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A ‘Muslim’ Leader of a ‘Catholic’ Nation?
Mari Alkatiri’s Arab-Islamic Identity and its (Inter-)National Contestations

Introduction

At the turn of the century, Mari Alkatiri became the first Prime Minister of East Timor\(^1\) – a nation which had gained independence in 1999 after Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation. Mari bin Amude Alkatiri was born into the tiny Muslim Arab-Hadhrami minority in Portuguese Timor. Thanks to this ethnic heritage, he had some money and access to education in his youth – vital to his development as a politician in Fretilin, the Revolutionary Front for the Independence of East Timor (Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente). In 1999, he returned from his exile in Mozambique to an East Timor that had become profoundly more Catholic. His religious identity was not particularly advantageous. The Indonesian government policy insisted on its citizens identifying themselves with a major religion and most Timorese chose Catholicism; the number of Catholics officially rose from twenty nine per cent in 1974 to nearly ninety per cent in 1999 (Carey 1999: 78). The Catholic Church provided succour and a solidarity network for the independence movement at home. In 2005, an argument over religious education in schools resulted in the Church organising a two-week long demonstration at which people called for Alkatiri’s resignation as Prime Minister.\(^2\)

In this article, I look at two instances where Alkatiri’s Islamic identity became visible and problematic for him. First, I draw out some examples of the Australian media’s presentation of Alkatiri’s identity in 2005 and 2006 that illustrate how they rewrote Alkatiri’s religious identity in a primordialist fashion. I then outline Alkatiri’s Hadhrami and Islamic background and describe his early life, involvement in the resistance and his exile, drawing on my recent interview with him in August 2011. The second event examined is the 2005 Church demonstrations, an event that allows me to describe two perspectives on Alkatiri’s identity. The article takes the view, as Caroline Hughes did in her book, *Dependent Communities: Aid and Politics in Cambodia and East Timor* that, “the dispute with the Church dealt a blow to Alkatiri personally, from which he never recovered” (2009: 190). Alkatiri and his Fretilin supporters stated that opposition groups used religion as an argument, even though on their socialist-influenced view, religious affiliation is not relevant for political leaders. However, as Caroline Hughes argues, Alkatiri’s religious identity meant he could not garner support from the younger members of the independence movement, (2009: 191-93), for whom the Church had “become a

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\(^1\) I use the name East Timor, instead of the official name Timor Leste, or Timor Loro’sae or Timor Timur, throughout the text to refer to the country since 1975. I use this designation to enable international audiences to read it more easily.

\(^2\) An earlier version on this article was presented in Dili at the Timor Leste Studies Association Conference ‘Communicating New Research on Timor Leste’, 30 June – 1 July, 2011.
crucial reference point for the new student-led independence movement from 1985 onwards”, according to Peter Carey (1999: 77).

My argument largely follows Hughes’ in illustrating how Alkatiri’s religious identity made it difficult for him to be a part of the new Timorese solidarity community due to the new flavour of nationalism influenced by New Order Indonesian policies. Alkatiri could not claim legitimacy because the new kind of nationalist discourse that was more conservative and more religious excluded him. Alkatiri’s unpopularity, visible in the 2005 demonstrations, resulted in political tensions and riots throughout 2006, culminating in his resignation. Yet, in examining the tumultuous period, not only internal developments have to be taken into account. The Australian media were especially influential in creating a particular image of Alkatiri that reflected back into the Timorese political scene. Given the elections in East Timor are happening again in 2012, it is useful to look again at the circumstances surrounding one of the key players in East Timorese politics, and the influential role East Timor’s much larger neighbour played prior to the last election.

