

New party huge gamble for Gusmao

By Sahe Da Silva¹

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Jose Ramos-Horta's announcement this week that a new party will be launched by current President of the Republic, Xanana Gusmao, appears to confirm what most experts have been predicting for some time - Gusmao will enter parliamentary politics in Timor-Leste as the head of a new party called the National Congress of Timorese Reconstruction.

The new party will be known by its Portuguese acronym, CNRT, a deliberate attempt to link the new party with the umbrella resistance organisation, the National Council of Timorese Resistance, which was also known by the Portuguese acronym, CNRT.

Fretilin has already indicated that it will take legal action against the acronym CNRT being used by the new political party based on the Constitution and the Laws of Timor-Leste.

In the light of the multiple predictions that a new 'CNRT' will be launched, the President's refusal to announce the date of the parliamentary elections looks like an abuse of his powers to serve his own personal political ambitions.

The decision by Gusmao to form a new party will be a huge gamble for the former resistance leader and current President of the Republic, who remains, at least as a parliamentarian, an unknown quantity.

The aim of the new party will be, at the minimum, to remove the parliamentary majority of Fretilin, Timor-Leste's largest party. There has also been speculation that the new party, provided it obtains enough seats, may seek to obtain a parliamentary majority by forming a coalition with one or two of the other parties.

There is no doubt that the National Congress of Timorese Reconstruction will be a force in the parliamentary elections as it will leverage Gusmao's popularity around the country to maximise its votes. The new party will not only take votes from Fretilin, but the other political parties as well. However, even before Gusmao's party has been formed, there

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are serious questions being raised about it. The questions relate to the use of the acronym CNRT by the party, whether Gusmao can make the transition to parliamentarian, whether Gusmao will be able to handle the public scrutiny and criticism that will be leveled at him and his party and whether his party will have enough time to prepare for the elections.

The use of CNRT is misleading and deceptive

If the acronym CNRT is used by the new party it will be an opportunistic move to capitalise on the achievements of the National Council of Timorese Resistance which was also known as CNRT. The use of this acronym is misleading and deceptive and will be criticised by other political parties who will argue that the name will confuse the voting population where there is a high level of illiteracy.

The secretary general of Fretilin, Mari Alkatiri, has already said that his party would take legal action against the acronym CNRT being used by the new political party based on the Constitution and the Laws of Timor-Leste. In a media release issued by Fretilin, Alkatiri said that “there is a moral obligation on all parties to be transparent and unambiguous in their identity, campaign messages and policies”.

“We welcome the decision by Xanana Gusmao or others to form a political party and Fretilin looks forward to the up-coming electoral contest. However, it is unacceptable that any political party should seek to capitalise on the name of CNRT which is an organisation of historical significance to the people of Timor-Leste” said Alkatiri.

By way of background, the National Council of Timorese Resistance was the independence umbrella organisation under which the pro-independence parties and individual activists worked together to achieve independence from Indonesia during the 1999 referendum. Once independence had been achieved, CNRT was dissolved shortly after in 2001 so that political parties could participate in a multi-party democracy.

CNRT was initially known as the National Council of Maubere Resistance (CNRM), which was created by the Fretilin leadership in 1987 as a non-partisan organisation designed to involve all East Timorese political organisations and individuals in the struggle for independence.

When CNRM was created the leadership of Fretilin decided that Xanana Gusmao should leave Fretilin to become the leader of CNRM. It was also decided that Falintil would become the armed wing of the entire independence movement as opposed to being the armed wing of Fretilin only. In 1998, the term ‘Maubere’ was dropped from

CNRM and replaced with the term 'Timorese' to facilitate the entry of the UDT (Timorese Democratic Union) party which absolutely rejected the world 'Maubere'.

Is Gusmao capable of being an effective parliamentarian or even Prime Minister?

Gusmao remains an unknown quantity as a parliamentarian. An effective and charismatic resistance leader does not automatically make an effective parliamentarian. Gusmao has recently been quoted in the Portuguese media as saying that the role of President has been more difficult than that of resistance leader. However, it is conceivable that life as a parliamentarian let alone the Prime Minister is more difficult than that of President.

By forming a new party, Gusmao and his team are presenting themselves as an alternative government capable of developing and delivering a program for national development. This is new territory for Gusmao and an area in which he clearly lacks experience.

