

FRETILIN strongly rejects the biased and inaccurate reporting in Greg Sheridan's 9 August 2007 article "Fretilin still a stranger to democracy".

Dear Editor

According to Fretilin's and many constitutional lawyers' interpretation of the Timor-Leste constitution, the President could choose the political party, or pre-election formed coalition of parties, with the most votes to form the government. President Ramos-Horta believed however, that he could choose the post-election formed coalition of parties who alone could not, but by coddling together their disparate minority seats, could form a loose alliance in the national parliament. Fretilin believes the President's interpretation is unconstitutional, and therefore, that the Xanana Gusmao led government is illegitimate.

Through a series of press conferences and interviews the Fretilin leadership has explained why it thinks the President's decision is unconstitutional. The Fretilin leadership has emphasized that it will pursue legal means to protest this unconstitutionality. So far, these legal means have only involved a temporary suspension of the mandate of the Fretilin members of parliament.

At no stage has the Fretilin leadership condoned violence or encouraged its supporters to engage in violent protest. In fact, the Fretilin leadership has expressed its dismay at the destruction which has followed the President's announcement of his decision and the UN Police and Australian led ISF's inability to contain the violence.

Although some of those perpetuating the violence may be Fretilin sympathizers, others may be some of the more than 75 per cent of the constituents who voted against Xanana Gusmao in the parliamentary elections and do not want him to govern the country.

Xanana Gusmao may still be a popular figure in Australia, but in Timor-Leste he is considered quite divisive and is partly blamed for causing the crisis in 2006, and for inciting the ongoing ethnic tensions which have resulted.

For this reason I and many Leste Timorese object strongly to the inflammatory rhetoric used by Greg Sheridan in his article. To compare Fretilin to Hamas "Fretilin is thus facing a Hamas-like moment. It must decide whether it is essentially an armed militia or a respectable political party" highlights the ignorance of The Australian's foreign editor and sullies the reputation of what used to be a respectable publication.

I feel it is unnecessary to highlight the inaccuracies with which the report is riddled, which only go to illustrate his total lack of sufficient knowledge of Timor-Leste to qualify him to make any meaningful or accurate contribution to this debate. Timor-Leste does indeed face serious institutional problems and welcomes support in building and strengthening its institutions so it does not have to face the problems it is dealing with at present.

However, Timor-Leste is not an "Australian project", and nor does it need long term "Australian hand-holding" of the type advocated by Greg Sheridan, especially when that hand-holding means Australian involvement in a coup to topple a democratically elected government as occurred last year. This has clearly not been of any success in either PNG or the Pacific Islands, and will not work in Timor-Leste because it is vastly different to those other places of failed international development assistance by Australia over the decades.

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