The Australian Media

After September 11 and during the so-called War on Terror, the Australian media gave negative press to Islam and Muslims. The majority of news media presented what they saw as the incommensurability of Islam with western democratic values, and treated identity and culture as a ‘core or deep value’, reflecting neoconservative texts in circulation. In the post-9/11 United States, some commentators called Samuel Huntington’s 1993 thesis declaiming an inevitable ‘clash of civilisations’ between Islam and the West as prophetic. Conservative international politics re-fashioned scripts of the Other using bald orientalisms, a strategy that Verstraete & Longman have argued makes religion or “culture into the main identity factor of a population, or its motivational force in intercultural conflicts”, (Verstraete and Longman 2004: 5). I would suggest this is particularly true in cases of Arab/Muslim diasporic communities as Heiss and Slama have argued (2011: 232). To illustrate the discursive context in which discussions of Alkatiri’s identity took place, I digress briefly to the Australian media reportage of the 2002 so-called Bali Bombings. The weekly news magazine The Bulletin wrote, “there are monsters on the loose […] [Eric Ellis talks to police about] the secret world of ‘Indonesia’s Arabs’”, because, “Militant Hadhramis are believed to have been instrumental in radicalising and financing otherwise moderate Indonesian Muslims” (Ellis 2002). As Edward Said argued long before 9/11, “labels like ‘Arab’ or ‘Muslim’ as subdivisions of ‘The Orient’”, are so overdetermined and political that, “no one today can use them without some attention to the formidable polemical mediations that screen the objects, if they exist at all, that the labels designate” (Said 1984: 214). In Alkatiri’s case, the Australian media happily used labels like Muslim and Arab to discuss him as a politician, making ‘culture’ into the main motivational force in what was a political

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struggle of elites over legitimacy. In this way, the media simplified complex politics and history for Australian readers, a great number of which subsequently saw Australian interference in Timorese affairs, especially in the East Timor-Australian dispute over gas in the Timor Gap, as natural and necessary. For these reasons it is necessary to have a closer look at Australian media reporting on Alkatiri.

In East Timor from 2005 to 2008, there was political instability at the national level of Timorese politics. During this period, the Australian media cast roles for actors in post-Independence East Timor in terms of primordial identities. To draw on Eller and Coughlan’s ‘The poverty of primordialism’ (1993: 46-7), Australian media reports attributed the strife to the a priori natures of both Alkatiri’s Islamic identity and the Timorese Catholic identity. They not only represented the political dispute as one of conflicting religious identities but also portrayed the conflict as inevitable. Identity was the beginning and end of their analysis. Regardless of the complexities of the situation in the capital Dili, the Australian media wrote to themes of ineffable and incompatible identities in East Timor. During the Church demonstrations in 2005, Mark Dodd of the largest Australian newspaper wrote that the appeal for Alkatiri to step down, “struck a popular chord, with many in the staunchly conservative Catholic nation already uneasy about being ruled by an un-elected Muslim” (Dodd 2005). There are problems with this statement: it is debateable how ‘staunchly Catholic’ East Timor is and that the demonstrations were representative of a widespread opinion is unsubstantiated in the article. Dodd’s analysis represented the demonstrations as an inevitable conflict between religious identities.

In a second and glaring instance, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) current affairs programme Four Corners ran a report in 2006 called Stoking the Fires (Jackson: 2006). This piece of television journalism, although awarded with Australia’s highest journalistic accolade, the Walkley Award, has since been heavily criticised for its “irregularities” recently in the documentary film Breaking the News (Hansen 2011). Stoking the fires begins with reporter Liz Jackson quoting sensationaly: “‘Alkatiri is a terrorist, a communist, a Muslim’ say the men at this rally”. Jackson happily used these conflated terms without prefacing or contextualising them and used primordial notions of the incommensurability of Islam and Christianity to frame her subsequent allegations. The Australian newspaper ran articles calling Alkatiri a “fundamentalist” (Aarons 2006). Seven days after the broadcast of Stoking the fires and amidst riots, Alkatiri resigned. He said in the interview, “I was trying to sue Four Corners, for Four Corners’ complete fabrication of a lot of things, but I didn’t really get good lawyers in Australia”.

The primordialist and simplistic portrayal of the complex politics in East Timor was evident not only in the Australian media’s emphasis of Alkatiri’s Islamic identity but also

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4 For background on the Timor Leste-Australia petroleum gas dispute see: East Timor Action Network’s fact sheet http://www.etan.org/issues/tsea/plainfact.htm
5 The ABC is the Australian Government-funded television station
6 Mari Alkatiri, Interview with author, Dili, Timor Leste, August 12, 2011. This was reported in another Australian daily (Murdoch: 2007)
in their reporting on the apparent division between East-West (*Loro’sae-Loro’monu*) (Fox and Soares 2003: 1). In both instances, supposed cultural differences were portrayed as ineffable and these categories, East and West, constituted all the journalistic analysis. The Australian media packaged the dispute, which had political origins, into a clear-cut ethnic conflict. They asserted the very recently recorded East-West conflict was long-standing, ethnic based and inevitable.

