

Military imposes a government of businessmen, bureaucrats and high chiefs on Fiji

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Amid rising political and social tensions in Fiji, the country's military regime has appointed an unelected civilian government in a new bid to end the parliamentary hostage crisis that began on May 19. Armed Forces chief Frank Bainimarama will remain as the self-declared head of state while the new administration drafts a racially-based constitution to ensure that political power is dominated by indigenous Fijian land-owning and business interests.

By appointing a civilian cabinet the military junta is seeking to increase the pressure on business entrepreneur George Speight, to release the 27 government ministers, MPs and officials that his gunmen have been holding prisoner in the parliament complex for nearly seven weeks. At the same time, it is meeting the Speight group's demands for ethnic Fijian rule. Above all, it is hoping to meet the demands of investors and the Western powers for the stabilisation of the volatile political situation.

Just before unveiling its cabinet on July 3, the army declared a Military Exclusion Zone around the parliament and began to ration supplies of food, water and electricity to the complex. A tense standoff soon resulted. Just after the new government was sworn in the next day, a gun battle erupted after 200 Speight supporters charged an army observation post and launched grenades at soldiers. At least seven people, including two soldiers backing Speight, were injured.

Under intense business pressure to end the parliament siege, it appears that the military regime may now be preparing to use force. According to one regional chief, the army is secretly training 100 soldiers for an assault on the parliament, although the military leaders have denied the allegation.

Headed by Laisenia Qarase, a merchant banker, the military's cabinet consists of various sections of the ethnic Fijian establishment—bank executives, employers' representatives, businessmen, high chiefs, retired military commanders and heads of government departments. Two wealthy Indo-Fijian business owners were to join the line-up but pulled out under reported “community pressure”. This indicates that the new administration will lack any legitimacy in the eyes of the 44 percent minority Indian population, as well as facing opposition from ethnic Fijian working people.

Qarase, who will function as both Prime Minister and Information Minister, is a former senior public service bureaucrat who was managing director of Fiji Development Bank for 15 years and then chief executive of Merchant Bank Fiji. Last year he also became a Senator, nominated by the Great Council of Chiefs. He has taken temporary leave from his banking post to head the government.

Bankers, generals and business leaders dominate his 19-man cabinet. Finance Minister Ratu Jone Kubuabola is a former Fiji Reserve Bank governor. Deputy Prime Minister Ratu Epeli Nailatikau is a former armed forces chief and the son-in-law of deposed President Ratu Kamisese Mara. Labour and Industrial Relations Minister Hector Hatch is the chief executive of the Fiji Employers Federation and former chief executive of Carpenters, a trading company.

Others named include the head of the Fiji Sugar Corporation, a Suva-based property consultant, a former chief executive of the finance company Colonial Fiji, members of the Great Council of Chiefs and current or former heads of government departments. There will be no ministers for defence, national security

or police; instead Bainimarama will remain Executive Head of State and retain responsibility for national security and law and order.

Bainimarama restated his pledge of immunity for Speight and six other thugs who seized parliament with guns on May 19, demanding the dismissal of Mahendra Chaudhry's Labour Party-led government, the scrapping of the 1997 Constitution and the formation of an exclusively indigenous Fijian regime. Bainimarama said that if Speight released the hostages the Great Council of Chiefs would be convened to appoint a new President.

In the meantime, Bainimarama said, Qarase's cabinet would remain for 18 months, with its chief task being to draft a new constitution—possibly modelled on the Malaysian Constitution—that would enshrine special economic and political privileges for ethnic Fijians.

Making his first speech, Qarase said he was “very conscious” that his government had no popular mandate. He praised the leaders of the Fiji Trade Union Congress for having asked their Australian counterparts to lift trade bans and for agreeing to end the boycott of the sugar harvest. Despite protesting against Hatch's selection as Labour Minister, the trade union officials are collaborating with the military commanders and employers to quell resistance to the new regime.

Nevertheless, the military's government confronts major problems. In the first place, the hostage crisis remains unresolved. Both Bainimarama and Qarase appealed to Speight to let the prisoners go, saying that there was no longer any reason for them to be kept captive. Speight, however, has refused to recognise the government or release the hostages unless his nominee, Ratu Josefa Iloilo, is appointed President. Having failed to win widespread popular support, Speight is holding out for Iloilo's appointment as a means of securing a guarantee of immunity from prosecution.

In addition, the military commanders face renewed signs of divisions within their ranks. As the government was sworn in, several officers and soldiers supporting Speight took over a small army base at Vaturekuka, on Fiji's second largest island of Vanua Levu. From the outset, senior military officers have participated in Speight's coup attempt, led by former Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit commander, retired Colonel Ilisoni Ligairi.

Moreover, despite the complicity of the trade union

leaders, the military's cabinet has no mandate, little popular support and will quickly come into conflict with the working class and poor. In his first speech Qarase confirmed that his government's priorities include a planned mid-July mini-budget that will cut public sector jobs and wages. This is under conditions where at least 5,000 workers in the tourism, garment and sugar industries have already lost their jobs in the wake of Speight's coup attempt and many more have had their working hours and wages slashed.

Under these conditions, the major capitalist powers have not openly endorsed the new cabinet but instead urged the military to quickly end the hostage crisis and establish a more credible administration. The Howard government in Australia, whose companies dominate much of banking, finance, garment making, mining and sugar industries in Fiji, has been leading the push.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander described Qarase's government as a “step forward” but said Australia would not recognise it until the hostages were freed. He described Qarase as a good choice for Prime Minister, while still formally calling for the restoration of Chaudhry's government. Canberra was obviously consulted about Qarase's selection. The Australian High Commissioner in Fiji revealed that she had had lunch with Qarase before his appointment was announced.

In this, there are distinct echoes of 1987, when the Hawke government condemned Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka's racially-based military coup, but prevailed upon the Australian trade unions to lift their bans on the military dictatorship and soon officially recognised the regime. Over the following years, Australian ruling circles applied renewed pressure on Rabuka for tax concessions and other measures to fully open up the island state's economy to international exploitation, particularly by Australian-based cheap labour employers.



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