

Fiji remains tense after new coup threat

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Bitter divisions in ruling circles in the small Pacific island state of Fiji have resurfaced after the country's military commander, Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, last week threatened to stage a coup if the government proceeded with its planned Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill. The legislation, which would provide amnesty for the leaders of a May 2000 coup attempt, is due to be passed in February when the parliament resumes.

Bainimarama, who made similar threats last August when the Bill was introduced, declared on January 8: "[I]f they [the government] lack the moral strength and the courage to continue the good fight the military is willing to return and complete for this nation the responsibilities we gave this government in 2000 and 2001."

In May 2000, coup leader George Speight, an ethnic Fijian businessman, and a handful of special forces troops took over the parliament at gun point, detaining the first elected Fijian-Indian Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and members of his Labour-led government for 56 days. The military led by Bainimarama imposed martial law and installed the current Prime Minister, Laisenia Qarase, as an unelected caretaker, then brokered a deal with Speight to end the standoff at parliament house.

With the backing of the ethnic Fijian establishment, Qarase formed a government sympathetic to the Speight's communalist aims. He placed a number of Speight's backers in his cabinet and implemented much of their racist agenda for measures favouring ethnic Fijians. A year later, his government was elected amid an ongoing communalist campaign against ethnic Indians.

After pressure from Australia and New Zealand, Speight and some of his closest supporters were eventually tried and jailed, but none of the tensions that gave rise to the coup have been resolved. The

Reconciliation Bill panders to Qarase's communal constituency. 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 anger over widespread poverty and joblessness.

When he declared military rule in 2000, Bainimarama represented sections of the ruling elite that were just as mired in Fijian chauvinism but more mindful of the demands of the regional powers, Australia and New Zealand, as well as the United States, for political stability and more open markets to allow profitable investment.

In the current crisis, he has accused the government of using "racist policies and programs to justify its existence to the indigenous community" and to "influence the community at large to support the cause of the opportunists [Speight and his backers]." He expressed concerns that the release of Speight and others would jeopardise investment.

Others in ruling circles, however, including within the military, are concerned that the continued sparring between the Bainimarama and the government has the potential to spiral out of control. Qarase placed a gag on government members speaking out on the issue and the *Fijilive* website reported that on January 12 Qarase summoned Police Commissioner Andrew Hughes before the National Security Council to discuss Bainimarama's threats. The military commander was not invited to the meeting.

On the same day, the military headquarters at Queen Elizabeth Barracks in Suva were locked down and placed on heavy guard by military police, while naval vessels took to the harbour, fuelling speculation of an imminent coup. On January 13, the *Fiji Times* reported that the Police Tactical Response Group had set up roadblocks.

With the possibility the situation could escalate even

further, Qarase called Bainimarama to a special meeting today with acting President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi and Home Affairs Minister Josefa Vosanibola at Government House in an attempt to broker a deal and defuse the immediate crisis. Neither Qarase nor Bainimarama would comment after the two-hour meeting, although Qarase said an official statement would follow.

Qarase previously indicated that he may modify the Reconciliation Bill on its reintroduction to parliament, stating that “I must confirm that we plan to make a few amendments.” Whatever cosmetic changes are ultimately made to the Bill, Qarase intends to make ethnic Fijian chauvinism a central plank of his campaign for elections due in September.

There are indications of significant divisions within the military. On January 12, Bainimarama held a meeting with senior army and warrant officers to answer concerns on the continued tensions with the government. The *Fiji Times* reported that a group of senior officers, led by Acting Land Force Commander Lieutenant Colonel Jone Baledrokadroka, confronted Bainimarama, demanding he stop making public statements against the government.

Bainimarama later dismissed Baledrokadroka from his post, telling newspapers that the colonel refused to follow orders and had threatened to shoot him. Bainimarama also claimed that some government officials had held a meeting with Baledrokadroka to instigate a revolt against him.

For his part, in an interview with the *New Zealand Herald* on January 15, Baledrokadroka said he had confronted Bainimarama to demand that he stop taking “treasonous” and “illegal” acts, which would have taken the country “down the road of instability”. Baledrokadroka also made a pitch for foreign support, saying Bainimarama should step down to make way for a New Zealand or Australian officer to take charge, in order to “apoliticise” the military.

The regional powers have indicated their disquiet over the continuing instability. New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters said “the New Zealand Government reiterates its position that all parties should remain calm and resolve their differences through dialogue.” Acting Australian Prime Minister Mark Vaile called on the military to stay out of politics. “There is a democratically elected government in

position, in operation, governing Fiji that should be left to do its job,” he told Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio.

Like Bainimarama, Canberra and Wellington had pressed for Speight and his co-conspirators to be put on trial and jailed as part of their efforts to impose political stability. Canberra also pressured Qarase’s regime to allow Australian officials to oversee government operations, including the treasury, the legal system and the police. The current Police Commissioner Hughes is a former Australian Federal Police officer.

Far from resolving the issues that led to the 2000 coup attempt, the trials began to involve figures close to the government, including Vice-President Ratu Jope Seniloli. In response, Qarase pushed for his Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill. While not supportive of Qarase’s legislation, Australia and New Zealand do not want another military coup and more political instability that will cut across their economic and strategic interests in Fiji and the Pacific region.

Sensitive to the possibility that the situation could escalate, Fiji’s two daily papers called on the government to act against the military and bring it to order. The January 13 *Fiji Sun* editorial stated that “the government must come out with a definitive statement taking the strong position that the army must stay out of politics.” The *Fiji Times* editorial headed “an ageing dinosaur in white” called on Bainimarama to “voluntarily decommission himself” and resign as military head.

Although all the warring parties have called for calm, nothing has been resolved.



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