

<https://www.crikey.com.au/2018/03/01/timor-lestes-true-problems-run-deeper-and-they-begin-with-australia/>

Timor-Leste's problems run deeper than a hung parliament, and they begin with Australia

With a new energy deal with Australia on the table, and with an end to a year of political gridlock in sight, the future should be bright for Timor-Leste. But will it fall pray to the same pattern of corruption that led it here?

[Michael Sainsbury](#)

Freelance correspondent in Asia and *Little Red Blog* Editor

In January, after half a year of political gridlock, Timor-Leste's president Francisco "Lu Olo" Guterres [set the date](#) for its 730,000 registered voters to head to the polls. This would be the second time they have since last July's election, which saw a standoff between the minority government of popular freedom fighters turned political party Fretilin, headed by the country's original post-independence Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, and the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT), led by charismatic revolutionary Xanana Gusmao.

Fretilin received just 0.2% more votes than CNRT to claim victory in last year's election, but fell short of a the required seats to govern. CNRT, which had previously formed a de facto coalition with Fretilin, refused to reform government, leading to the impasse.

The new election, set for May 10, will see campaigning held off after the Easter period, important for one of the world's most Catholic countries.

Guterres has, on paper, only limited power. He appoints and swears-in elected government and has control over the army. But crucially, as has been shown recently, he has the power to call a new election. His announcement of May's poll comes during a time of increasingly hostile tension among the government, the CNRT, and the smaller People's Liberation Party and Khunto Party.

And what has been Australia's official reaction or advice to what will be only the fourth ever general election ever in a country over which we boast midwifery? Nary a peep, demonstrating once again that money more central to Australia's attention than free and fair elections.

In the 16 years since Timor-Leste gained independence from Indonesia, Australia has poured an

enormous amount of money, human resources and political capital into the country.

Last week, the hapless Turnbull government was forced to [sign a renegotiated agreement](#) on maritime borders that was far more equitable for the tiny nation, one which replaces the Howard government's unthinkably immoral, bullying and hypocritical deal that ignored UN conventions in the same way that we are now seeing in China and the South China Sea.

Bernard Collaery, the lawyer who played David for Timor-Leste against the presumptuous might of Australia, claims the new deal still won't give Timor-Leste what it deserves under UN sea boundary law but that it will give it access to a vast amount more of the estimated \$53 billion in energy reserves beneath the sea.

But the primary wish of many of the people of Timor-Leste to whom *Crikey* spoke during a recent visit including members of major political parties is an end to the corruption that is eating away at national unity. There is also a widely held view that the revolutionary old guard (including Alkatiri and Gusmao) must make way for new blood, people who can better manage and deploy the country's considerable expected new wealth.

New infrastructure expertise and training are required to build new and sustainable sectors outside of energy, such as coffee, vanilla and tourism. This latest political stalemate must be the last hurrah for the old lions who have allowed corruption to weave its ugly web into the country, leaving 40% of people below the poverty line and with shocking infant mortality numbers.

As they say, the fish rots from the head down.