

Intent on securing Western support

Fiji's regime charges coup leaders with treason

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In an apparent effort to retain Western backing and lure foreign investment, Fiji's military-appointed government charged coup leader George Speight and 14 others with treason on August 11. By laying such serious charges—treason carries the death penalty—the regime seems anxious to prove that it is in firm control of the Pacific island state.

Speight and his associates have been charged with trying to wage civil war against former President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and with overthrowing the government on May 19, when they seized the parliamentary complex and took hostage the government of Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry. The charges include treason, conspiracy to commit treason and being accessories to treason.

The full accusation against Speight is that he intended “to levy war against his excellency the President in order to put constraint on the legislature and overtook the legislature by gathering arms and using armed force to overthrow the legitimate government”.

The others charged include the former Counter-Revolutionary Unit army commander Iliso Ligairi, Speight's public relations spokesman Joe Nata, Timoci Silatolu, and Speight's younger brother Jim Speight.

The severity of the charges means that the military can continue to hold Speight and his group as prisoners on a small island off the capital of Suva. As expected, a magistrate refused the group's applications for release on bail. A date for the trial will not be set for four weeks at least.

Speight and others already faced minor charges of unlawful assembly, possession of firearms and the illegal burial of a supporter in the parliamentary complex. These were laid after Speight and 369 of his supporters were arrested on July 27.

Both the initial arrests and new charges mark an about-face by the military, acting under intense Western pressure. Previously, the military commanders had granted Speight and other coup participants immunity from prosecution under the July 9 Maunikau Accord, which was signed by Speight and armed forces chief, Commander Frank Bainimarama.

The strengthening of the moves against Speight follows the house arrest of five chiefs on the northern island of Vanua Levu

last week and continued military operations against rebels involved in the shooting of a police officer and a soldier two weeks ago. The five chiefs are being held for questioning over their support for the coup. Among them is Ratu Josefa Dimuri, a former information minister in the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulua ni Taukei (SVT) government of Sitiveni Rabuka.

Within days of laying the treason charges, the military's non-elected “Interim Government” led by Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, unveiled an eight-point plan to attract investment. The scheme includes a lower corporate tax rate, special investment and depreciation allowances, tax and import duty concessions for export manufacturers and a host of other business incentives.

Such measures underscore the military's anxiety to appease foreign markets. Qarase, a corporate banker, gave no figures for the cost of the tax handouts, but there is no question he will move to deepen the cuts to social spending announced in his July 27 mini-budget. The regime's generosity to investors stands in stark contrast to the mini-budget's 20 percent to 30 percent reductions in government expenditure and its 12.5 percent pay cut for public sector workers.

Speight's coup sparked an investment strike. An estimated \$400 million worth of planned projects were suspended after the events of May 19. This withdrawal of capital will continue unless the military's administration can assure the major powers of stable conditions.

This message was reinforced by a report presented to the recent South Pacific Forum Foreign Ministers meeting, which estimated that under the best scenario—a resolution to the political crisis and a return to normal international relations—Fiji would face two years of recession. Under a worst-case scenario of full trade sanctions, the economy would lose 40,000 jobs and face five years of recession.

According to the latest *Pacific Economic Bulletin*: “Several unknowns in terms of the severity of international sanctions and the final political solutions to the crisis will impact on the magnitude of economic damage. Nevertheless, the damage done to date is already profound. The biggest losers will be the poor; the unskilled workers; particularly those dependent on the

construction, tourism, and retail industries—all intensive users of unskilled labour.”

International governments immediately reacted favourably to the treason charges, the internal crackdown and the investment decision. At the same time, they are pushing the military to ensure a “transparent” administration, free of the cronyism that dominated the military-backed governments set up by the 1987 coup leader, Major General Sitiveni Rabuka.

The United States Ambassador to Fiji, Osman Siddique, met Prime Minister Qarase and said that the US would “deal and work with the new administration as necessary”. Siddique urged the government to quickly get on the path to “national reconciliation and reconstruction” and to be “more transparent”.

US Secretary of State Madeline Albright wrote to deposed Prime Minister Chaudhry last week offering sympathy and vague support for a return to constitutional rule. The US would continue to suspend its Security Assistance Program until “constitutional government has been restored”. Albright did not, however, suggest any US backing for Chaudhry's reinstatement.

The Indian and British governments have taken a similar stance. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee met Chaudhry in New Delhi, condemned the coup and stated that “India stands for a multiracial, constitutional and democratic order in Fiji” but did not offer Chaudhry any specific support. When Chaudhry visits London this week, Prime Minister Blair will not meet him. Chaudhry will have to be satisfied with meeting the Secretary General of the British Commonwealth, a former New Zealand foreign minister.

Australia, New Zealand and Japan have lifted their travel advisory bans warning visitors to remain away from Fiji. The Australian High Commissioner will also return to Fiji after being recalled for advisory talks soon after the coup. Australia's Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has declared that limited economic, sporting and military sanctions will remain in place in order to keep pressure on the new government.

An article in the *Australian Financial Review* underscored concerns that the new government may favour indigenous business entrepreneurs, cutting across the interests of international banks and foreign investors. “In deciding how to tailor aid under the Qarase ‘interim’ regime,” it declared, “Australia should ensure it does not fill in funding gaps that allow the Fiji Government to slosh its diminished tax revenues into the pockets of somnolent chiefs and cronies via its positive economic discrimination measures.”

Members of Chaudhry's former Peoples Coalition government have launched a legal action against the current President Ratu Iloilo, his predecessor Ratu Mara, the armed forces chief Bainimarama, the interim Attorney-General Alipata Qetaki and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Timoci Tuivaga. The writ alleges that Mara's abrogation of the 1997 Constitution and dismissal of the Labour Party-led

government was illegal, and that Bainimarama had no authority to declare martial law.

The writ does not call for the Chaudhry government's reinstatement, however. Instead it calls for compensation for the hostages and restoration of their salary entitlements. The legal action appears to be a lever in the ousted government's efforts to be included in a partnership with sections of the interim government through the formation of a Government of National Unity.

Speaking in Sydney, Chaudhry welcomed the charges against Speight but declared that six members of the interim cabinet could also be charged with treason. He called for a national unity government as the only way to solve the crisis.

Other ructions have appeared within sections of the Fijian elite. Court of Appeals President Jai Ram Reddy, a former leader of the National Federation Party, resigned last week after only two months in office. He said he could not continue after the elected government had been removed at gunpoint. Two other judges have also resigned since the coup.

Behind these manoeuvres is a concern that the interim government will not be able to contain popular unrest, particularly as the economic crisis worsens. A similar situation erupted after the 1987 coup when the deposed Labour Party prime minister, Timoci Bavadra, negotiated a deal with Mara to be included in an interim government with Mara's Alliance Party. Just days after the deal was signed, however, Rabuka led a second coup to reassert military rule.

In an effort to head off further criticisms, the military has announced a board of inquiry into Speight's coup. According to the *Fiji Times*, the board will have representatives of the security council, the police, the military and the president. Other media reports have suggested that the inquiry will examine the role played by various military officers, politicians and businessmen in supporting the coup. Army spokesman Colonel Tarikinini played down these reports, saying that the investigation will primarily deal with the breakdown of security on May 19.

The major powers appear to be prepared to work with the military's government, so long as it can establish law and order, contain Speight's supporters, and provide profitable investment conditions. For his part, Chaudhry is seeking to convince the imperialist powers that a coalition government would best secure their interests in Fiji.



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