

2018 Parliamentary Elections in East Timor

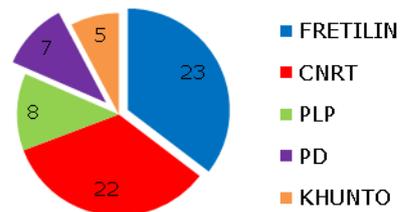
For the second time within the span of a year, the citizens of East Timor have elected a new Parliament. As the parliamentary elections on 22 June 2017 failed to produce a clear majority and a stable government, the President called for a new ballot to be held on 12 May 2018. This was the fifth parliamentary elections since the country gained independence.

The parliamentary elections of 22 June 2017 were the first organized and conducted independently by the small island state, home to a population of almost 1.2 million people, since the withdrawal of UN troops in 2012. The elections resulted in the following distribution of votes: 29.7% FRETILIN (*Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente*), 29.5% CNRT (*Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução*), 10.6% PLP (*Partidu Libertasaun Popular*), 9.8% PD (*Partido Democrático*) and 6.4% KHUNTO (*Kmanek Haburas Unidade Nasional Timor Oan*). The newly founded PLP gave a particularly impressive performance at the polls.

The two major parties, the left-wing FRETILIN and the conservative CNRT, initially entered discussions to form a grand coalition. However, Xanana Gusmão, figurehead of the Timorese struggle for independence and chairman of the CNRT, announced his resignation following his party's dramatic election defeat. Following discussions, he declared that his party would be part of the opposition. With the PLP quickly following suit, FRETILIN, the winner of the elections, was forced to find other political allies to form a parliamentary majority.

Eventually an alliance between FRETILIN, PD, and KHUNTO was formed. While FRETILIN Secretary-General Marí Alkatiri and PD Chairman Mariano Sabino Lopes signed a coalition agreement on 13 September, KHUNTO officials withdrew from the agreement at the last moment. According to a statement by the party, the withdrawal followed on the heels of an internal dispute concerning the party's participation in the future government. Despite the lack of a parliamentary majority, President Francisco Guterres and FRETILIN appointed Alkatiri Prime Minister. Meanwhile KHUNTO announced its intention to cooperate with the political coalition of FRETILIN and PD.

Chart: Distribution of seats in parliament 2017



The Government Collapses

On October 2017, several of the opposition parties including the CNRT, the newly formed PLP, and KHUNTO formed the *Aliança da Maioria Parlamentar* (Alliance of the Parliamentary Majority, AMP) to secure a parliamentary majority. Prime Minister Alkatiri's repeatedly unsuccessful attempts to

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pass his draft budget and government programme in parliament highlighted the government's increasing incapacity to act. Subsequently, the AMP called on President Guterres to transfer political power to the Alliance instead. However, on 26 January 2018, Guterres announced the dissolution of parliament and called for new elections. The promise of new elections was welcomed by the minority government, which had hopes for securing a new majority in the polls. Across different political camps, however, the decision to dissolve Parliament was strongly condemned as the misuse of a political instrument aimed at permitting FRETILIN to stay in power. Guterres was thus heavily criticized for his actions.

In the hope of repeating their previous success at the polls, FRETILIN and PD began campaign preparations for the parliamentary elections on 12 May 2018. Having already collaborated in the previous parliament, the AMP agreed to enter the election campaign as a coalition. To do so, the alliance was renamed *Aliança para Mudança e Progresso* (Alliance for Change and Progress). In a statement, the partners of the AMP announced their intention to form a coalition government following the elections. In addition, FRETILIN and the PD announced that they would also join forces during the election campaign. However, a common list was rejected by Prime Minister Alkatiri. To counterbalance the dominance of the larger parties, several alliances were formed among some of the smaller parties including the FDD, MDN, and MSD. In March 2019, the national election authority, the *Comissão Nacional de Eleições*, announced that a total of four political coalitions had been admitted to the elections. As such, four political coalitions and four individual parties stood for election.

During the election campaign, the AMP enjoyed additional support from those parties not standing for election. Parties such as the PDRT, PMD, and PDP called on the electorate to vote for the AMP. This support significantly improved the coalition's chances of winning the elections.

The Election Campaign

On 9 April, all political parties and coalitions pledged to conduct a peaceful election campaign with the signing of the "Pact of National Unity". The actual election campaign began on 10 April and ended on 9 May. The parliamentary elections of 2017 had already highlighted to all political parties the importance of securing the votes of young people in the battle for electoral victory. During the 2018 elections, political campaigning in social media networks and other web-based platforms thus played an increasingly important role. For the first time, the electorate included young voters who had grown up in a sovereign East Timor and who had no first-hand experience of the Timorese fight for independence.

This generational change to the voting demographic was amplified in the prior year when the voting age was lowered to 16. Some observers speak of an increasing professionalization of the election campaign which they attribute to new challenges and increased competition. All parties were willing to adapt their political campaign to capture the votes of this new young electorate.

The focus on social media during the 2018 elections led to the widespread circulation of fake news. Cloaked by the anonymity of the internet, incidents of defamation and insults increased sharply. On 5 May tensions came to a head when two vehicles carrying 18 CNRT supporters were attacked by supporters of FRETILIN and several people were injured. Prime Minister Alkatiri issued an official apology on behalf of his party. Nonetheless, violent verbal exchanges continued to dominate the election campaign. Political parties went as far as accusing each other of vote buying. In general, the election campaign can best be described as emotionally charged.

The Result

Despite the fact that the electorate was called to the polls twice in 12 months, voter turnout was surprisingly high. With a 80.98% turnout, this number exceeded the voter turnout for the previous election in 2017. Of the 635,116 votes cast, 624,525 were validated. After all votes had been

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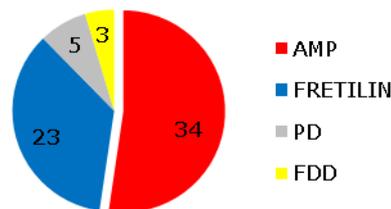
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counted – including the votes cast by expatriate East Timorese at the polling stations in Portugal, Australia, Great Britain, Ireland and South Korea – the AMP was declared the winner with an absolute majority in Parliament with 49.6% of the votes (34 seats of 65) thus validating its demand for the mandate to govern. FRETILIN and PD, who previously formed the minority government, won 34.2% (23 seats) and 8.1% (5 seats) of the votes respectively. FRETILIN saw the highest increase in votes won with a growth rate of 4.6% compared to the election results of the previous year, however, the increase was not enough to form a government. The FDD won 5.5% (3 seats) of the votes. All other parties and political coalitions remained below the four percent hurdle and thus failed to enter parliament.

projects, the promotion of a diversification of the economy, and a reduction of social poverty.

In March 2018, East Timor, through the work of Ex-Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao, reached an agreement with Australia on the development of the maritime borders and the joint exploration of the gas field "Greater Sunrise". This may soon result in higher revenues for East Timor's Treasury.

Chart: Distribution of seats in Parliament 2018



Taur Matan Ruak New Prime Minister

On 23 May, the Court of Appeal *Tribunal de Recurso* dismissed FRETILIN's allegations of electoral fraud as "completely unfounded". With the result of the parliamentary elections validated, the new parliament convened for the first time on 13 June. On 22 June 2018, AMP candidate and PLP leader Jose Maria de Vasconcelos, known by his byname Taur Matan Ruak, was elected as the new Prime Minister of East Timor.

Taur Matan Ruak was President of East Timor from 2012 to 2017 and is one of the heroes of the East Timorese independence struggle. The new Prime Minister is pushing for economic reform in the form of a reduction in investment in major infrastructure