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Alkatiri to sue ABC for role in downfall

Lindsay Murdoch
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EAST TIMOR'S former prime minister Mari Alkatiri intends to sue the ABC for defamation over an award-winning *Four Corners* program that led to him being forced from office.

Mr Alkatiri said yesterday that even before prosecutors in Dili, told him on Monday that he had been cleared of any wrongdoing, he had instructed lawyers in Australia to prepare legal action against the ABC over the program "Stoking the Fires", which was broadcast in June last year.

The program, which focused on power struggles in Dili, won a Gold Walkley, Australia's top journalism award, for Liz Jackson, Lin Buckfield and Peter Cronau.

"The ABC damaged my image, my family and my party," Mr Alkatiri said by telephone from the East Timorese capital.

Jackson reported in part on claims by a former guerilla fighter, Vicente da Conceicao, that Mr Alkatiri had hired him and other men to kill and intimidate opponents. Mr Alkatiri denied the claims, saying they were part of a conspiracy to topple his government. But the President, Xanana Gusmao, said after watching the program that Mr Alkatiri could not remain prime minister.

East Timorese and international prosecutors who investigated Mr Conceicao's claims told the Office of the Prosecutor-General this month they had found no evidence implicating Mr Alkatiri.

Mr Alkatiri also said yesterday he was confident that Fretilin, the ruling party of which he is secretary-general, would win an absolute majority at national elections this year. He had not ruled out recontesting the prime ministership, but definitely would not stand in presidential elections due on April 9, he said.

Under East Timor's constitution, the national elections should be held on May 20, but Mr Alkatiri said the Government would have to be flexible because the country probably would not be ready for the vote until June.

The United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, has recommended that the UN mission in East Timor be extended by 12 months and that more police should be sent to the country before the elections.

The present UN mission, due to expire on February 25, has 1068 international police and up to 35 military liaison officers. It is backed by 800 Australian and 120 New Zealand troops.

"In order to strengthen security for the critical electoral process, I support the Government's request that an additional formed police unit be deployed," Mr Ban said in a report to the UN Security Council on Monday.

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