Australian government provocations heighten political crisis in Fiji

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The Fijian military has stepped up its criticisms of the government amid ongoing fears of a coup. Military head Commodore Frank Bainimarama, who returned to Fiji from the Middle East last Saturday, yesterday condemned the government's "lack of integrity, moral courage, and sound judgement". While claiming that he did not wish to overthrow Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, Bainimarama did not rule out a coup if the military's demands were not accepted.

On October 17, the military leader had threatened to move against the government unless two bills—one granting amnesty to organisers of the 2000 coup and another establishing indigenous Fijian tribal ownership over coastal foreshores—were scrapped. On October 31, Qarase attempted to sack Bainimarama while he was visiting troops overseas, but his nominated replacement refused to accept the position and pledged allegiance to Bainimarama.

In an attempt to defuse the conflict, Qarase announced he would modify the amnesty bill and accept Bainimarama's position as head of the military. The prime minister is also presiding over a meeting today of the Great Council of Chiefs, but Bainimarama has refused to attend. He has previously denounced the authority of the unelected indigenous-based Fijian body and rejected the government's attempt to resolve the crisis under its auspices.

The bitter power struggle within the Fijian ruling elite is rooted in deep-seated political and social tensions. While the Qarase government was installed by the military following the failed 2000 coup led by ethnic Fijian nationalist George Speight, Qarase nevertheless relies upon the same communalist and anti-Indo-Fijian constituency. The prime minister is unable to satisfy the demands of the military for the withdrawal of the amnesty and land rights bills, while also securing the backing of that layer of the indigenous ruling elite toward which the legislation is pitched.

A deepening economic crisis in the country also threatens to split Qarase's power-sharing coalition with the Indo-Fijian based Labour Party. Some Labour cabinet members and MPs have baulked at voting for the austerity budget presented by the government last week. The budget was aimed squarely against the working class and rural poor of the country, with spending cuts and more regressive taxes that aim to reduce people's spending and repay government debts. While satisfying international investors and Fiji's debtors, the budget will exacerbate the country's deep social inequality and poverty. Australian-based economist Paresh Narayan claimed the budget would increase the official poverty rate of 34 percent by between 8 to 12 percent.

Tensions have been exacerbated by Canberra's provocative interventions. The Howard government is exploiting the standoff between the military and the government to further its own agenda in the south Pacific, and is preparing for possible military intervention in Fiji. In moves recalling the lead-up to the operation in East Timor earlier this year, Canberra has stationed two Australian navy warships just outside Fijian territorial waters. Howard has also secretly deployed military personnel in the country's capital, Suva.

A group of at least eight Australians flew into Fiji last Friday, bypassing normal immigration procedures, and are now stationed in the Australian High Commission. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer described the personnel as "additional coordination and administrative staff" required to evacuate Australian citizens in the event of a coup. He refused to specify whether the group were soldiers, police, or something else.

The Australian personnel brought sealed silver boxes, weighing more than 400 kilograms, into Fiji without passing through customs. Downer claimed the boxes contained communication equipment, and Canberra insisted it was entitled to evade inspection by classifying the boxes as a diplomatic consignment.

The Fijian military accused Canberra of smuggling in elite Special Air Service forces, and alleged that the silver boxes carried weapons and ammunition. Colonel Pita Driti described the entry of the Australian forces as "a gross breach of sovereignty", and denounced Canberra's actions in the Pacific as "sheer ignorance or hegemonic shoving of

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big brother policies down our throats".

Bainimarama yesterday declared that the Australian defence force attaché in Fiji had denied knowledge of any additional military deployment, and that the Fijian army therefore regarded the Australian personnel as "mercenaries".

The crisis has again highlighted the Howard government's hypocrisy. In Fiji, Canberra defends its right to secretly insert Australian forces into Fiji without any explanation or regard for the country's immigration laws. In the Solomon Islands, on the other hand, Australian police and judges have arrested and prosecuted Julian Moti, the country's attorney-general, on trumped-up charges of entering the Solomons without the proper paperwork.

The Howard government's witchhunt of Moti formed one aspect of its ongoing campaign against the Solomon Islands' government. Canberra has manipulated the Australian-controlled state apparatus of that country for its own ends, arresting the immigration minister and threatening the prime minister.

Similar processes are evident in Fiji. While there are far fewer Australian personnel in Fiji than in the Solomons, Canberra controls key legal and police positions. Most significantly, Police Commissioner Andrew Hughes, a former Australian Federal Police (AFP) officer, has played a particularly provocative role in the present situation.

On October 30, Hughes confiscated a shipload of ammunition ordered by the Fijian military and insisted that it would not be handed over while Bainimarama was threatening a coup. After military leaders condemned this move, soldiers forcibly seized the cargo and brought it back to their barracks.

Hughes responded by threatening to arrest the soldiers involved. He also announced that a police file will soon be forwarded to the Director of Public Prosecutions, recommending that Bainimarama face treason charges for threatening the government. The military leader yesterday denounced Hughes and accused him of mounting a political vendetta. Bainimarama's colleague, Captain Esala Teleni, had earlier written a letter to Hughes, demanding his resignation.

In the latest incident, police arrested two military officers outside the Australian High Commission today. This follows Fijian military warnings that it would closely monitor the activities of all Australian personnel in the country.

While the Howard government opposes a military coup, it has condemned the government's contentious legislation. Canberra rejects the foreshore land rights bill because it threatens Australian interests in the lucrative tourism industry. Privatising tribal and communal land holdings, in Fiji and throughout the south Pacific, is one the Howard government's central economic objectives in the region.

There are also important strategic considerations. Canberra has developed the Fijian capital as of a base for its regional operations. Suva is home to the Pacific Islands Forum secretariat, headed by Australia's Greg Urwin, which is responsible for overseeing a regional economic and political reform program known as the Pacific Plan. The Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre, which coordinates AFP operations throughout the region, is also based in the city.

Last August, Fiji was one of three Pacific countries which Howard listed as potential targets when he announced an expansion of the military and AFP. On Tuesday, Howard said he was considering convening a foreign ministers meeting of the 16-member Pacific Islands Forum to invoke the "Biketawa Declaration". The declaration, first drafted by Canberra following the 2000 Fijian coup, permits Australian military interventions under the banner of "regional cooperation," and was used to justify the Howard government's neo-colonial takeover of Solomon Islands in 2003.

The south Pacific has become an arena of growing rivalry, with European and Asian powers seeking to challenge US and Australian predominance. Of particular concern for Canberra and Washington is the rising influence of China, which is using aid and investment to extend its strategic foothold in the region.

Sections of the Fijian ruling elite are now looking to Beijing as a counterbalance and potential alternative to Canberra's domination. In a revealing episode, the Great Council of Chiefs was unable to convene earlier because its members were in China, promoting further investment and bilateral cooperation. Both Qarase and Bainimarama have visited Beijing, while Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao described the China-Fiji relationship as a model for other Pacific countries to look to.

Whether or not Canberra decides to mount a large-scale intervention in Fiji, the Howard government has already made clear it is prepared to resort to provocative and underhanded methods to secure its interests.

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