

How Australian imperialism rips off Timor-Leste

02 February 2016 | Rutaban Yameen



Australia, which promotes itself as the liberator of the tiny nation of Timor-Leste (East Timor), has been ripping the country off.

Both governments have ratified the temporary resource sharing treaty on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMATS), which provides for the exploitation of oil and natural gas fields that mostly fall on the Timorese side of the halfway line between the two countries, short-changing Timor-Leste of tens of billions of dollars of government royalties and revenue.

In early October, Timor-Leste prime minister Rui Maria de Araujo announced that his country will seek arbitration.

In an address to the International Peace Institute on 1 October, former president and “father of the nation” Xanana Gusmão said that he was not “very optimistic about Australia”. Citing British politician Lord Palmerston’s maxim, “Nations have no permanent friends or allies, they only have permanent interests”, Gusmão said, “This is the mindset of powerful nations when they deal with small countries like ours”.

One of the fields in question is Greater Sunrise, which is located just 100km from East Timor's coastline. It is expected to generate approximately \$40 billion in government revenues.

If maritime boundaries were established in accordance with international law, Greater Sunrise would lie entirely within East Timor's jurisdiction.

But two months before Timor-Leste gained formal independence in 2002, Australia withdrew recognition of the maritime boundary jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal of the Laws of the Sea, leaving the fledgling nation with no legal avenues to assert its rights.

The new government signed the Timor Sea Treaty with Australia, which split revenues from Greater Sunrise 18 percent to 82 percent Australia's way.

It wasn't the first time an Australian government betrayed the people of Timor.

Indonesian military forces brutally invaded Timor-Leste in 1975. The quarter-century occupation was supported by Australia and resulted in more than 100,000 East Timorese deaths. In 1989, Australia and Indonesia carved up East Timor's oil reserves, signing contracts with Shell, Phillips and other multinationals.

Opposition in Timor resulted in that government not ratifying the Timor Sea Treaty. The CMATS Treaty, signed in 2007, divides revenue 50-50 – still a rip-off.

As Gusmão noted, speaking with the Monthly's Mark Aarons last year, the withdrawal of recognition of international jurisdiction was clearly a move to allow the pilfering of resources: "[F]or less than 2 percent of Australia's maritime boundary, the unmarked part with us, the jurisdiction ... is not recognised by Australia".