

Fiji's military government wins more explicit backing from Australia and New Zealand

Tim Joy

19 December 2000

The Australian and New Zealand governments have strengthened their support for the military-installed interim government in Fiji by making it plain that they are not calling for the reinstatement of deposed Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry.

Following talks last weekend, Australian and New Zealand foreign ministers Alexander Downer and Phil Goff said it was up to “the properly constituted authorities of Fiji” to decide whether Chaudhry should return to office. Australia and New Zealand simply wanted the restoration of the 1997 constitution, which the military abrogated in the aftermath of George Speight's May 19 seizure of parliament.

Downer said that if it was decided “according to the Constitution ... to move to another prime minister that would be a matter for them.” Goff said Fiji should restore constitutional rule, democratic processes and the rule of law. “Provided those three principles are upheld we will live with the decision of the properly constituted authorities of Fiji.”

In other words, while appealing to certain constitutional and democratic “principles,” the governments in Canberra and Wellington are making more explicit their backing for a regime that was installed through the overthrow of a democratically-elected government. This shameless announcement underscores the willingness of the two regional powers to keep working with the unelected administration headed by Interim Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, so long as it can maintain its domestic authority.

Several days earlier, on December 12, Downer buoyed Qarase's regime by announcing the renewal of a special trade deal to assist Fiji's textile and garment industry. Downer said his decision followed Qarase's commitment to hold elections by March 2002, instead of his original decision to do so “only after two or more years”.

The textile scheme had been allowed to lapse because of the political crisis that erupted with the May 19 coup. In October, Downer announced that a replacement would be put in place if Qarase agreed to elections within 18 months—a deadline that Qarase later agreed to.

The scheme allows Australian firms to export fabric to low-wage countries such as Fiji for manufacturing and to import the finished garments without paying full import duty. Its renewal

extends an economic lifeline to Qarase's government. The Fijian-based garment industry employs 18,000 people and accounts for 25 percent of Fiji's gross exports, with 70 percent of the exports going to Australia. Before Downer's announcement, three factories had closed and 300 staff had been retrenched because of the uncertainty caused by the delay in announcing a new scheme.

Now the scheme will be replaced by changes to the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Co-operation Agreement (SPARTECA), which allow the duty free import of goods into Australia, provided that certain local content requirements are met. The Australian government has predicted that the changes will preserve 75 percent of garment and textile imports from Fiji.

Downer made the announcement despite receiving a letter from Chaudhry two weeks earlier opposing such an agreement. In a Radio Australia interview after the announcement, Chaudhry said: “If they continue to do business with an illegal and unconstitutional regime that may send out wrong signals to the international community.”

Chaudhry nevertheless indicated that he was still hoping for Australian support. He described the decision as disappointing but “it doesn't mean that our relations have soured”.

In his statement on the textile scheme, Downer said Canberra was “following closely the implications” of a November 15 ruling in the Fijian High Court by Justice Anthony Gates that the military had illegally abrogated the 1997 Constitution and that the interim government therefore had no legal authority. Downer described the ruling as “fully consistent with the position Australia has taken about the illegitimacy of the 19 May coup and its consequences”.

In his judgement, Justice Gates called for a government of national unity, but the military and Qarase rejected the ruling and are appealing to the Court of Appeal. Chaudhry's ousted government has made similar calls for a power-sharing government.

Downer's contradictory statement, both supporting the interim government and acknowledging its illegitimacy, confirms that the regional powers' real concern is not democracy but the creation of a government that can stabilise the situation politically and with which they can work to further their

considerable strategic and business interests in the Southwest Pacific.

Other Western powers are keeping a close eye on the situation. A special envoy from the Commonwealth Secretary General, Justice Pius Langa, has just concluded a tour of Fiji in which he met with members of Chaudhry's government and non-government groups as well as the interim government. A three-member team from the Carter Centre in the United States has also arrived on a fact-finding mission.

The moves by Australia and New Zealand came after the Fijian regime announced a new "Look North" policy. Speaking at Exporter of the Year Awards in Nadi, Qarase said Fiji would seek to improve its connections with Japan and China. He linked the new policy to the sanctions introduced by Australia and New Zealand after the coup and said Fiji had to develop other associations to protect its national interests. As part of the policy, Fiji is backing Japan to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and supporting China's application to join the World Trade Organisation.

The policy appears to be an attempt to pressure Australia and New Zealand to provide more backing for the government in the short term and to reduce Fiji's dependence on the regional powers in the long term. Australia and New Zealand dominate Fiji's external trade, supplying 60 percent of its imports and taking 39 percent of exports. By comparison, Japan is worth 7 percent of imports and 5 percent of exports.

The Qarase government is continuing to straddle between the capitalist powers and the elements who backed Speight's coup. Having been installed by the military with Speight's agreement, the regime adopted an economic blueprint that grants many of Speight's demands for favoured treatment for ethnic Fijian business and it is drafting a new constitution to entrench political discrimination against Indo-Fijians. Yet is also desperate to entice foreign investment.

Last month's budget for 2001 reduced the corporate and top personal tax rate from 35 percent for residents and 45 percent for non-residents to a uniform 34 percent, with a further cut to 30 percent by 2003. The budget statement declared that this would make Fiji more competitive internationally and ensure that non-residents were treated "equitably".

At the same time, the budget featured a \$F28.65 million affirmative action package for indigenous Fijians and Rotumans, including a \$F10 million trust fund for indigenous business.

Tensions within the regime have been inflamed by last week's release of four people being held on Nukulau Island along with Speight. The Director of Public Prosecutions announced that he did not have sufficient evidence to charge them with treason. The four men, Tevita Bukarau, Metuisela Mua, Eroni Lewaqai and Viliame Sausauwai, were inside the parliamentary complex for the entire 56 days of the hostage crisis following the May 19 coup.

Their release, leaving just 10 prisoners on the island, marks a

further sign of conciliation towards Speight and his supporters. The political nature of the decision was emphasised when Qarase's spokesman defended it. Jioji Kotobalavu, Permanent Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office, stated that the DPP had carefully considered all the evidence and had taken sufficient legal advice.

In turn, Speight offered his support to the interim government, endorsing its economic blueprint. One of the four released prisoners said Speight had written to Qarase and President Josepho Iloilo suggesting that he could assist with "national reconciliation".

The prisoners' release drew criticism from an employers' group, the Fiji Hotel Association, as well as Chaudhry's Labour Party and the Fiji Trade Union Congress. Hotel Association chief executive Olivia Pareti warned that the decision could see the reinstatement of travel advisory bans on Fiji introduced after the coup, just when the government had launched a \$F11 million marketing campaign to convince travellers that the island is safe.

The fact that the Qarase government is risking international condemnation and a further economic boycott by the gesture towards Speight points to its dependence on the social layers who supported Speight's coup—right-wing Fijian nationalist politicians, business entrepreneurs, government bureaucrats and landowning chiefs.

Significantly, the decision also drew criticism from the army. Spokesman Major Howard Politini said the army was surprised and disappointed. It arrested Speight and his followers in August under pressure from the international powers, which opposed his influence over the government.

The army remains deeply divided over Speight's coup. It has recently announced that mutiny and murder charges will be laid against 39 soldiers for attempting to seize the army headquarters and stage another coup on November 2. The soldiers will face a military court on charges that carry the death penalty.

While bolstered by the Australian and New Zealand announcements, the Qarase regime's ability to maintain its hold on power depends on whether it can preserve order while simultaneously advancing the interests of the ethnic Fijian elite as well as foreign business interests.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact