



## The Official Residence: Dignity or Threat?

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### Fundasaun Mahein (FM)

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## Introduction

The Tempo Semanal online media publication has released a story on its website regarding the official residence built in Motael – Dili. The residence was built to house a government member and is furnished with luxurious amenities. The construction of this official residence cost around U.S. \$ 1.5 million. The interesting thing about this project is that it does not include any information on the project board, which is the normal process that has been applied to other State-owned projects. The information shared normally includes the project budget, type of project, duration of the construction work and the name of the company that won the project.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the construction of the official residence, there were lots of criticisms from the general public questioning the project. Many considered the construction of the residence as a form of ignorance towards the social and economic condition of the people of Timor-Leste<sup>2</sup>. The criticisms also originated from the widely held belief that members of the government tend to pay more attention to their personal lives and the attainment of luxurious possessions and living conditions while the majority of Timorese continue to live under extremely poor conditions in respect to education, health, agriculture, and infrastructure, among others<sup>3</sup>.

Despite the criticism, the project continued and has now been finalized. It is clear that despite being a luxurious residence it is yet to be inhabited. Although the residence was originally intended for use by members of the government, the general public has still not been informed about who will be occupying the luxurious residence.

Many opinions have circulated in the public discourse through social media forums such as Facebook and Twitter. It has been widely speculated in these forums that the residence will be designated to the President of the Republic, Taur Matan Rua. The logic is simple: the residence would be a form of homage to the Head of State who should occupy a residence with proper conditions and adequate facilities<sup>4</sup>.

In this report, Fundasaun Mahein (FM) views this issue from a security perspective. This perspective is especially relevant in the case that the official residence is to be handed to the President of the Republic, Taur Matan Ruak.

Based on this perspective, FM presents the issues that will pose threats to the President of the Republic in this luxurious residence.

## Dignity and Threat

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<sup>1</sup>Tempo Semanal. (2012, November 15). Video footage on the Construction of the Palace of the Official Residence of the Minister of Finance. <http://temposemanaltimor.blogspot.com/2012/11/filme-konstrusaun-palacio-residencia.html>

<sup>2</sup> Jornal Nacional Diario. (2013, January 25). "The Residence of the MoF Creates Discrimination "Call for KAK to Investigate". Also published on the blog: Timor Hau Nia Doben: <http://www.timorhauiniadoben.com/2013/01/rezidencia-mf- kria-diskriminasaun-husu.html>

<sup>3</sup> Tempo Semanal. (2012, December 2). The Reactions of Some University Students on the Constructions of the Luxurious Official Residence for the Minister of Finance. <http://temposemanaltimor.blogspot.com/2012/12/reasaun-husi- estudantes-universitariu.html>

<sup>4</sup> Fundasaun Mahein (FM) followed and monitors the discussions on the social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Fundasaun Mahein (FM) followed this discussion on Sunday June 30, 2013 until the publication of this article

A reliable source accessed by Fundasaun Mahein (FM) confirmed that some members of the government approached the First Lady, Dr. Isabel Ferreira, beginning in February 2013, to convince the President of the Republic to inhabit the official residence by asserting that it would be a form of honor to the Head of State. To this day they are still trying to convince the President of the Republic and the First Lady to occupy the residence on the same pretext<sup>5</sup>.

Fundasaun Mahein (FM) questions why this residence was eventually offered to the President of the Republic despite the fact that it was initially intended for some other members of the government. Was this change made because there have been many criticism from the public? Fundasaun Mahein (FM) asserts that the government's reasoning is not sound enough to justify the President of the Republic occupying the official residence, as the security of the property is a major concern.

**First, the park (or place for public gathering) is nearby.** Fundasaun Mahein (FM) observes that the official residence is located very close to an area for community gathering, which is the park in front of the Motael Church. Many people regularly play in the park, increasing the ease with which someone could launch explosive substances into the official residence of the President of the Republic.

**Second, it is near the main road.** The traffic in the area in question is overly congested. Fundasaun Mahein (FM) is concerned that given the high number of vehicles passing by, people can easily throw bombs or other explosives that can threaten the life of the President of the Republic. Similarly, the traffic of commercial transports in the Dili port is likely to cause potential risks to the official residence.

**Third, the official residence is located in a residential community.** Fundasaun Mahein (FM) observes that people can take advantage of the houses surrounding the presidential residence by throwing a harmful device into the house of the President of the Republic.

**Fourth, it is adjacent to the church.** The Catholic Church has a daily congregation of visitors from the community, and has a large number of people visiting for Sunday Mass as well as a number of other religious holidays. Given this mass concentration of people, anyone with bad intent can take advantage of the situation to launch attacks against the President of the Republic.