In Alkatiri’s opinion, the reason the Australian media campaigned so strongly against him was resources. At the time, Alkatiri and his government were negotiating with John Howard’s Australian government regarding natural gas reserves in the Timor Gap. Alkatiri asserted, “If I had really, in the negotiation given bigger, better opportunities for the Australians, they would have defended me. I am sure. This is very opportunistic… a very pragmatic way of doing things.” If Alkatiri’s analysis is correct, then the Australian media’s negative emphasis on his incompatible Muslim identity framed the argument in the political sphere in a way that elided Australia’s hard-nosed negotiation. It was certainly better for Australian mining and natural gas lobby to have the focus on Alkatiri’s unpopularity rather than on Australia campaigning so hard for gas that, some would argue, morally and legally belongs to East Timor.

The Australian media, in replicating the turn to ethnicity propagated by people like Huntington, wrote analyses of situations in East Timor using primordialist notions. Questions of religious identity subsequently assumed more importance in political debate in Australia and in East Timor. Having pointed to the flaws of such an essentializing approach, I nevertheless argue that Alkatiri’s ethnic and religious background did have some influence on his biography even before he became Prime Minister. In the following I posit Alkatiri’s cultural identity as a Hadhrami enabled his education and did not hinder his ascent in Fretilin, it limited his success only in 2005-2006.

**Hadhrami Routes and Roots**

Since medieval times, traders and religious teachers from the Hadhramaut, a region in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, travelled with the monsoons throughout the Indian Ocean. They then formed diasporic communities and alliances Eastern Africa, India and the Southeast Asian archipelago. According to Ulrike Freitag, the break-down of security and social order in the Hadhramaut in the 19\(^{th}\) century as well as advancements in transportation, such as steam shipping, led to greater migration flows to the Indian Ocean littoral, where Hadhramis had settled and traded in the preceding centuries (Clarence-Smith and Freitag 1997). They had also set up schools where Islamic and secular subjects were taught (Mobini-Kesheh 1999: 327). Hadhramis were important to trade, religion and the courts of Southeast Asia and were influential in the Islamization of the region.

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8 Mari Alkatiri, Interview with author, Dili, Timor Leste, August 12, 2011
It has been difficult to establish from the available literature when the first Hadhrami Muslims arrived on Timor Leste. According to some sources, people on the island of Timor recognised the sovereignty of the Islamic Ternate Sultanate in the Moluccas, in the 16th century, suggesting regular relations. The island of Banda to the north of Timor and the only source of nutmeg and mace for many centuries probably had Muslim settlements before the Portuguese arrived. Tomes Pires wrote in 1512 that the people of Banda “began to be Moors’ only since the 1480s”, supporting the idea of muslim communities on Timor predating colonialism (Lape 2000: 145).

Alkatiri says there was a Muslim trading presence on Timor in the 19th century. They have only ever numbered a few hundred, and there are approximately 2,400 Muslims living in East Timor now. Haegerdal (2010) tells us “there was a degree of movement between Alor, Atauro and Timor”. Inter-island movement possibly brought with it Muslims from the island of Alor. Such inter-island settlement seems to be supported by the toponym Kampung Alor, the suburb in central west Dili where Hadhrami and other Muslims live. It fronts the sea to the north, the Comoro River to the west, and the Farol quarter borders it to the east. According to Lisbon Technical University’s *The History of Timor*, the Hadhramis established a community in Kampung Alor from the nineteenth century onwards. Until the 1970s, the Hadhrami community of Kampung Alor grew rice and fished. Some Hadhrami men gained positions of high regard within the Portuguese administration, becoming *Chefe de Posto*-head of the subdistrict. During the Second World War, some members of the Arab community in Kampung Alor took over local political posts from the *Liurai* (kings) and cooperated with the Japanese occupation forces (History of Timor N/D).

