

Threats of a new military coup in Fiji

Frank Gaglioti
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Legislation under discussion in the Fijian parliament threatens to precipitate a full-blown political crisis in the small island state, just five years after a failed coup attempt in 2000. The key element of the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill that has provoked bitter controversy is a proposed amnesty for those involved in the coup, including nominal coup leader George Speight, who is serving a life sentence for treason.

In May 2000, Speight and a handful of gunmen took over the parliament building and held hostage the Labour Party-led government of Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry for nearly two months. While Speight failed to form his own government, Chaudhry, an ethnic Indian, was replaced by the current Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, with the backing of the ethnic Fijian establishment, and formed an administration that was sympathetic to the coup's communal aims.

Speight and several of his co-conspirators were tried and jailed, but none of the tensions that gave rise to the coup have been resolved. The Bill is a crass appeal by Qarase for support from ethnic Fijian supremacists. Incapable of resolving the country's deep social crisis, sections of the ruling elite have repeatedly stirred up animosity toward ethnic Indians, who form nearly half of the population, as a means of diverting attention from their own failed policies.

The legislation is opposed by sections of the political establishment and state apparatus who are deeply concerned that such a move will lead to political instability and alienate foreign investors and the regional powers—Australia and New Zealand. Last month, Fiji's military commander Frank Bainimarama denounced the legislation and warned that the army could move against the government if it were passed. The threats were contained in an eight-page submission that he submitted to a parliamentary committee, portions of which were published in the media on July

12.

In his submission, Bainimarama described the Bill as the product of “warped and corrupt minds”. He declared that “anyone who will try and destabilise the country... we will see them as George Speight... [R]ight now Nukulau [a prison island] is about full and if the need arises we will use the island next to Nukulau to fill it with those who want to cause instability.” He specifically named Attorney General Qoriniasi Bale and Ministry of Reconciliation chief executive Apisalome Tudreu as working to destabilise the country.

Bainimarama's statement drew an angry response from the government, but it was unable to take any action against him—an indication that the military commander enjoys significant support not only in the military but in broader ruling circles. Home Affairs Minister Josefa Vosanibola lamely declared: “We are proud of our military institutions but its present leadership is questionable.”

The following day, the Fiji press published an even more contentious extract from Bainimarama's submission. It stated bluntly: “The RFMF [Royal Fiji Military Force] must stop the Bill from passing or get rid of the Government if it is passed. We can recover without this government, we cannot recover from this Bill.”

US Ambassador David Lyon immediately delivered a sharp rebuke, declaring: “Extra-constitutional action against a duly-elected democratic government for exercising its powers in proposing a Bill to Parliament is unacceptable.” At the same time, he reiterated US opposition to the Bill, saying that it would lead to future instability.

New Zealand Foreign Affairs Minister Phil Goff released a similar statement and on July 27, the Australian government issued a travel warning for Fiji pointing to “tensions [that] have arisen around the

controversial Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill relating to the coup in Fiji in 2000”.

Over the past five years, Australia and New Zealand have pushed for the prosecution of Speight and other coup plotters to end political instability that has threatened their considerable strategic and economic interests in the country. Canberra has pressed Qarase to accept the appointment of Australian officials into key positions in Fiji. Fiji’s police commissioner Andrew Hughes, a former Australian police officer, has indicated he will resign if the amnesty legislation is passed.

Qarase has attempted to reassure the US that his government would uphold the rule of law. “We must listen with respect and tolerance to what others say, even when they disagree with our own thinking,” he said, adding: “There can and will be no interference with the authority and the independence of the Courts, the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Police.”

Qarase convened a meeting of the National Security Council on July 18 attended by Bale, Vosanibola, Finance Minister Jone Kubuabola and Foreign Affairs Minister Kaliopate Tavola. Significantly, Bainimarama and Hughes were not invited to attend. Following the meeting, Qarase issued a statement declaring: “I would like to reiterate the assurances given by the military and police that the situation in the country is stable.”

There is no doubt that Qarase intends to press ahead with the amnesty bill. Not only will the legislation form a part of his campaign for the 2006 elections, but he also wants to put an end to the trials of other coup participants that threaten to expose the real instigators of the coup. Last year, Fiji’s vice-president Ratu Jope Seniloli and four other leading politicians, including the deputy speaker of the House of Representatives, were sentenced to jail terms for sedition and taking an illegal oath to commit a capital offence.

Qarase has been lobbying intensely for the Bill. Late last month the Great Council of Chiefs, representing the traditional ethnic Fijian elite, endorsed the legislation along with all 14 provincial councils in the country.

Labour Party leader Chaudhry criticised the Council, declaring: “The chiefs have failed to address the issue properly and this doesn’t augur well for Fiji’s future.” But Labour has conducted launched no concerted campaign against the blatantly anti-democratic legislation.

Military commander Bainimarama attempted to persuade the Great Council not to support the Bill, saying it would “legitimise the 2000 coup and will weaken the law and order agencies. All the good work of rebuilding Fiji to what it is today will be undone.” After the council backed the legislation, he again denounced the measures as “legally, morally and ethically wrong”.

Tensions in the capital of Suva are extremely high. The Bill has already passed the first stages of debate and due to be voted on later in the year. Last week, the police increased security around the parliamentary complex, establishing checkpoints and putting plainclothes officers and the Tactical Response Unit into the area.

If the legislation is enacted, a political crisis could quickly erupt. “This is how civil wars are made and the public is well aware of the possible outcome of such a confrontation. It would be nothing short of disastrous,” an editorial in the *Fiji Sun* warned.



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