

Taur Matan Ruak: the first candidate for the 2012 presidential elections in Timor Leste?

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On September 2nd, the Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces of Timor Leste, Major-General Taur Matan Ruak, resigned, claiming that after 36 years in FALINTIL and the F-FDTL, this was the right time “to go back to civilian life”.¹ On August 20th, the Timorese government had officially disbanded the Armed Forces for the Liberation of Timor Leste (FALINTIL), who fought against the Indonesian occupation for more than two decades.² In a way, the demobilization of the FALINTIL marks the end of a cycle and, as such, the resignation of Matan Ruak fits well in this process.

Yet, while ending his military career, the decision of Matan Ruak could also mark the beginning of his active participation in political life. His presidential ambitions were an open secret in Timor Leste, with abundant rumors last June and July that he would resign in the coming months in order to launch a campaign. When asked if he intended to run in the upcoming presidential elections Matan Ruak did not deny it, while answering cautiously that it was “too early to talk about that”.³ Indeed, in the coming months, he will have to assess if

his presidential ambitions have the necessary political support to succeed. If Matan Ruak decides to run for President it is possible that he might have the support of the main ruling party, the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT), founded by José Alexandre ‘Xanana’ Gusmão in 2007, as well as from other parties close to CNRT, such as the Social Democratic Party (PSD). So far, Xanana has given no public signal on his position regarding Matan Ruak’s presidential ambitions. Bearing in mind the men’s good personal relationship, as well as the fact that Xanana is not close to Ramos-Horta, it would not be a surprise if Xanana, sooner or later, reveals that he supports Matan Ruak’s presidential bid. The incumbent President, José Ramos-Horta, is the major political obstacle that lies ahead of Matan Ruak’s presidential ambitions. In July, the Timorese press reported that Ramos-Horta would not seek reelection, and that he indicated to Matan Ruak that it was 90% certain he would not run for the Presidency again.⁴ Even though this might be true, the fact remains that so far Ramos-Horta has not made any definitive public statement regarding his future political plans. If Ramos-Horta does not run for reelection – his desire to occupy

1 “East Timor army chief resigns” (*Agence France-Presse*, 2 September 2011).

2 “East Timor disbands pro-independence battle unit” (*Agence France-Presse*, 20 August 2011).

3 “East Timor army chief to resign, mum on presidency” (*Associated Press*, 2 September 2011).

4 See “Political Earthquake: Major General Taur Matan Ruak to Run for President” (*Tempo Semanal*, 14 July 2011).



an important international post is also an open secret⁵ – Matan Ruak will have a free path, in theory running against a candidate backed by the Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor Leste (FRETILIN), whose chances of success are small. Along with Ramos-Horta, Mari Alkatiri and Xanana, Matan Ruak is one of the four most popular figures in Timor Leste. Since Alkatiri intends to contest the next parliamentary elections – also in 2012 – and settle scores with Xanana, this means that FRETILIN will not have an opponent at his level.

However, if Ramos-Horta decides to run for a second presidential term, the CNRT and Xanana will be confronted with an important challenge. In the last legislative elections, in June 2007, FRETILIN was the most popular political party. However, after intense backstage political maneuvering, Ramos-Horta asked the CNRT to form a coalition government, and by doing so ignoring the fact that FRETILIN was the most voted political party. Thus, Xanana has a political debt to pay to Ramos-Horta that collides with his potential intention of supporting Matan Ruak. If, nevertheless, Xanana supports Matan Ruak against the present incumbent – Matan Ruak seems to have mentioned earlier, in private, that he would run only if Ramos-Horta did not, even though he thinks that he is capable of defeating him – one should not rule out the possibility of FRETILIN supporting Ramos-Horta's bid for reelection. The fact that a significant part of his staff is from FRETILIN might be read as an attempt to make amends with FRETILIN, as well as a strategy to prepare the way for future political collaboration between them. Moreover, with or without the support of the CNRT and FRETILIN, if he wishes to seek the reelection in the forthcoming presidential elections, Ramos-Horta has enough political clout to sustain a winning bid.

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Finally, it is not yet clear if Matan Ruak's resignation letter will be accepted. His public statements saying that he had resigned make it difficult for him to continue as the Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces. However, Ramos-Horta appears to be against his resignation,⁶ and as a consequence he might try to convince him to reconsider. This might be explained not only because he does not wish to open the way for Matan Ruak's presidential bid, but also due to the fact that his resignation will raise a

serious problem regarding Matan Ruak's succession in the Armed Forces. The obvious candidate to replace him is the current Vice-Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces, Brigadier General Lere Anan Timur. When asked if he was a candidate to replace Matan Ruak, Ramos-Horta said that Lere Anan Timur's "will be one of the names likely to be suggested", while at the same time carefully adding that "probably there will be other names".⁷ Lere Anan Timur, on the other hand, did not exclude the possibility of becoming the new Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces. "I am prepared for any job that matches my skills", he said.⁸ Indeed, Lere Anan Timur might be prepared to replace Matan Ruak, but he does not seem to be a unanimous choice, given that he is a hardliner close to FRETILIN. A more consensus choice, for example, could be Colonel Filomeno Paixão. He is

currently doing the training course to become General at the Institute of Higher Military Studies (IESM) in Lisbon. More importantly, he was the Deputy Commander of the Halibur, the successful joint Armed Forces and Police operation set up to arrest the suspects of the assassination attempt against Ramos-Horta and Xanana in February 2008.

5 "Ramos Horta Rejeita Foo Sai Ninia Hanoin Kona Ba Reznasau TMR" (*Tempo Semanal*, 6 September 2011).

6 "Presidente aguarda regresso de PM para decidir sobre demissão do chefe das Forças Armadas" (*Lusa*, 7 September 2011).

7 "Vice-CEMGFA preparado para assumir chefia dos militares" (*Lusa*, 7 September 2011).

5 For example, in 2006, the former US ambassador to the United Nations, Richard Holbrooke, suggested him as a possible successor to the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan.



So, with or without the acceptance of his letter of resignation, it seems that Matan Ruak's political ambitions are bound to face some hurdles along the way. In that sense, it would not be exactly a surprise if he ended up waiting until the 2017 elections to finally take his shot at the Presidency. Given that he is a few

weeks away from only his 55th birthday, he certainly can wait patiently for the right – and ripe – moment. On the other hand, one final question remains unanswered: if he resigns and does not run in the forthcoming presidential elections, then what will Matan Ruak do in the next five years?

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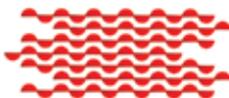
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