After the military revolution overthrowing Salazar’s successor Caetano in Portugal in 1974 and the moves towards decolonisation of Timor, some people within the Arab community in Dili supported Apodeti and integration with Indonesia. Others supported the nascent independence movement. One of these people was Mari Alkatiri.

**Alkatiri’s Biography**

Alkatiri began his story by stating that both his paternal grandfathers came to Timor directly from the Hadhramaut in Yemen, “almost 200 years ago”. Like many Hadhrami families, his grandmothers were locals. His paternal grandmother, “is from Maubara and my father’s [grandmother] is from Venilale”. Hadhrami men are allowed to marry outside the community but women generally do not. Alkatiri himself is married to a Catholic Timorese woman. Although his grandfathers had come as traders, they later became agriculturists and bought up a substantial amount of land in Fatuhada. According to the Dili gossip, most of the land in the area still belongs to his family. Alkatiri said they were pushed out of trade in Timor because of growing Chinese control of that sphere. He was born on the 26th of November 1949 and grew-up in Kampong Alor. When Alkatiri was a child, helping his father in the rice paddy, the whole area was

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9 Mari Alkatiri, Interview with author, Dili, Timor Leste, August 12, 2011
10 Mari Alkatiri’s wife, Marina Alkatiri, is the Timorese Ambassador to Mozambique.
Agricultural and not the dusty suburb in which we recorded the interview. He, his six brothers, and five sisters all of whom are still living, worked together in the family farm. It is a large family: including the children from his father’s earlier marriages there are eighteen siblings.

Alkatiri acknowledged his family’s religion set them apart. As the third generation born in Timor, they are, “gradually being integrated into society. Although the religious identity is different [...] I am still a Muslim. And that’s the reason why my education was a Muslim education. Before going to the official school, I was educated in a Madrasa”. The Madrasa is in Fatuhada, Kampung Alor, and attached to the mosque, Masjid An-Nur, which was built on land endowed by Azan bin Umar Al-Katiri sometime before World War Two. The teachers in the Madrasa were mostly Hadhrami (Bazher 1995). Alkatiri’s family had enough money to send him to school; and, as a Hadhrami, he had access to education outside of the inadequate colonial system, meant he enjoyed advantages that were simply not available to the Timorese majority. In the late 1950s, Alkatiri started learning Portuguese in addition to his mother tongue, Bahasa Kupang (a variation of Malay), and the local lingua franca, Tetun. He spoke about the advantages and disadvantages of belonging to a religious minority, “At that time, being a Muslim, we couldn’t really apply for the official school”, because the limited education was only available to Portuguese nationals and Catholics (da Silva 2008). The Catholic seminary had been running from 1904 and the children of local Liurai (local kings) had had some primary education since the 1860s. From 1953 onwards, the Portuguese expanded schooling to Timorese from just 8000 pupils to 95 000 in an effort to assimilate them to Portuguese culture (Hayek 2002: 182). This change in policy affected Alkatiri too. Although the Portuguese colonial education system remained expensive and exclusive, his family sent him to one of the new Portuguese schools when he was about 10 years old, in stark contrast to most Timorese who remained excluded despite the token efforts of colonists.

Alkatiri left Timor to study surveying at university at the Angolan School of Geography. After returning to Timor, he joined an “anti-colonial discussion group” (CAVR 2006: 23) and worked for the Colonial Public Works Department as a chartered surveyor (Shoesmith 2003: 236). He contributed to the Jesuit-run newspaper Seara, which debated marriage practices, Catholic doctrine and scientism as well as gave “space to the teaching of Tetun”, as well as writing from most of the anti-colonial nationalists in Timor at the time. (Carey 1999: 80). It escaped the Caetano regime’s censorship until 1973, when the Portuguese secret service shut it down. Although he had not attended the Catholic seminary in Dare where many of the other Timorese nationalist leaders had studied, he was very active in the independence cause and became very influenced by socialist thinking. In January 1970, he founded the Movement for the Liberation of East Timor (Al Madani 2002)11. He was also a founding member of ASDT (The Timorese Social Democratic Association), which later became Fretilin. His cultural identity was not particularly relevant to the independence struggle but I asked him if his family’s religious background had an influence on his political attitudes. He replied:

11 And Mari Alkatiri, Interview with author, Dili, Timor Leste, August 12, 2011
“The way [my father] approached things were different sometimes. Of course [it had an effect]. Because I tried really to identify myself with the majority, but still, the religious identity is still very strong in my way of doing things. I try to be straightforward but very honest. Tell everything clearly, talk clearly. And sometimes I hear that people don’t like it. They prefer the Javanese style.”

