

Signs of more political instability in Fiji

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An acrimonious struggle has broken out this month in Fiji's ruling circles between the head of the military Commander Frank Bainimarama and sections of the government led by Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, threatening to reignite the festering conflicts that remain unresolved following the failed coup attempt in 2000.

The conflict centres on who will head the Fijian military. Bainimarama's commission is due to expire at the end of February and the government wants to replace him. Bainimarama, however, has indicated that he will not go until all those involved in the 2000 events—which includes members of Qarase's government—have been dealt with in the courts.

Who controls the military is no small matter in Fijian politics. The military successfully ousted an elected Labour government in 1987 and replaced it with a regime headed by the army chief Sitiveni Rabuka. In May 2000, George Speight and a group of special forces soldiers seized parliament and held the entire Labour government hostage for weeks. The army abrogated the 1987 constitution and effectively seized power. Bainimarama ended the immediate crisis by brokering Speight's surrender and the installation of the Qarase cabinet leaving the elected Labour government out of power.

Last week tensions again appeared to reach breaking point with media rumours of an imminent coup. While Prime Minister Qarase rushed to make a televised address denying media speculation and appealing for calm, there have been definite indications that Bainimarama was threatening the government.

In an interview in the *Review* business magazine in early January, he declared: "We (the military) have decided we must play our part in the governance of this country and provide the government with continued advice on security issues with regards to the rule of law. That is why I am being attacked by politicians and

ministers alike."

Later in the interview, he added that the military would "only resist the push in one direction; not in the governance of the country. We stay away from that. Only when it touches security and when we see people interfere in the rule of law being followed." The significance of such statements would not have been lost on the members of Qarase's government who are well aware of the role played by Bainimarama in 2000.

The interview was followed by constant media speculation of an impending showdown between Bainimarama and the government. Agence France Presse journalist Michael Field wrote on January 13: "Fiji is slipping into an unusual kind of crisis that is either a looming coup at worst, or a weird kind of bureaucratic mess at best."

Rumours intensified after Radio Fiji reported on January 19 that Bainimarama had held a meeting of his senior officers asking them to swear allegiance to him. Those who refused were directed to take leave. The following day the Police Commissioner Andrew Hughes was called to intervene in a "commotion" between Bainimarama and Home Affairs Secretary Jeremian Waqanisau. Home Affairs is the department in charge of deciding who will head the military.

The same day Qarase was forced to break his silence on the dispute and called a meeting of the National Security Council. He later went on radio and television to allay any fears of an impending coup. "I can confirm to you that there is no basis for a newspaper report which spoke about a security alert. There is no such alert," Qarase declared, adding that the dispute over the military commander's post should be kept out of the public light and settled according to established legal procedure.

Qarase's comments gloss over the fact, however, that the record of the Fijian ruling elites in settling their disputes according to accepted legal and constitutional

norms is a very checkered one. The immediate issue is how to deal with those responsible for the 2000 coup attempt but this touches on more fundamental concerns.

Some in the Qarase government have an obvious vested interest in shutting down the trials. Vice President Ratu Jope Seniloli and two government ministers were charged last year with sedition and the junior partner in the ruling coalition—the Conservative Alliance—includes George Speight’s brother and others who want to see him and his fellow coup plotters released.

Bainimarama, on the other hand, represents layers of the ruling elite. They are just as mired ethnic Fijian chauvinism as Speight but regard the trials as essential to prove to international investors and the major powers that the legacy of the events of 2000 has been overcome and full political stability restored.

These divisions go to the heart of the Qarase government. It has been trying to attract foreign investment and aid but at the same time rests politically on very conservative Fijian social layers that are hostile to any changes to their entrenched privileges based on a racially divided voting system and almost exclusive ethnic Fijian ownership of the land.

Exacerbating these tensions is the fragile state of the Fijian economy. It has restabilised to some extent since 2000 and foreign investment is flowing in. The New Zealand-based *National Business Review* reported last week that Fiji’s growth rate, which was negative three years ago, was now running at more than 5 percent with inflation low and falling. Chief executive of the Fiji Islands Trade and Investment Bureau (FTIB) Lailun Khan said that \$F1.2 billion investment was expected during 2002-2005, mostly from tourism which is booming.

But as the events of 2000 graphically demonstrated the rosy economic picture could rapidly change if there were any hint of a coup. For some, Bainimarama is seen as the only guarantee of future political stability. This is particularly the case when other factors threaten to create social tensions. The sugar industry which employs about a quarter of the workforce—many of them ethnic Indians who make up nearly half of the populations—is currently undergoing a major restructure. The change threatens to undermine the income of the land-owning ethnic Fijian elite and to drive thousands of Indian tenant farmers off the land.

Pacific Islands Report website recently ~~hosted~~ a comment entitled “Bainimarama’s steady hand is Fiji’s only hope” by former director of the Fiji Trade and Investment Board (FTIB) Narendra P. Singh. He warned that any economic gains would be “eradicated overnight if the nation is pushed into mayhem once again. And this time Fiji will be staggering for a long time and perhaps even will be forced to join the Pacific neighbours, like the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, where it would have to ask the developed partners to intervene and assist in providing good governance.”

Behind the scenes, it is virtually certain that the Australian and New Zealand governments have been exerting their influence to ensure that a political crisis in Fiji is averted. Both governments played a major role in strengthening Bainimarama’s hand at the time of the 2000 coup and have supported efforts to ensure that Speight and others were charged and tried. None of this had anything to do with the democratic rights of the Fijian people—neither government insisted on the restoration of the elected Labour government.

Since last week’s fracas there has been growing pressure on Qarase to maintain Bainimarama in his post. An editorial on January 22 in the *Fiji Sun* entitled “Fiji owes allegiance to Bainimarama” declared that there was a “large reservoir of trust for the army among the citizenry” and praised the military chief for restoring order after the 2000 coup “as the democratic process that put the nation back on the path of stability it enjoys today.” The newspaper also reported that former coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka had also weighed in behind Bainimarama.

Whatever the immediate outcome to the present political conflict, none of the underlying issues have been resolved, paving the way for future crises.



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