Supporters of Gusmao's party may argue that the party will surround him with capable people. The question is, who will these people be? Local media in Dili have reported that some Fretilin dissidents headed by Vitor da Costa and Vicente Mauboc Ximenes will join Gusmao's new party. This is political suicide for the new party for several reasons. The first is that some of these dissidents such as Mauboc, George Teme and da Costa have aired their grievances outside of Fretilin's party structure. This is a sign of political immaturity and an inability to properly articulate grievances within a team structure. Secondly, some of the dissidents have patchy disciplinary records. For example, Mauboc was suspended from Fretilin in July 2005 and the suspension was confirmed for another 12 months by an internal disciplinary panel of Fretilin on 16 May 2006. Thirdly, Jose Luis Guterres and Egidio de Jesus misled the public after claiming that they were prevented from contesting the leadership of Fretilin at the party Congress in May 2006 because the election was by show of hands. The reality was that Guterres and de Jesus did not even nominate themselves for the leadership election because they were unable to get the support of 20% of delegates at the Congress (which is the minimum threshold required to contest the election under party rules).

The presence of these dissidents in the new party also brings into question whether Gusmao's new party will be able to function as a cohesive unit.

As a politician Gusmao will be subject to intense public scrutiny and criticism

If Gusmao becomes a parliamentarian his previous roles in East Timorese society such as that of resistance leader, president of the National Council of Timorese Resistance

and President of the Republic will be open to complete scrutiny during the parliamentary election campaign. There is no doubt that politicians from other political parties in Timor-Leste will bring up Gusmao's past mistakes in an attempt to discredit him and his party in Timor-Leste's unforgiving political climate.

One of the criticisms that will probably be leveled against Gusmao will be the forced resignation of Mari Alkatiri as Prime Minister based on unfounded allegations made by Vicente Railos in the ABC Four Corner's program "Stoking the Fires". On that program Railos claimed that Mari Alkatiri had armed hit squads to eliminate political opponents of Fretiln, allegations which were strenuously denied by Alkatiri. Despite Alkatiri agreeing to co-operate with all investigations, Gusmao used the program to force Alkatiri from office in violation of the Constitution of Timor-Leste. Embarrassingly for Gusmao the East Timorese prosecutor-general recently confirmed that there was a lack of evidence to support Railos' allegations and the case against Alkatiri was closed.

Another criticism which will be made against Gusmao will be his relationship with army rebel and key player in the 2006 crisis, Alfredo Reinado. The nature and extent of the relationship between the two is the subject of much speculation and will only be made clear when Reinado is brought before the courts for his role in the violence last year, particularly in relation to the killing of government troops in Fatu Ahi on May 23.

Supporters of the President have argued that Gusmao's close relationship with Reinado was an attempt by the President to control the movements of the rebel and prevent him from causing further damage. While this may be true, the failure to arrest Reinado, Railos and others recommended for prosecution by the "Report of the United Nations: Independent Special Commission of Inquiry for Timor-Leste (2 October 2006)" gave the green light to Dili's gangs to continue to cause instability and violence. This is because the lack of action is an indication that the State lacks the courage to assert its authority.

These are just two of the criticisms that will be made against Gusmao if he chooses to become a parliamentarian. For someone who is rightfully revered around the country for his role as the leader of the resistance movement, particularly after the dark days of the late 1970s, the public criticism and probing into his previous roles in Timorese society may prove to be difficult to handle.

Will the new party be ready to campaign before the parliamentary elections?

Logistically and organisationally, the new party formed by Gusmao will not have much time to prepare for the election campaign. This has fueled speculation that Gusmao is delaying the announcement of the date for parliamentary elections in order to give the

party more time to get organised. If this is the case, then it is a clear abuse of power by the President. The parliamentary elections should be held and a new government should be in place by 20 May 2007 in order to properly comply with the Constitutional time frames.

The decision by Gusmao to lead the new 'CNRT' party will mean that the current President and former resistance leader will no longer be an independent figure in this emerging nation. He is throwing down the gauntlet to Fretilin, the political party he once led and which formed the backbone of the successful resistance to the Indonesian occupation. The political stakes in Timor-Leste could not be any higher.