He calls his straightforwardness an Islamic influenced, but is careful to draw a distinction between his ‘clear’ ‘Islamic style’, and the occupiers’ ‘unclear’ ‘Javanese style’.

In 1974, Fretilin’s education programmes drew on Brazilian education theorist, Paulo Freire, (Niner 2001: 16) whose major work, The pedagogy of the oppressed, recalls other works in the left-wing, post-colonial canon. According to Smyth (2004), the Timorese Church also referenced Freire. The African nationalist movements and other anti-colonial struggles inspired Fretilin’s ideology at the time. Their avowed aim, according to their 1974 manifesto, was to be a “front that united nationalist and anti-colonial groups under one vision—the liberation of Timorese from colonialism”. Its political programme in said the party would be dedicated to the re-structuring of society for the good of people; forming cooperatives for agriculture; farm land expropriation; and the creation of organisations, “so that every person […] actively contribute[s] to the political life of the country” (CAVR 2006 and Jolliffe 1998: 335). In the 1970’s decolonisation period, Fretilin also drafted programmes that seemed to be a threat to the Church, including a “critique of the Church’s involvement in colonialism and its large land-holdings” (Smythe 2004: 36). Prior to the Indonesian invasion, says Carey, “Fretilin was proposing a complete division of Church and state” (1999: 81) Alkatiri stated for a modern political party, there was no other choice but to insist on the division of Church and State. He said during his term as Prime Minister, people pushed him to set up a ministry of religious affairs, which he argued, “is not a tradition from a Catholic majority country. This is a tradition for an Islamic majority country. You are trying to copy Indonesia. I am Muslim, but I don’t agree with this”.

Alkatiri practices his religion, as do most Timorese people, but he admits, “I am a Muslim, but I am not a radical Muslim. Even for some Muslims, I am a very bad Muslim. But of course I am a progressivist man”.

After the unilateral declaration of independence following Fretilin and UDTs civil war in 1975, Alkatiri was named Minister of State of Political Affairs in the short-lived Fretilin government (Al Madani 2002). Alkatiri recalled this period:

“After the invasion of Timor Leste [on December 7, 1975], we went to Portugal first, and in Portugal, there was a lot of confusion, [it was] a powerless country. And we couldn’t really get some assistance from Portugal, to establish our headquarters in Portugal. And then I flew to Mozambique, because I know Samora Machen, the-then President of Mozambique, as a very strong man in supporting liberation movements. His position was always very strong in assisting
During the occupation of East Timor, he continued his studies in Mozambique, this time in law at the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo. The politics of the East Timorese diaspora and Fretilin’s overseas political representatives to the United Nations and select countries, the External Delegation, were complex, and there were a number of competing factions (Jolliffe 1978: 85). In 1977, Alkatiri replaced another founding member of Fretilin, and current President, José Ramos-Horta, as the Minister for Foreign Affairs for the External Delegation. Ramos-Horta then became East Timor’s representative to the United Nations. In the 1980s, Xanana Gusmão, leader of the armed resistance in Timor, left Fretilin and declared that Falantil, the revolutionary army, would be party neutral and only fight for independence, not for a particular ideology. Ramos-Horta also renounced his membership of Fretilin leaving Alkatiri well placed in the External Delegation.

Fretilin, the ruling leftist party in Mozambique, supported the External Delegation at both the diplomatic and individual level. The Fretilin government gave scholarships to any Timorese who could qualify for university (Hill 2006). Alkatiri had a successful professional career in Mozambique, becoming a legal consultant in 1992 and later lecturer in International Law at the University of Mozambique. In Mozambique, he said he did not meet any Hadhramis; rather he relied on his solidarity with Fretilin. Fretilin’s External Delegation under Alkatiri’s leadership remained socialist, while the clandestine movement received Church support and increasingly defined themselves as Catholic.

