

Race-based government formed in Fiji

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17 September 2001

Following general elections earlier this month, Fijian Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase has appointed a cabinet without a single Indo-Fijian member and excluded the Labour Party, sparking a fresh political and constitutional crisis in the Pacific Ocean island state of some 820,000 people. By rejecting the Labour Party's request to join the ministry, Qarase breached the country's 1997 Constitution, which requires cabinet seats to be offered to all parties with more than eight Members of Parliament.

At the same time, backed by President Josefa Iloilo, Qarase included two members of the extreme racist Matanitu Vanua (Conservative Alliance) of George Speight, who led the May 2000 seizure of parliament. Speight's coup resulted in a military takeover and the removal of Mahendra Chaudhry's Labour Party-led government.

Chaudhry has foreshadowed a Court of Appeal challenge to the legality of Qarase's government and accused the military-backed regime of ballot rigging in the elections. He has called rallies of Labour Party members, canvassing a boycott of parliament and suggesting continued international sanctions against the government.

Earlier in the week, Iloilo swore in Qarase as Prime Minister even though Qarase did not have a parliamentary majority. In the elections, Qarase's indigenous Fijian party, Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewe ni Vanua (SDL) or United Fiji Party, won 31 of the 71 parliamentary seats, while Chaudhry's Labour Party took 27. The breakaway New Labour Party headed by Chaudhry's former deputy, Tupeni Baba, obtained two seats. The Indian-based National Federation Party won one seat, as did the United General Party, and there are two independents. The final seat will be decided through a by-election because one of the candidates died.

In order to hold onto office, Qarase—a merchant banker initially installed by the military as an unelected prime minister last year following Speight's coup—is relying on the support of six Conservative Alliance MPs. They include Speight, who won a seat after the government permitted him to campaign from a prison island, where he remains in detention on treason charges.

When Qarase announced his refusal to allocate cabinet

seats to Labour, he did so on explicitly chauvinist grounds. He declared that Chaudhry had put unacceptable conditions on participating in the government by refusing to adopt the manifesto of Qarase's party, which provides for preferential treatment for indigenous Fijian businesses and excludes Indo-Fijians from holding high political office—even though they comprise nearly half the population.

The 1997 Constitution, adopted by 1987 military coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka at the direct behest of the regional powers, New Zealand and Australia, divides Fijian working people along communal lines by allocating most parliamentary seats on an ethnic basis—23 to indigenous Fijian, 19 to Indo-Fijians and 3 to “other races”. But it also requires governments to share power by offering cabinet seats to parties that win more than 10 percent of the vote.

By flouting this rule, Qarase is seeking to entrench the economic and political fault lines created by Speight's coup. While he claims to represent the interests of ordinary Fijians, including poor villagers and urban workers, his regime rests on the support of traditional land-owning chiefs and ethnic Fijian businessmen.

Chaudhry's response has been a mixture of denunciations of Qarase's administration as illegitimate and appeals to join it. In the first place, the Labour Party has challenged the election results in five seats that it lost narrowly. Invalid marks on ballot papers appear to have been made by the same hand, and Labour has called for ballot papers to be fingerprinted. In some seats, the invalid vote reached 15 percent, almost twice the level recorded in the 1999 election. Moreover, doubt exists about the voter turnout. Initially, it was reported to be as low as 60 percent. Even the final official figure of 83 percent is far below the 1999 result of 90 percent.

Despite this, Chaudhry sought to join the government, a clear indication of his readiness to work with Qarase. Even after being snubbed by Qarase, he insisted that policy differences between them could have been “easily resolved”.

Now that Iloilo has sworn in Qarase's cabinet, Chaudhry has called a series of protest rallies to demand entry into the government. The Fiji Trade Union Congress has backed his

stance, with TUC national secretary Felix Anthony declaring that the unions would only support a “constitutional government”. At the same time, Chaudhry has refused to rule out accepting the outcome and serving as leader of the parliamentary opposition.

He is following a well-worn path. As a trade union official, Chaudhry was jailed by Rabuka in 1987, when the military ousted the previous Labour Party government of Timoci Bavadra and instituted a nationalist program of protecting ethnic Fijian interests. Chaudhry later entered parliament and helped prop up Rabuka as prime minister during the 1990s.

This month’s elections marked a further shift toward communalist politics, and this was reflected in the results. The Labour Party lost nine “open” seats it had previously held to Qarase’s party—all seats where the number of ethnic Fijian voters just exceeded the number of Indo-Fijian voters. It appears that some indigenous Fijians who had previously voted for Labour switched to the newly-formed parties of Qarase and Speight. A number of “moderate” parties that held seats in the previous parliament disappeared, including Rabuka’s SVT and the Fijian Association Party of Bavadra’s widow Adi Kuini Speed, which presented themselves as more tolerant faces of ethnic Fijian politics.

During the campaign, Qarase and Chaudhry appealed for support along ethnic lines, diverting attention from the deteriorating living standards of Fiji’s working people as a whole. Despite their differences on Qarase’s racist manifesto, both committed themselves to the underlying economic policies required by global investors and the international banks. One of Chaudhry’s main criticisms of Qarase’s military-appointed interim government was that it over-spent on government programs, including providing villages with basic facilities to win electoral support.

For its part, the government’s first major move after the election was to re-impose a value added tax (VAT) on essential items, further hitting working class and poor families. As soon as he was sworn in, Qarase sought to assure foreign investors that his government would be “fairly stable” and would “welcome investors from within Fiji and outside”.

Throughout the political crisis provoked by Speight’s coup attempt last year, and the installation of Qarase’s government, Australia and other Western powers have demanded a return to a more constitutional form of rule, in order to contain political unrest and protect foreign investment. They imposed limited economic and diplomatic sanctions on the military regime, insisting that elections be conducted under the 1997 Constitution. Reflecting these pressures, Fiji’s Court of Appeal—comprised of expatriate judges—ordered the restoration of the Constitution and the

staging of elections.

Immediately after the elections, UN observers swiftly declared the poll to have been free and fair, dismissing Chaudhry’s objections. The leaders of the Commonwealth of former British colonies (Britain ruled Fiji from 1872 until 1970) were quick to propose lifting sanctions and inviting Fiji to next month’s Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in the Australian city of Brisbane.

Qarase’s actions have thrown this course into doubt, however, setting off new fears of instability. Since Speight’s coup, many investors and tourists have already fled Fiji, sending the economy into a tailspin and eliminating thousands of jobs. The renewed conflict over the government’s legitimacy clearly indicates that Fiji’s political, business and military leadership remains severely fractured along sectional and regional lines.

Reflecting these concerns in Australian ruling circles, Friday’s editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* branded Qarase’s refusal of cabinet posts to Labour as “unconstitutional” and denounced his inclusion of two Speight supporters as “recklessness bordering on irresponsibility”. It did not call for Chaudhry’s inclusion in the government but urged Qarase to “put purely ethnic considerations aside and act on behalf of all Fijians”.

The editorial went on to warn: “It is difficult to see what further international pressures may ensure the process of rebuilding democracy in Fiji can continue.” These comments are not based on any regard for the democratic rights and social needs of Fijian working people but reflect concerns that Western business interests and governments are drawing the conclusion that the Fijian elite is incapable of delivering the requirements of global investors.



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