

Fiji's military leaders accede to racialisists' demands

Mike Head
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For over a month since declaring martial law, Fiji's military chiefs have been declaring that their aim has been to maintain law-and-order, uphold the country's constitution and end the hostage crisis sparked by the takeover of parliament by George Speight and members of the army's Counter Revolutionary Unit on May 19.

The deal signed by armed forces commander Frank Bainimarama last Sunday acceding to all of Speight's demands demonstrates that, from the outset, the military was deeply divided over the coup attempt and fundamentally agreed with the racist anti-Indian demands of Speight and his thugs. Insofar as the military top brass opposed Speight at all, they were responding to intense pressure from sections of big business and the major powers.

As it has turned out, even the prospect of international isolation and an economic collapse failed to deter Bainimarama from signing the July 9 Muanikau Accord, under which he has agreed to relinquish power to a President selected by the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) that meets tomorrow and to terminate the government of interim Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase that he installed just over a week ago.

After accommodating to Speight for weeks, holding occasional negotiations with him, the military last week formed its own civilian administration and gave Speight a deadline to end the hostage drama. But the divisions in the military were immediately apparent. Junior officers and some soldiers defected, handing over a barracks and armoury to Speight supporters. Bainimarama and his advisers quickly backed away from enforcing an exclusion zone around the parliamentary complex.

Various armed gangs, incited by Speight and encouraged by the military's continued refusal to move against his parliament house hoodlums, then brought parts of the country to a standstill. They seized a power station and shut off electricity to the capital Suva, stormed a village and grabbed 30 Indo-Fijian hostages, blockaded key roads and took over several army and police stations.

The military chiefs caved-in to Speight almost immediately. Under the accord, the new President, possibly Speight's handpicked nominee, Ratu Josefa Iloilo, will choose a government to rule Fiji for at least two years. This regime will

almost certainly include members of Speight's group, in addition to some of Qarase's cabinet of businessmen and bureaucrats. The President will also appoint a committee to draft a new racially-based document to replace the 1997 Constitution that the military had earlier revoked.

Speight and his associates will be given immunity from prosecution for all their crimes committed between May 19 and July 13, as will their supporters. These crimes include the ongoing pillaging of Indo-Fijian homes, villages, farms and shops.

After signing the pact, Speight declared that he was "excited and ecstatic". It was, he claimed, "a great day for Fiji". Every one of his original demands has now been granted. Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry's Labour Party-led coalition government has been dismissed and a blanket amnesty provided, members of Speight's cabal will be placed in positions of power and a new constitution will be drawn up to exclude Indo-Fijians—44 percent of the population—from high office.

Speight undertook to release Chaudhry and the 26 other government hostages on Thursday morning before the chiefs assembled but, having tasted victory, soon threw that commitment into doubt. Yesterday he declared that the hostages might not be freed before the meeting. Nine hostages were released in the early hours of Wednesday morning, leaving 18 still held at gunpoint inside the parliamentary complex.

The accord has further spurred on the various elements whipped up by Speight and his backers. Since it was signed, mobs have burned down buildings, looted shops, taken over a tuna cannery, overrun a police station and threatened to seize the international airport at Nadi. Telecom staff have gone on strike to demand the dismissal of Indian managers, islanders have occupied an airstrip and a tourist resort, prisoners have attempted a mass breakout at the Naboro maximum security jail and the villagers who took over the hydro-electricity plant have refused to leave, demanding compensation payments for the construction of a dam on their land.

Sections of the Fijian ruling elite, including some of the GCC elders, fear that such movements can spiral out of control as various groupings seize on the opportunity to raise their own

demands. Many of Speight's supporters appear to be disgruntled villagers and disaffected unemployed youth. For the present, Speight's grouping of grasping business entrepreneurs and junior landowners are channeling these frustrations into anti-Indian racism, splitting the working class and poor. But this can also cut across other business interests, including those of foreign investors.