Hughes’ (2009: 192) summarises the differences between the two groups as, the “socialist nationalism of Portuguese Africa”, nationalisms of the External Delegation and the “conservative and anti-communist, with a strong emphasis on religion” nationalism of the clandestine movement and its supporters. Hughes’ reasons for this contestation of the national imaginary is, firstly, that Fretilin’s socialist nationalism outlined in the 1974 programme seemed unimportant next to the horror of the Indonesian occupation. Secondly, she says the younger generation did not imagine independence in the same way as the diaspora because of the different sort of nationalism that “so many citizens had imbibed from the Indonesian system” (Hughes: 192).

**Religious Identities after Independence**

In the UNTAET interim government, from September 2001 to May 2002, Alkatiri was both the Chief Minister and the Minister for Economy and Development. At that juncture, Alkatiri’s Muslim identity played little role in his selection as leader of the interim government. It was his standing in the international community as leader of Fretilin’s External Delegation that contributed to his success. For people both inside and outside East Timor, Fretilin was the party who had fought for independence. They subsequently won 57 per cent in the first elections in August 2001 and Alkatiri became the first Prime Minister of East Timor.

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15 Ibid.
On 3 November 2002, police arrested a high school student at a demonstration in Dili. The next day, demonstrators assembled in front of National Parliament. During the latter demonstration a student was shot, quite probably by the police. A group of the demonstrators then burnt a supermarket, houses near the mosque, Mari Alkatiri’s house and the house of his younger brother. The violence, at least partially directed at Alkatiri, illustrated the increasing dissatisfaction of some groups with his leadership.

The Church demonstrations began in April 2005, sparked by a debate over inclusion of Catholic teaching in the school curriculum. The Cabinet had decided in February to remove compulsory Catholic education from schools. Alkatiri claimed he voted against the majority of the cabinet for religious teaching to remain compulsory. Alkatiri told me that his opponents ignored his support of religious teaching and he was unfairly blamed for lifting of compulsory religious education. Kelly da Silva (2008: 6) has shown through examination of Timorese news sources that Alkatiri argued for a thoroughly secular state at the time, even saying that the constitution was his Bible. The Age in Australia reported, “influential sections of the Church called people into the capital, Dili, to protest against the curriculum” (Murdoch 2005). Protesters held placards asking people to “fight against the Alkatiri regime”. The same article quoted Father Benancio Araujo, spokesperson for the Diocese of Dili, as saying, “We are fighting the dictatorship regime of Alkatiri” (Garcia 2005). Father Domingos Soares, a member of the CRNT organising committee, said, “The people and the Catholic Church have joined peacefully for an end to this extremist government” (Lamb 2005). After Timorese independence, the nationalist sentiment that had been important for community solidarity had developed a different character. As outlined above, during Alkatiri’s exile the Catholic Church had grown influential. Their solidarity with the East Timorese people in offering places of refuge, taken together with the fact that few East Timorese had contact with the External Delegation, meant that the East Timorese Church became a key channel of communication and resistance.

Mozambique newspaper quoted Alkatiri as saying, “I admit the fact that I am a Muslim, in an overwhelmingly Catholic country, may be difficult for some Catholics to accept”, and remarked that during the demonstrations: “the Catholic Church played the role of an opposition” (AIM 2006). In our interview, he said that his religious identity was only important to some:

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16 Mari Alkatiri, Interview with author, Dili, Timor Leste, August 12, 2011
17 Jose Teixera, Fretilin MP, said in an interview with the author in Dili on July 30, 2011 that the main Church actors were: Father Filomina Jacob, a Jesuit priest; Anthropologist Father Domingos da Costa Soares, a Parish priest of Letifoho in 2001 and member of CRNT organising committee; and Fernanda Borges: Leader of the Christian National Unity Party (PUN) formed in 2005. Borges was a member of the UNTAET and Alkatiri governments. She resigned because of a lack of transparency and became an accountant for the Church. After the 2005 protests, she formed PUN, which is supported by the Bishops. After the 2007 election, PUN held two seats in Parliament as an Independent, not part of the CRNT Coalition. PUN is critical of Gusmao and Horta on justice issues, particularly prosecution of war crimes committed during the occupation.
“...not for the normal people, but some of the Catholic hierarchy [...] because some people within the Catholic Church, particularly those in a political party - small parties - they had no other argument, [other] than to tell the people this is a majority Catholic country, [and therefore] can’t be really governed by a Muslim.”

