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## Ramos-Horta set to stand for president

Lindsay Murdoch  
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THE Nobel Peace Prize winner Jose Ramos-Horta faces a tough fight after declaring that he will stand for the East Timorese presidency at an election due in April.

Mr Ramos-Horta, who took over as Prime Minister amid violent upheaval last year, will campaign against up to eight other presidential candidates, including Francisco "Lu-Olo" Guterres, the president of the ruling Fretilin party, which has the country's largest supporter base.

Fretilin's rallies in towns outside Dili in recent weeks have attracted thousands of supporters.

Mr Ramos-Horta, who is expected to formally announce his candidature tomorrow, told Al Jazeera television he had reluctantly decided to stand.

"Many people have come to me barefoot, illiterate from around the country. Some without even my agreement began collecting signatures for me," he said. But if people "decide in their centuries-old wisdom to vote for someone else ... I will probably be the only candidate in the world for any job who will celebrate my electoral demise".

Mr Ramos-Horta said he had consulted the incumbent President, Xanana Gusmao, and Catholic bishops before deciding to stand for the largely symbolic but influential position.

Mr Gusmao, the charismatic former guerilla leader, has told opposition leaders in Dili that he plans to form his own party and contest the general elections likely to be held mid-year.

Mr Ramos-Horta and Mr Gusmao will try to convince voters that as president and prime minister they offer the country's best chance to heal divisions and entrench political stability after last year's chaos and violence.

The men played key roles in forcing the former prime minister Mari Alkatiri from office last June amid claims aired on the ABC TV program *Four Corners* that he had set up a hit squad to eliminate political opponents.

Prosecutors last month cleared Mr Alkatiri of the allegations, opening the way for him to run Fretilin's campaigning for the presidential and general elections.

Mr Alkatiri, the party's secretary-general, has not ruled out contesting the prime ministership. With Mr Gusmao standing, this would create a deeply divisive and potentially violent contest.

Mr Gusmao and Mr Alkatiri have been locked in a bitter behind-the-scenes power struggle since East Timor gained its independence in 2002.

Observers in Dili say that Mr Ramos-Horta, who won the Nobel prize in 1996 and has served as

foreign and defence minister, faces a strong field of presidential contenders including Fretilin's Mr Guterres, a former guerilla who spent 20 years in the mountains fighting the Indonesian occupation.

Others who have announced they are contesting the April 9 presidential election include: Fernando de Araujo, a former political prisoner and student leader; Lucia Lobato, a lawyer; and the opposition figure Joao Carrascalao.

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