**Fifth, there is a single gate for both exit and entry.** If the situation arose where nearby houses in the neighborhood - or even the official residence itself - caught on fire, it would be difficult to evacuate the President of the Republic and his family members.

Fundasaun Mahein (FM) concludes that it is not appropriate for the President of the Republic to inhabit the official residence. The official residence has the potential of attracting threats to the President of the Republic. In addition, Fundasaun Mahein (FM) notes that these threats are extremely diverse. Threats could originate from members of the community, organized criminal

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<sup>5</sup> Private interview with a reliable source. On Tuesday, July 2, 2013. Dili

groups, or interest groups who want to undermine the stability of the people of Timor-Leste.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, when there is an official state visit or a state meeting at the Presidential residence, it will have an impact on public transportation because nearby roads will be closed. This problem is compounded by the fact that the official residence is located near main streets utilized by many vehicles, in addition to the commercial activities in the Dili port<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, Fundasaun Mahein (FM) would like to request that the Presidential escort team make observations and conduct feasibility studies on the potential security threats and risks before coming to a decision regarding whether or not the President of the Republic will occupy the official residence. Despite the unresolved nature of this issue, it is still a popular subject of debate in the public.<sup>8</sup>

### **Assassination Attempt on 11 February 2008**

Timor-Leste is just five years removed from the attempted murder on February 11, 2008, when armed group lead by former Major Alfredo Reinaldo launched an attack against the President of the Republic, Dr. Jose Ramos Horta, at his residence in Metiaut – Dili. At the same time, a group lead by the former Lieutenant Salsinha carried out an attack on the convoy of the Prime Minister, Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, on his way from Balibar to Dili.<sup>9</sup>

The people of Timor-Leste witnessed the attempt and the incident is still fresh in people's minds. It was a very traumatic situation. The former President of the Republic, Dr. Jose Ramos Horta, was seriously injured as a result of the attack.

Fundasaun Mahein (FM) notes that in this situation, the attempt on the former President of the Republic, Dr. Jose Ramos Horta, was an event that no one expected, nor was the president's security sufficiently prepared for the attack. This is a form of negligence in which the security forces did not anticipate the existing security threats and risks. The residence of the former President, Dr. Jose Ramos Horta, was located in a suburban area next to the main road and adjacent to a hill. During the attempt, former Major Alfredo Reinaldo and his bodyguard were killed on the scene while the rest of the group managed to escape. After a joint operation was launched, the rest of the gang members were captured.

With respect to this experience, we must not ignore the potential threats to the official residence located in Motael, which is to be eventually handed over to the President of the Republic, Taur Matan Ruak. Both the police and military need to conduct a study on the security threats or

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<sup>6</sup> Private interview with a reliable source. On Tuesday, July 2, 2013. Dili

<sup>7</sup> Fundasaun Mahein. (2013, July 3). Security Sector Discussion – SSD. Dili

<sup>8</sup> Private interview with a reliable source. On Tuesday, July 2, 2013. Dili

<sup>9</sup> An attempt after the political and military crisis against the President of the Republic, Dr. Jose Ramos Horta in his residence in Metiaut-Dili as well as the Prime Minister, Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, on his way from Balibar to Dili launched by the armed groups lead by the former F-FDTL Military Police Commander Major Alfredo Reinaldo and the Spokesperson of the Petitioners, Lieutenant Gastão Salsinha

risks to the environment surrounding the residence. The threats may come in different forms: taking advantage of the nearby park or public place, utilizing the main road, community houses, or Church, all of which are in the immediate area of the official residence.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

1. Recommend to the President of the Republic and the First Lady to announce to the people of Timor-Leste, an official statement regarding who will be accepting the official residence. If the residence will be occupied by the President of the Republic, they should publicize this, as well as provide an explanation for why that will be the case, despite the fact that the residence was originally intended to be occupied by other members of the government.
2. Recommend that the President of the Republic not take this residence as his own, as FM's analysis shows that the environment surrounding the residence is not suitable for the President of the Republic to occupy because it presents a security threat.
3. Recommended to the National Intelligence Service (SNI) to conduct an intelligence review of the surrounding environment based on the intelligence standards.
4. Recommend that Casa Militar – in the Office of the President (which includes the military and police authorities) study the potential security threats or risks that would impact the residence in case it is truly to be handed over to the President of the Republic.
5. Recommend that the government explain to the people of Timor-Leste why the member of the Government intended to occupy the residence rejected the offer. In addition, the government should explain why the residence is now being pushed towards the president, when it was meant for another government member at the beginning of its construction. If this change was caused by the public's reaction, or another reason, the people of Timor have a right to know.

## Bibliography

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