Speight has called a meeting of junior chiefs prior to tomorrow's meeting of the Great Council of Chiefs in order to further bolster his position. The GCC chairman is 1987 military coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka, who has in recent weeks distanced himself from the Speight camp. Rabuka has insisted that the GCC will meet in the Queen Victoria military barracks, not the occupied parliamentary complex, which is Speight's nominated venue. Also in attendance at the GCC meeting will be former prime minister Ratu Kamisese Mara, who has not formally resigned as President and who has extensive business interests.

Some business leaders have been critical of Speight's actions, alarmed by the withdrawal of foreign capital, the collapse of tourism and widespread disruption to trade and commerce. Last week the Fiji Employers Federation, the Fiji Chamber of Commerce and Industries and the Fiji-Australia Business Council joined hands with the Fiji Trade Union Congress (FTUC) to urge the military to restore the 1997 Constitution.

As part of this alliance, the FTUC leaders agreed to end the boycott of the sugar harvest and ask overseas trade unions to lift trade bans. From the outset, the common response of the employers and trade union bureaucrats to Speight's coup has been to contain the volatile situation and restore order, so that the employers in the sugar, garment, tourism and mining industries can resume profitable operations.

The FTUC officials, together with their colleagues in the ousted Labour Party-led coalition government, bear the primary political responsibility for Speight's ability to strut the stage. They have opposed any mobilisation of the working people, across ethnic lines, against the racists. It is typical that even after the military's final capitulation to Speight, there has been no official call for any strikes or protests.

Nevertheless, there are signs of popular opposition to Speight's coup, among indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians alike. One glimpse of this came in interviews that the Fijilive Internet news service conducted with car drivers stopped at a rebel road block near Suva last weekend. "I am a Fijian," one driver exclaimed. "Is this the kind of rights they are fighting for? Will these people, who claim to be championing indigenous rights, look after my family?" The driver said he had heard the same claims in 1987, only to find that the coup leaders forgot about their promises once in power and instead lined their own pockets.

On July 4 the acting leaders of Chaudhry's ousted People's Coalition government appeared to depart from their previous conciliatory line toward the martial law regime. They responded to the appointment of Qarase's cabinet with a

statement accusing the military of being "fully complicit" in the "unlawful overthrow of a democratically elected government". The media release clearly reflected the pressure of growing demands from below for the rejection of the entire coup.

While uttering these words, however, the statement also effectively dropped the Coalition's previous formal demand for the reinstatement of the Chaudhry government. Instead it urged the military to consider appointing an interim administration drawn from members of all political parties represented in the parliament. This would amount to a military- and business-backed national unity government to enforce the requirements of investors.

On July 7, the same Coalition leaders—Education Minister Pratap Chand and Fijian Association acting leader Isimeli Cokanasiga—issued a further statement imploring the military to avoid "the very real possibility of civil chaos and anarchy across the country" by asking the United Nations or the British Commonwealth to provide professional negotiators to resolve the hostage crisis.

The purpose of any intervention by the UN or the Commonwealth would not be to defend the democratic rights of the Fijian workers, villagers and poor. It would be to prosecute the interests of the Western powers, such as Australia, that dominate the south-west Pacific, and protect the operations of the global financial institutions and multinationals. These interests are to some extent challenged by the racist takeover, in so far as local operators like Speight and his cronies aspire to control sectors of the economy.

That is why the Clinton administration in the United States has expressed concern about the military's compliance with the demands of Speight's camp. Last week it reacted to the military's appointment of the Qarase cabinet by withdrawing the US ambassador, Osman Siddique, for consultations. As he departed, the US embassy warned that Washington was considering measures that would have a "serious impact" on Fiji.

The Howard government in Canberra has taken a slightly different tack, seeking to maintain Australian hegemony in the region. It has pointedly refused to condemn the military's deal with Speight. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said the accord was welcome in that it provided a means of securing the release of the hostages. This response is similar to that of the Hawke government in 1987, which quickly dropped its verbal opposition to Rabuka's military coup and worked with Rabuka to open the economy up to Australian cheap labour investment.



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