



## World

## Tougher line expected on Timor oil and gas

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AUSTRALIA can expect a more aggressive line from the new president of East Timor, Taur Matan Ruak, in talks over maritime boundaries and oil and gas revenue, after he described Australia's approach to these issues as "always a problem".

The East Timor electoral authorities have not declared an official result in the second round of the presidential election on Monday, but with 91 per cent of the vote counted, Taur Matan Ruak has taken an unassailable lead, winning almost two-thirds of the vote.

Neither he nor his unsuccessful opponent, Francisco "Lu Olo" Guterres, from the Fretilin party, appeared in public yesterday, as both waited for the court to announce the official result, probably today.

Taur Matan Ruak, or "Two Sharp Eyes", whose real name is Jose Maria de Vasconcelos, is a plain-speaking former army commander who led the East Timorese forces in the last years of the war of independence against Indonesia.

His message of poverty reduction, finding jobs for young people and decentralising government resonated with voters who endorsed him in numbers few analysts had predicted.

In an interview with *The Age* yesterday, Taur Matan Ruak's spokesman, Jose Belo, said the president-elect would search for consensus in all decisions he made, and he would not be beholden to any of his backers, including Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao.

Asked about a 2006 United Nations commission of inquiry that recommended Taur Matan Ruak be prosecuted for distributing weapons to citizens during a period of serious unrest, Mr Belo said nobody wanted to reopen the wounds of events that almost led to civil war.

"He didn't talk about it in the campaign," Mr Belo said. "He put it in a bracket somewhere else for the last six years."

During the campaign, Taur Matan Ruak was asked by local non-government development organisation La'o Hamutuk ("Walking Together") what he thought East Timor could do to decide the issue of unresolved maritime boundaries with Australia and Indonesia.

"I will continue discussion," he responded. "I see Australia is always a problem in negotiations because they want to get a bigger percentage. Most of their agreements depend just on political, not legal negotiations."

The president has no direct power to negotiate such issues - that falls to the government of the day - but he can use his influence to set the tone of the debate, as did the outgoing president, Jose Ramos-Horta.

In East Timor, Australia is widely regarded to have bullied the smaller country out of oil and gas revenues by refusing to agree to a maritime boundary in accordance with international law, instead negotiating revenue-sharing agreements in 2002 and 2006.

Many East Timorese regard this as a slight on their country's sovereignty.

The latest iteration of the dispute is whether Australian company Woodside processes natural gas from its Greater Sunrise fields on East Timorese soil, or on a floating platform offshore.

Politicians here hope an onshore processing plant will create new industries and thousands of jobs.

Mr Belo said the president-elect believed, as did other East Timorese politicians, that the pipeline should come to East Timor.

"It is not in Australia's interest for East Timor to be poor," Mr Belo said.



Taur Matan Ruak. Photo: Getty Images