' Catholic Church. But it was the hierarchy. And they were joined by other groups. People from the opposition parties and illegal groups within the country.

You mean militia or martial arts groups?

Not really martial arts but irregular organizations that at the time of resistance even played a role within the resistance movement.

They were from within the resistance or were part of the resistance?

Yes.

But why were they so disaffected that they started causing trouble for the government?

There were some groups who joined the resistance for their own purpose. It was not their clear objective to fight for independence. What they were looking for was to get the Indonesians out and then take their place.

You mean they wanted to get the Indonesians out and then inherit the situation?

Yes.

You have said there might have been a civil war if you had not resigned?

I have no doubt of it.

But who would have fought the civil war and what would have been the outcome?

I knew that if I had decided to resist all the pressure to step down, I would have got support from most of the members of Fretilin. It meant that they would either have come down to Dili to resist or they would do it in other districts. But they would do it and we would really have had bloodshed and a civil war. This is one of the reasons why I decided to give up – to avoid the civil war and bloodshed. And I'm sure that if it happened Fretilin would win. But this is not the time to win power through bloodshed and civil war. I would never accept staying as prime minister in the government if it meant a civil war.

What, if any, are the similarities of UDT's coup of August 1975 and the civil war that followed – especially remembering the activities of the anti-communist movement?

There are some similarities but in a different context. When UDT staged its coup, we were fully aware that after the coup we would be invaded by Indonesia. That is why we fought against the coup. We were also fully aware that the civil war would take a short time. Now the situation is completely different.

So in other words the civil war would have been very protracted if it came?

Yes.

But you went to war in August 1975 knowing that the consequences would be the arrival of the Indonesians?

Yes.

Let us return to the Church. If it is the hierarchy and other individuals why are they doing it?

Some people try to attribute their effort to 'bad' government. But they can't really sustain this argument because in our four years of government we were considered by many, many development parties and institutions as one of the best examples in the world. There is no argument about this. And there is evidence for it. Now they are

trying to argue that it was because the prime minister was arrogant. But this is not reason enough for a coup particularly when such a coup will 'push back' the country for years. To say the reason is that the prime minister doesn't smile is no reason. Not only 'push the country back' but leave thousands of people homeless. There is no argument to defend this view. But I think and I do believe – although they never say it – that the main reason was that the prime minister was not a Catholic. And all their actions were against the constitution.

But if I was to say that you have said that the campaign against you was mounted because you were not Catholic what will be the hierarchy's response?

They will deny it. They will try to say it was my mistake. I was arrogant and there was no effort to create jobs. They will say many things like that.

But what would such an allegation do to your support base within the country?

When the government inherits a vacuum in State institutions the major priority for this government is to create the State. It means public administration, other institutions, defence and security and it means most of the resources they get from international donors must go to education, health and some infrastructure. It was only a year ago – August September last year - that we started to receive money from oil and gas. That is why our budget this year is a big budget. We couldn't do the same two or three years ago.

But what I'm saying is that we are in a supposedly Catholic country so if you are going to sit there as general secretary of Fretilin and say the Church tried to bring me down because I'm not a Catholic what is that Church going to do...

No, no, I'm sure that this is not a problem for the people of this country.

Yes but what will be their response when you attack the Church?

They will tell me not to worry about this. You are the secretary general of Fretilin because you are a founder of Fretilin. You are working well for the people and this has nothing to do with religion. A majority of the people will support me.

If we accept this thesis that the Church did what it did...

I can't see another reason.

You say that your opponents wanted to form a government of national unity. So what part did people like the president and the new prime minister play. Were they part of it before it all happened or were they opportunist?

No. They were facing a clear problem with some groups spreading violence and aiming to have the prime minister step down and the situation was difficult to control by our own forces because the police and army were fighting each other and then they thought it was the best solution.

So you think they acted in good faith?

Not in good faith. The best solution would have been to strengthen the institutions in solidarity. Not to force the prime minister to step down because others wanted them to do so. They should have supported the constitution.

But why didn't they?

In my view, lack of courage.

You have argued that although the international force has stabilized the situation, they really don't understand what has happened. Why?