Zelia Fernandes, a Fretilin party member, also said that “Alkatiri being Muslim is not a strong argument”, although the Church cited other reasons for complaint such as setting up a truth commission with Indonesia and lack of transparency in the Timor gap negotiations; Kelly da Silva lists these in full in a note. Alkatiri said that although the Church could not form part of the government, “the Catholic Church is part of [Timorese] identity. As a politician, I am always looking for a strong identity of the people. As a small country between two giants [Indonesia and Australia] you need really a strong identity, to identify yourself as a different...different from the others”. He also claimed that his relationship with the Catholic Church is greatly improved:

“I think we cannot really proliferate religions here, although the constitution is open for these kinds of things [...] Because when I was Prime Minister, I was really protecting the Catholic Church here against the new groups of Christians coming in, nee? I blocked them from coming in. Blocked them! And now suddenly the Prime Minister is Catholic, everybody is Catholic, and they open doors and windows and everything for those people to come. That’s the reason why the Catholic Church now realised it was better with [me].”

Although claiming to have better relations with the church now, for his party, Fretilin, having revolutionary credentials is more important than religious identity. Alkatiri claims an authentic revolutionary identity: “I am a founder of this country; I am the founder of everything, Fretilin, Falintil, the Democratic Party of Timor Leste [ASDT]. There is no other... leader with the same condition. That’s why I have been telling the people: religiously, I belong to a minority; politically, I am the leader of the majority. But this is a contradiction”. Alkatiri’s statement lends support to Caroline Hughes’ argument that he and Fretilin saw themselves as “early pioneers who helped forge a national consciousness;

18 Mari Alkatiri, Interview with author, Dili, Timor Leste, August 12, 2011, 2011
19 Zelia Fernandes, Interview with author, Dili, Timor Leste, July 8, 2011
20 I reproduce Kelly da Silva’s note (2008: 11 n14): “On April 26, 2005 the Timor Post printed part of the Church’s accusations against the government, which were characterized as anti-democratic and unjust. To ground its claims, the Church presented the following evidence [that the government was at fault], the: 1) creation of the Committee of Truth and Friendship along with the Indonesian state; 2) lack of transparency in the negotiations with companies drilling for oil in the Timor Sea; 3) lack of appropriate punishment against the former Secretary of State, Virgílio Smith, for a crime for which he was condemned; 4) lack of appropriate public policies for food security, education, and health; 5) lack of government assistance to Falintil’s veterans; 6) negative economic growth since the restoration of independence; 7) nepotism; 8) anti-democratic use of force in popular demonstrations; and 9) disrespect for freedom of the press”
21 Mari Alkatiri, Interview with author, Dili, Timor Leste, August 12, 2011, 2011
22 During my fieldwork, I met many protestant missionaries and there are a number of non-Catholic denominations building large churches in Same, Manufahi.
23 Mari Alkatiri, Interview with author, Dili, Timor Leste, August 12, 2011
24 Ibid.
they were the vanguard of the nationalist revolution” (2009: 193), but that this became less important after independence and the ‘contradiction’ Alkatiri noted, more so.

Despite Fretelin’s avowed anti-colonial nationalism, Alkatiri’s administration was responsible for the institution of Portuguese as the national language, which came in for a great deal of criticism, especially from Australian stakeholders. He justified his decision:

“The priests and so on, the evangelisation here in Timor Leste comes from Portugal. You can’t really separate the two things. The Portuguese day-to-day life: we inherit it. That’s the reason why. No reason to reject or to be against Portuguese language. Language is not colonialism. The system is colonial, not the language.”

Hughes’ summary gives a deeper reading to the opinion Alkatiri offered me, namely, “the Fretelin government argued that Portuguese language and culture were a part of Timorese history and that restoration of Portuguese had ‘always’ been Fretelin policy” and in doing so they were “recapturing the authentic Timorese experience” (Hughes 2009: 193), regardless of the 24 years of intervening post-colonial history. Other groups claimed another sort of authenticity: for many people, “whatever suffering homesick exiles might have endured abroad could not come close to their own” (Traube 2011: 134) and this counter claim of authenticity worked against Alkatiri’s revolutionary credentials and highlighted his years away from East Timor.

