

Coup threat in Fiji as confrontation between army and government intensifies

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A tense standoff between the government and the army in the Pacific Island state of Fiji has raised the prospect of another coup—the fourth in two decades. Behind these extreme tensions lie a deepening social and economic crisis that is further compounding the unresolved conflicts in Fijian ruling circles created by the previous attempted putsch in 2000.

The Australian government, backed by the US and New Zealand, has put its military on alert and ordered two warships to sail to Fiji. Prime Minister John Howard claimed that the vessels were to protect Australian citizens and denied any plans to intervene in Fiji's affairs. In the past six months, however, Canberra has already dispatched troops twice—to the Solomons and to East Timor—as part of broader plans to establish its dominance in the region.

The confrontation in Suva continued to escalate today after Fiji's military chief Commodore Frank Bainimarama warned of bloodshed if the government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase defied the military's demands. He has repeatedly called on Qarase to drop two bills—one granting an amnesty to the 2000 coup leaders and another establishing tribal ownership of coastal foreshores and adjacent waters—or resign.

Speaking from the Middle East, where he is inspecting Fijian troops, Bainimarama ridiculed Qarase's offer yesterday to hold negotiations with the military under the guidance of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC). He accused Qarase of being "gutless" and hiding behind an unelected body of traditional chiefs.

Qarase's offer came in a nationally-broadcast media conference in which he declared "emphatically" he would not quit or accede to Bainimarama's demands. Bainimarama issued his ultimatum on October 17, having made similar statements in January this year and in August 2005. Neither of the previous threats reached the point of open conflict.

Bainimarama declared that Qarase was leaving the military with few options. "The fact that he doesn't want to accede to our request, the fact that he doesn't want to resign, and the fact that he is calling for a meeting of the Great Council

of Chiefs means, to the military, that he has put us in a situation where there is going to be bloodshed and violence," he said.

The threat followed extraordinary scenes in the capital, Suva, over the past three days. On Monday, without notifying the military, Police Commissioner Andrew Hughes, an Australian, confiscated a shipment of ammunition ordered by the army, only to have two carloads of soldiers seize the cargo from the docks and take it to the military's barracks. Hughes, who was appointed in 2003 as a nominee of the Australian Federal Police, asserted that he had legal authority to protect the country from a threatened coup.

The next day, Qarase and President Josefa Iloilo moved to sack Bainimarama but the officer they appointed to replace the commander, Lieutenant Colonel Meli Saubulinayau, declined the offer. He said he did not have the support of the military forces, and pledged his own allegiance to Bainimarama. Meanwhile thousands of reservists were summoned to the Queen Elizabeth barracks to stage a show of support for Bainimarama.

In his statement today, Bainimarama accused Qarase of using the same methods as the 2000 coup leaders. He said that appealing to the Great Council of Chiefs had been a tactic adopted by jailed coup frontman George Speight to rally ethnic Fijian support and take over police stations, towns and settlements.

In May 2000, Speight, an ethnic Fijian businessman, and a handful of Special Forces troops detained the first Fijian-Indian prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry and members of his Labour-led government for 56 days. The military led by Bainimarama imposed martial law, then installed Qarase as an unelected caretaker and eventually brokered a deal with Speight to end the parliament house siege.

Backed by the ethnic Fijian establishment, Qarase installed a number of Speight's backers in his cabinet and implemented much of their racist agenda to favour ethnic Fijians at the expense of Indo-Fijians. His government has since been re-elected twice, in 2001 and May this year, 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. Both the amnesty law—the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill—and the coastal lands legislation pander to Qarase’s ethnic Fijian constituency.

Incapable of resolving the country’s deep economic and social crises, sections of the indigenous elite have repeatedly stirred up animosity toward Fijians of Indian descent, who make up nearly half of the island’s 900,000 people, as a means of diverting the discontent produced by widespread joblessness and impoverishment. According to aid agencies, up to half the population is living in poverty. The situation is worsening because of plunging sugar and textile exports and a post-2000 exodus by Indo-Fijian professionals.

When he declared military rule in 2000, Bainimarama represented sections of the ruling elite more attuned to the demands of the regional powers for political stability and open access for profitable investment. After installing Qarase, Bainimarama became increasingly critical of the government, accusing it of racism, corruption and standing in the way of the development of the tourism industry.

Although Australia and New Zealand also oppose Qarase’s legislation, they fear that a military coup could spiral out of control and endanger their strategic and economics interests in Fiji and the increasingly volatile region. They have continued to support the Qarase government, which is now based on a power-sharing coalition with the Labour Party.

In return, Qarase has generally assisted their plans throughout the region. Only last week he helped Howard get his way at the 16-member Pacific Islands Forum in Suva. Qarase moderated criticism by the prime ministers of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands of Australia’s trampling on the national sovereignty of their countries and refused to back their proposal to replace an Australian official, Greg Urwin, as the organisation’s secretary-general.

At yesterday’s press conference, Qarase issued a thinly-veiled threat to call for an international intervention in the event of a coup. He declared that the Biketawa Declaration adopted by the Pacific Islands Forum following the 2000 coup, “provides the mandate for intervention by member governments at the invitation of the lawful authority in a Forum country affected by crisis”. He added that the Australian, New Zealand and US governments had sent him messages of “strong support”.

All three governments have made aggressive statements backing the Fijian prime minister.

Howard announced that he had telephoned Qarase to offer

support and told the Australian parliament his government would view with the “utmost seriousness” any military moves against Qarase. “The idea that there could be some extra-constitutional overthrow of the government is quite unacceptable,” he said. Australia’s military chief Angus Houston also rang Bainimarama in Egypt on Tuesday and urged him to refrain from carrying out his threats.

US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said any action by the military would have a serious effect on Fiji’s stability and political and economic development, and warned that US aid could be cut off. New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark, Howard’s junior partner in the region, said Bainimarama should accept his sacking and step down when he returned from the Middle East.

An attempt could even be made to arrest Bainimarama on his return. Police Commissioner Hughes has initiated criminal investigations against him for his statements threatening the government, and foreshadowed charges against the soldiers who took the ammunition from the docks. Hughes declared in an Australian television interview last night that his forces had taken measures to deal with a coup, including any bid to oust him as police chief.

Howard’s decision to immediately order two warships to Fiji is a further demonstration of Canberra’s determination, with US backing, to assert its authority over the region. In April, Australian soldiers were sent to the Solomons to prop up its neo-colonial occupation of the country. In May, Howard dispatched naval vessels then 1,300 troops to East Timor to bring about “regime change” in Dili. In August, he announced a major expansion of the Australian military, nominating Fiji, together with PNG and Vanuatu, as possible countries for military intervention, on top of the existing deployments in Solomon Islands and East Timor.

Like the previous operations, any new Australian intervention in Fiji would not be to help the local population or even the thousands of Australian tourists and residents, but to ensure continued Australian predominance in the South Pacific’s second largest island nation.



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