

## Ex-PM: your spies didn't fool me

Exclusive Amanda Hodge, SOUTHEAST ASIA CORRESPONDENT August 28, 2019



Former East Timor prime minister Mari Alkatiri. Picture: Acacio Pinto

Former East Timor prime minister Mari Alkatiri “never had any doubt” Australia was spying on his government during negotiations over oil and gas resources in the Timor Sea, and he did his best to prevent it.

But in an exclusive interview with *The Australian*, Dr Alkatiri said the eventual confirmation that Canberra had indeed spied on his offices more than 15 years ago served as leverage in renegotiating a resources agreement Dili believed disproportionately benefited its powerful neighbour.

“I never had any doubt that such things were happening when I was PM,” he said. “That’s why I took all capacity to really avoid these spies that Australia had, but Australia was here, all Australian forces were here. I never had any doubt.”

Asked if Canberra’s duplicitous actions later provided leverage when the time came to get Australia back to the negotiating table, he replied: “Yes.”

However, Dr Alkatiri, who negotiated the first resource-sharing agreement over the Bayu Undan gas fields between 2002 and 2004, was scathing of the new maritime boundary treaty struck by the two governments in March last year, which he said disproportionately benefited Australia.

The borders came into force last weekend and will be formally acknowledged in a ceremony attended by Scott Morrison in Dili on Friday as part of celebrations to mark the 20th anniversary of the country’s independence referendum.

Australia fiercely resisted drawing maritime borders with East Timor, arguing the controversial 2006 CMATS (Certain Maritime Arrangements) treaty, in which royalties from the undeveloped Greater Sunrise field would be evenly split and border talks deferred for 50 years, was binding.

It was eventually forced into conciliation after East Timor launched international legal action over revelations by a former ASIS officer turned whistleblower, known only as Witness K, that Canberra had spied on Dili to gain commercial advantage.

The Australian government has since launched controversial criminal proceedings against Witness K and his lawyer, Bernard Collaery. So unpopular has that action been in East Timor that the country's resistance hero and former president Xanana Gusmao told the ABC's *Four Corners* program this week he would consider travelling to Canberra to give potentially embarrassing evidence in the trial.

The eventual deal to draw the maritime boundary along the median line represented a victory for East Timor over Canberra, which had argued it should be drawn along the northern limit of Australia's vast continental shelf.

Had that occurred, far more of the Timor Sea's oil and gas-rich Greater Sunrise area would have fallen within Australian borders. Instead, the entire field now falls predominantly within Timor's territory, yet Australia still stands to earn up to 30 per cent of royalties from it.

Dr Alkatiri, whose Fretilin party is in opposition, said he would not have signed the maritime boundary treaty because it was "not a good deal for Timor".

"Given Greater Sunrise falls within Timor Leste, why does Australia get any (royalties)?" he asked. "It was 50-50 when there were no boundaries. After they agreed on the boundaries everything was different."

Amanda Hodge is The Australian's South East Asia correspondent. Based in Jakarta, she has covered war, refugees, terror attacks, natural disasters and social and political upheaval from Afghanistan to Sri Lanka...  
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