

Fiji's election results in unstable coalition government

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The ruling Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewe ni Vanua (SDL) Party won a majority in Fiji's closely-fought election last week, enabling incumbent prime minister Laisenia Qarase to claim victory on May 17. But the racially polarised outcome has only set the stage for further political turmoil.

Out of the 71 parliamentary seats, SDL won 36 while the Labour Party has 31. Two independents joined the SDL coalition and two United People's Party (UPP) members remain in opposition. During his previous term, Qarase ruled in coalition with the Conservative Alliance (CA), open supporters of the attempted coup in 2000, but the two parties merged just before the elections.

Qarase was initially installed by military commander Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama after George Speight and a handful of gunmen seized parliament in 2000 and held the Labour government hostage for 56 days. Bainimarama struck a deal with Speight and his backers to surrender that included keeping Mahendra Chaudhry, the country's first ethnic Indian prime minister, out of office. Qarase, who shared much of Speight's racist agenda, then won the August 2001 elections.

A central plank in Qarase's platform in the 2006 elections was the so-called Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill, which would pardon supporters of the 2000 coup, including Speight, who is serving a life sentence for treason. The legislation has provoked bitter recriminations not only among ethnic Indians, who form more than 40 percent of the population, but sections of the Fijian elite, including Bainimarama, who fear it will pave the way for more instability.

Under the constitution, voting is racially segregated. The SDL won most of the Fijian communal seats, while all of the Indo-Fijian seats went to Labour. The result was determined in a few mixed-race "open" seats in the capital Suva and other towns. Even there people voted on communal lines. An editorial in the *Fiji Sun* on May 18 commented: "The people have spoken. But their only really clear message is that the nation is racially polarised possibly as never before."

After the election, Bainimarama lashed out bitterly at

Qarase and threatened to impose martial law. "I don't think that [the outcome] is going to auger well for the nation," he warned. Bainimarama actively campaigned against the SDL and admitted he had asked the two independent MPs to switch their support to Labour.

Qarase responded by threatening to ask the Supreme Court to curb the military's involvement in politics. "We really can't move on as a nation with this sort of problem continuing," he said. Prior to the election, Bainimarama accused Qarase of destabilising the country and threatened a military takeover if the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill was passed.

Fearing the situation could spiral out of control; all three major newspapers issued calls on May 19 for Bainimarama to go. The *Fiji Sun* commented: "He's gone too far this time. And the commander ... now has to go the full distance. He has to quit." The *Fiji Times* declared stated that the military head "has become a danger and threat. That danger and threat have to be removed for the sake of the nation. And as his employer, it is the Governments task to do something about it quickly. No more pussyfooting around. The nation needs to move on."

The Australian and New Zealand governments quickly endorsed Qarase's election as a guarantor of stability. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer issued a statement on May 19, declaring: "Australia welcomes the re-election of the Qarase government and I urge the people of Fiji to accept the will of the voters and give the new government a chance to begin its work."

Labour has mounted a legal challenge against electoral irregularities that allegedly disenfranchised many of their voters. "The issue of missing names becomes even more crucial in closely-contested seats where Labour lost by as few as nine votes.... Scores of voters at polling stations for these constituencies were turned away when their names could not be found on the rolls even though they carried registration slips," Chaudhry said.

At the same time, however, Chaudhry agreed to enter the Qarase government. Under the 1997 constitution, the prime

minister is required to share cabinet positions proportionately with any party that wins more than 10 percent of the vote. As a result, Labour ministers will be sitting alongside those who openly supported Speight's gunmen in 2000. Chaudhry has even refused to rule out the endorsement of the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill, telling the Fijilive.com website on May 19 that "these will be matters we will discuss after we are in government".

Chaudhry has tried to justify the decision by declaring Labour would enter the government to help resolve the country's economic crisis. He told the *Fiji Sun* that the ministerial positions offered were "portfolios in a lot of mess and they want us to clean it [up] ... I have certain standards about governance." His comments are in line with Labour's election campaign promoting the party as a better economic manager, that is, more willing to implement the restructuring dictates of business, the World Bank and IMF.

The multi-party coalition was only sworn into office on Wednesday after a delay caused by Labour's complaints about the portfolios being offered. Chaudhry himself has not taken a position and insists that he should be parliamentary opposition leader to a government, in which nine of his own party members hold cabinet posts. The SDL will overwhelmingly dominate the huge administration of 23 cabinet ministers and an additional 12 junior ministers.

Echoing newspaper editorials, Chaudhry demagogically declared: "The bloated size of government is an irresponsible decision on their part given the dire straits of the economy and public finances." Labour, he said, would not be demanding additional posts, as "we know it will be a burden on taxpayers."

Chaudhry's decision to remain outside the government and the haggling over posts reflect unease within Labour ranks and more broadly in ruling circles about the formation of this unstable coalition. While Labour has joined the government in a bid to end political volatility, the cabinet could rapidly fracture amid festering communal tensions and a deepening social and economic crisis.

Labour's entry into the government may temporarily slow the exodus of Indo-Fijians, fed up with systematic discrimination entrenched after two coups—first in 1987 when military strongman Sitiveni Rabuka ousted the first Labour government of Timothi Bavandra and then in 2000. Over 100,000 Indians have immigrated since 1987 and, in 2002—almost a quarter of the population, 220,000 people—applied to immigrate to the US through the "Green Card" lottery.

The emigrants include the most educated layers, with teachers leaving in the greatest numbers. Human development geographer at the University of the South Pacific, Manoranjan Mohanty, has calculated that "over half

of Fiji's stock of middle to high level workers" have left. He estimated the losses to the economy at about \$45 million (\$US26 million) a year. Overseas remittances now form the second largest component of the Fijian economy and contributed \$F300 million in 2004.

Fiji's sugar industry has declined dramatically after the loss of preferential EU import pricing quotas and the expiry of sugar leases. No formula has been established for the renewal of leases for the mainly Indian sugar farmers by tribal Fijian landholders. Sugar still accounts for around \$F200m annually in export revenues—about 22 percent of total export earnings—and provides a livelihood to about 31 percent of the population. An Oxfam paper published in 2005 predicted that 5,000 families will abandon cane farming by 2008, if leases are not renewed, leading to a decline of about 1.8 percent in the country's GDP.

The protracted economic decline has led to a growing gulf between rich and poor. The Australian government aid agency, AusAID, estimates that 40-50 percent of the Fijian population lives in poverty. Unemployment and poverty are rife among the squatter settlements that are swelling around the main towns.

Neither the SDL nor Labour has any solution to these deepening social problems. Whereas the SDL seeks to defend the interests of the traditional Fijian elites, Labour promotes itself as the vehicle for market reforms that will exacerbate the social divide. Both parties are entrenched in the communal politics that has been repeatedly exploited by the ruling class to split workers, farmers and villages on ethnic lines and has produced the current chronic political crisis.



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