Because they still think that the crisis here is a power struggle between the prime minister, the former prime minister and the president. But I reject fully, this argument.

So they still adhere to this theory?

Yes.

Do they know the identity of those members of the martial artists and the militia who are promoting the violence?

They are becoming more familiar with the situation but still they think that the initial reason for the whole crisis came from a power struggle.

Do you think the ignoring of the constitution makes the constitution inoperative?

No. It's operative because as the major party we decided to keep defending the constitution and try to have people work again within the framework of the constitution. Now we are working within the framework of that constitution. We have accepted the situation and what we are doing is defending the constitution.

You say the national leadership – the five you have listed – made mistakes and they have to recognise those mistakes. So what do you think were your mistakes?

I never thought that it would be possible for minor groups to be successful in forcing the prime minister of a major party to step down.

So you underestimated your opponents?

Yes, I underestimated them. But in I also should have paid more attention to the army and to the police. And I should have paid more attention to the grassroots organization of the party. We should also have worked better with the media to inform public opinion. We did a lot of things and people didn't know.

East Timor was beginning to increase its yearly rice production. Now it's gone back. How long will that take to recover?

Not less than three or four years.

If the leadership was to reunite and the State was re-established what would be the priorities.

The priority is to rebuild the entire State institutions again.

But what are the economic priorities?

If you don't have an efficient public administration and you start investing money in the economy you will have corruption. So we must try and strengthen the sub-national sectors of the public administration. Districts and sub-districts. Strengthen them. And of course you need to invest.

Infrastructure. Human development. Community development. All are included in the current action plan. But now with this crisis I think we need to invest, we need to get jobs. We need to prepare the people with skills for the jobs. But above all we need to strengthen State institutions. All this will take at least three or four years.

And what about the marine boundary with Australia?

Our priority is to make the country economically independent and to avoid getting loans from others. That's why we decided to negotiate with Australia as a priority the joint exploration and exploitation of natural resources and it was a successful negotiation with good results for Timor. Ninety percent from the (joint authority) 50 percent from Sunrise and we were thinking of pushing for the pipeline from Sunrise to Timor-Leste. Now it will be more difficult but we will keep pushing. But we are now in a very comfortable financial situation. We have our own resources. We have enough resources to start developing the country. But what we need now is find out how to refine the partnership between the state and civil society and to redefine the partnership between Timor-Leste and foreign investors and countries that have been assisting us during the last five or six years.

So do you think parliament will still ratify the agreement?

I think so. Maybe with some reservations but I think they will ratify it.

When do you think it will happen?

Maybe before the end of the year.

The commander of the army has said that Australian troops here should be under UN control . Do you agree?

It's the common position of many leaders and institutions in Timor-Leste, including me. But the reality is this: To have the Australian army as part of the blue berets needs a resolution from the UN Security Council and we can't get it without objections from the United States and Britain and that's why it's better to be creative here and try to set up a unified command. That would mean a trilateral agreement between the government of Timor-Leste, the United Nations and the coalition of forces led by Australia and to have a unified command where the commander of our army would participate.

So how long will the Timorese army stay in its barracks?

The present situation is unsustainable. We need to get the army involved and the sooner the better. Side-by-side with the international forces. This is why the unified command is so important. I don't think it's difficult to get it.

How long will it take?

Two, three or four weeks I do believe.

Have you heard any of the East Timorese complaining about the behaviour of the Australians?

Yes and I have been saying that if there are any complaints it's better that they be investigated. Instead of resisting any investigation it's better to open an investigation.

But who are the people complaining?

Normal people. People from the displaced people camps and outside. Many have been complaining and many have been spreading rumours and that's why I believe it's best to investigate.

And who should investigate?

The United Nations, Australia and the government of Timor-Leste. But not all the complaints are genuine. Some people are using the situation to create problems.

But why do people want to spread rumours and keep the discontent going?

Because people are not really happy with the situation. They tried for a coup and now they will not be happy until Fretilin disappears.

How do you explain that the two mutineers who escaped from jail are still to be arrested?

This sense of impunity doesn't help. I have made it clear already to the government and to the Australian forces that they must use their authority to bring those people to justice.

