

Timor-Leste postpones re-opening of parliament

Absence of Xanana Gusmao cited as reason amid rumors of fight for cabinet posts in new coalition

Former East Timor Prime Minister, Xanana Gusmao, is heading a negotiation team at the Hague in an effort to settle a dispute with Australia over maritime boundaries. (Photo by Adek Berry/AFP)



Thomas Ora, Dili
Timor Leste

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Timor-Leste, Asia's most Catholic country, has postponed naming a new government and the first sitting of parliament since the July general election until former prime minister and opposition leader Xanana Gusmao returns from an overseas trip.

Analysts believe the postponement could be the result of a coalition dispute between Fretilin, the largest party, and its junior partners.

The swearing in ceremony for lawmakers was scheduled for Aug. 21 and was to be followed by the naming of a new cabinet, but this will not happen until Gusmao returns from a trip to negotiate maritime boundaries between Timor-Leste and Australia, according to Fretilin general secretary, Mari Alkatiri.

Timor-Leste is embroiled in a territorial spat with Australia being heard at the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague over maritime areas that are rich in oil and gas deposits.

The young nation, which only gained independence in 2002, sees these maritime areas as vital to its future prosperity and appointed Gusmao to lead the negotiations.

"[The] inauguration is postponed because Gusmao, as the main parliament member from the opposition National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction [CNRT] is still overseas," Alkatiri said on Aug. 20 in Dili.

However, according to Justino Sapalo Ximenes, a political analyst from Dili University, Gusmao's absence could be an opportune excuse for Fretilin to bide some time.

The postponement could be because the coalition between Fretilin and its coalition partners have not agreed to who gets what regarding cabinet positions.

Fretilin is trying to form a government with the People's Liberation Party and Khunto party.

"I think, there's a tug-of-war among coalition members with regards to cabinet positions," Ximenes said on Aug.21.

"Things should become clear in the next few days," he added.

On Aug.21, Alkatiri said that as the largest party, with 23 seats, Fretilin should hold key posts such as the president of parliament, prime minister and defense minister.

"I am afraid some coalition members are also seeking one or more of these posts," said Ximenes.

According to Alkatiri, Fretilin has invited not only coalition members, but also intellectuals from other parties to join the new government.