The argument over religious teaching in schools was also a debate over national identity. Alkatiri and Fretelin supported, and were representative of, a secular and more Portuguese socialist identity, but the Church, the CRNT and Jose Ramos-Horta supported a more conservative and religious identity. Ramos-Horta ran as an independent in the 2007 presidential elections and said in the Tetun-language part of his inauguration speech, that he had “three superiors, the Vatican and its two representatives in Timor”, Bishops Ricardo da Silva and Basilio de Nascimento. He added, “As President, I will work together with the Church in order to make the relationship between the Church and the State even stronger” (Ramos Horta 2007). Ramos-Horta was able to appeal to the more conservative and religious nationalist sentiment. During the vital juncture of the Church demonstrations in 2005, Alkatiri could not make the same appeal, lessening his ability to withstand his political opponents during the 2006 crisis.

Concluding remarks

_How finally inadequate are the labels, generalisations and cultural assertions_

—Edward Said (2001), in response to Samuel Huntington

The inadequacy of the Australian media’s presentation of Alkatiri’s identity has become clear in the course of this article, but so too have the constraints identity can place on a

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25 Ibid.
political leader. It was not an incommensurability of Muslim and Catholic identities, as the Australian media would have it, but rather that Alkatiri appealed to a different kind of socialist and secular nationalism for legitimacy. When political opponents rallied against him in 2006, they were able to appeal to a different kind of nationalism to bolster support. As an exile, his appeal was for an independent Portuguese-influenced nation that would redistribute wealth and educate the masses. Even though he could claim revolutionary credentials, the kind of nationalism that had evolved in East Timor was greatly different and the Church had been a, “source of social cohesion and political mobilisation” (Hughes 2009: 194). The young clandestine movement defined itself partly by using religious identity. By virtue of his Hadhrami-Muslim identity and left wing credentials, Alkatiri was neither able to use the Church as a support network, nor could he claim legitimacy from it; this limited his political success and could be used to solidify public opinion against him. The 2005 Church demonstrations were the beginning of the end of Alkatiri’s time as first Prime Minister of the new nation. The demonstrations illustrated his diminishing popularity with internal and external key players that would contribute to his controversial resignation in 2006.

I have argued that in the colonial period, being a member of the Hadhrami community in East Timor meant he had a more advantaged economic background than many other East Timorese and was able to go to the Islamic madrasah before he was admitted to the government school with the age of ten. Education allowed him to imagine a free and independent Timor and this conviction led to be a founding member of the left-wing independence party, Fretilin. In Fretilin’s External Delegation, identity took second place to ideology. His party claim that his religious identity is not important for a modern leader, but in 2005, his cultural identity was constraining because it meant he was positioned outside the Church’s communication and solidarity network. This in turn meant that his public personality could not have resonance with the nationalist feeling that had developed along more conservative and religious lines in East Timor since 1975. Alkatiri could not claim legitimacy because the new kind of nationalist discourse excluded him in an instance of problematised identity from which he has found his political career difficult to resurrect thus far.

In the upcoming parliamentary elections in June 2012, it is most likely that Alkatiri will once again run for Prime Minister (Alkatiri 2011). Five years ago, in the 2007 elections, McWilliam & Bexley noted “the public standing and reputation of the former Prime Minister […] was not seen as an advantage” (2008: 69), although Fretilin won a greater number of primary votes (29 per cent) than other parties did. Nonetheless, talking to people in Dili in 2011 about Alkatiri drew mixed reactions: party supporters were enthusiastic but others remained suspicious and rumours about his birthplace and real estate abounded. As a United Nations Development Programme worker told me, it will also be interesting to see whether the massive infrastructure spending (more than half of the current budget will be spent on electricity provision) by Xanana Gusmao’s incumbent coalition government, CRNT, will placate and win over voters. This is especially in the districts outside Dili, who seem frustrated with lack of services and economic development and who might otherwise vote overwhelmingly for Fretilin. In any case, the campaign and election will show whether Alkatiri’s religious identity continues to play a
significant role in the East Timorese public’s imagination as well as in the Australian media’s reporting on East Timor.

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