Why is that not happening?

I still don't understand if it's technical or political. Perhaps it's a mixture.

But if political by whom?

There has been an attempt particularly by the president, but also the prime minister, to settle the crisis through dialogue and appeal to those people. But you can't really govern a country through dialogue and appeal.

So what you are saying is that they refuse to make a hard decision?

Yes. They have avoided the decision.

You have said the investigation by the three men appointed by United Nations General Secretary Kofi Annan was not satisfactory because they did not ask how it happened. So what questions should they have attempted to answer?

Firstly, why they ignored so many facts.

Such as?

Meetings at the president's place with people who were putting pressure on him to force me to step down. Meetings between Ramos Horta and Reinado, Ramos Horta and Railos; Ramos Horta and Tara and other petitioners during the crisis. They promised everybody that they would not restart the violence and then restarted it. The allegations of weapons distribution. They (the investigators) made a thorough investigation. Why in their report do they consider it a minor problem?

What are these allegations of weapon distribution?

One of the allegations was that Fretilin had imported illegally two or three containers of weapons and distributed them to Fretilin members. But when they investigated this issue they came to the conclusion that there had been no illegal import of weapons for distribution to the members. In the report they simply ignore it. Why?

So when the now Prime Minister Ramos Horta met with these men was it during the violence?

During the trouble.

So during the trouble he met with them?

Yes.

And who were the people who tried to put pressure on the president to have you resign?

At least one of the bishops.

And after all that you're still prepared to work with Gusmao and Horta?

Horta comes here to see me once a week. In the interest of the nation and the government, I'm prepared to work with them but we need to define clearly a new framework .

You are not going to stand for prime minister at the 2007 election?

No. I think it's much more important to work for the party. To make it better organised.

You say that Fretilin's support has grown. Why?

I'm sure of that. When you are in a democracy people – even Fretilin members – think that because of the democracy they can chose another party. But when they realise that it also creates an opportunity for them to be targeted by others, they realise it's better to support their own party. And don't forget the link between Fretilin and the people comes from the time of the liberation movement and it's still very strong.

So you think they will support Fretilin despite the criticisms they might have of Fretilin?

Yes. The only way to defend real independence and the sovereignty of the country is with Fretilin.

Has Indonesia played any role in what has happened?

As a government no. But maybe there are still some people trying to do something but what we are seeing in this country is ex-militias that are behind these groups that are spreading violence in Dili and other places.

The decision to allow militia members back to East Timor – was that a mistake?

The decision was not a mistake. The way it was done, maybe. To have them back is right. But to put them into institutions like the army and the police was a mistake. They were immediately admitted by the United Nations into the police because it was thought the easiest way to build the police force was to use people who had already been police for the Indonesians because they had had some training. So they were the very first admitted to the police and that was a mistake.

And now the vexed question of language. Many – especially the Australians – scorn the use of Portuguese. What is your answer to their criticism?

This is nonsense. It's part of the whole culture of our decision to strengthen our independence and sovereignty. We know it's not easy to make Portuguese again the lingua franca of East Timor in a very short time. But we do believe that Timor-Leste needs to be different in this region. But it doesn't mean that we are against others. We need good relations with Australia and Indonesia – all over. But as Timorese, and not an extension of others.

But aren't the young disappointed because they can't find jobs in the civil service without Portuguese?

It's not true. Most of the people in the civil service are now speaking some Portuguese. But they were admitted to the job with no knowledge of Portuguese. There is no discrimination.

Why has the violence not spread beyond Dili?

This is a good question. Most of the jobless people are in Dili. It's in Dili that you have the gangs. Some organized through martial arts, others not. It's the country's only big city. We have more or less 200,000 people in Dili – too many for a very small city. That's why it's easy to spread trouble in Dili and spread violence.

Should you have had a program to stop young people coming to Dili?

This is one of our policies and plans. To create new opportunities and jobs within the interior of the country and create five or six small cities with a quality of life better than in Dili. It can be done and it needs to be done to stop people coming down to Dili.

So what should be the population of Dili in the country's population of about one million?

Not more than 50,000. Laughter.