

Fijian military regime moves to suppress any opposition

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After ousting the government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase on Tuesday, the Fijian military has moved to consolidate its uncertain grip on power, and has warned the population that it is prepared to use force to suppress any opposition. Heavily armed soldiers continue to man checkpoints in Suva, the country's capital.

Senators were forcibly dispersed after they attempted to hold a session on Wednesday and senior police and civil servants who refused to cooperate with the junta were sacked. Qarase, who remains exiled from Suva on his home island, still insists he remains the legitimate prime minister.

Military leader Frank Bainimarama, who appointed himself president after seizing power, installed Jona Baravilala Senilagakali, a 77-year-old military doctor, as interim prime minister. No other positions in the new administration have yet been filled. Senilagakali declared yesterday that elections would likely be held in one or two years' time. "It will totally be up to the military president and the military advisers to return Fiji back to normalcy," he said. "That could be tomorrow, that could be next week, it could be in the next two years or more."

Senilagakali demanded that the Australian and New Zealand governments respect Fiji's sovereignty. Openly admitting that the takeover was illegal, he told ABC radio: "Democracy might be all right for Australia and New Zealand but certainly not all right for Fiji, I can tell you that. I think in Fiji we need a different type of democracy. Just look at the United States—the father and mother of democracy. Look at what they have done in Iraq."

Canberra and Wellington have condemned Bainimarama's military coup. Both governments have called on Fijian soldiers, police, and public service workers not to cooperate with the new regime and have encouraged the population to adopt "passive resistance". Australia and New Zealand, together with the US, European Union, and the UN, have imposed a sanctions regime specifically targeting the military.

None of these measures has anything to do with protecting the democratic rights of ordinary Fijians. When it has suited their interests, Canberra and Wellington have used military interventions to enforce their dictates in other Pacific countries, such as East Timor and Solomon Islands.

Their record is no less tawdry and hypocritical in Fiji. The Howard government played a critical role in backing Bainimarama during the 2000 coup. Confronted with the armed seizure of the parliament and the cabinet by indigenous-chauvinist businessman George Speight, the military commander arbitrarily assumed executive power himself, revoked all political and democratic rights and declared martial law.

After a protracted and tense standoff that lasted nearly two months, Bainimarama sponsored a pact that ended the siege at the parliament in return for deposing the elected Labour Party prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry, the first Indo-Fijian to hold the post. In his place, the military installed Qarase, a merchant banker known for his sympathies with Fijian communal politics, and a cabinet that included figures openly supportive of Speight. All these thoroughly antidemocratic manoeuvres were welcomed at the time by the Howard government as a means of defusing the crisis.

Now, however, Bainimarama's actions are cutting across Canberra's interests. It fears that the coup may further destabilise the South Pacific, leaving the door open for rival powers to increase their strategic influence at Australia's expense.

Senilagakali bluntly told ABC radio yesterday that the new regime would look elsewhere for assistance in circumventing international sanctions. "We'll go to China to enlist their support. And I'm sure they'll be prepared to do that," he said. This highly significant statement indicates what is at stake. China's rising power in the South Pacific has upset the old regional balance of power established after World War II, and spurred the Howard government to adopt an aggressive stance against those governments in the region which fail to obey its dictates.

China has to date refrained from directly challenging American and Australian strategic interests. In the aftermath of the coup, however, it may seek to develop its economic and political interests in Suva. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman yesterday called for all concerned parties to work together and "seek a proper solution to keep social stability". Beijing neither condemned the coup nor announced sanctions. It did not suspend ties between the Fijian military and the

Peoples Liberation Army.

Three Australian warships and an unknown number of elite SAS troops remain stationed just outside Fijian waters, and a military intervention remains a definite possibility. Howard turned down Qarase's earlier request to intervene because he feared incurring significant casualties at the hands of the Fijian military. In a radio interview today, however, he pointedly refused to rule out dispatching troops if circumstances proved more amenable in the future.

Bainimarama's regime is not operating from a position of political strength. In a revealing retreat, the military ceased its efforts to directly censor the media just a day after it seized power. The *Fiji Times* (owned by Murdoch's News Corporation) initially ceased publication after soldiers were dispatched to its editorial offices. Captain Esala Teleni later apologised and said the dispute had been the result of a "misunderstanding".

The military coup has provoked predictable opposition from those sections of the indigenous-Fijian elite upon which Qarase's government rested. The Great Council of Chiefs—the central institution of this elite whose powers are enshrined in the constitution—cancelled a planned meeting next week that Bainimarama had hoped would rubber stamp his takeover. Council chairman Ratu Ovini Bokini called on the military leader to "stop the illegal activities". Other chiefs urged soldiers to leave their barracks and return to their villages.

None of these forces has any concern for democracy—many of them openly backed the military coups in 1987 and 2000. Their real preoccupation is in reinstalling a government favourable to their interests. Qarase promoted indigenous communalism directed against the Indo-Fijian minority, and sponsored two bills—one granting amnesty to the 2000 coup plotters, and the other establishing indigenous tribal land rights over coastal areas—which were pitched to his racist constituency. Bainimarama deposed the government after it repeatedly refused to give in to the military's demands to withdraw the proposed legislation.

On Wednesday, Bainimarama issued a stern warning against any opposition to the coup. "Should we be pushed to use force, let me state that we will do so very quickly," he declared. "The military will suppress very quickly any uprising against us." These threats struck a very different note to Bainimarama's previous efforts to portray his takeover as a peaceful and orderly transition.

There are some early signs of broader opposition to the military coup. On Wednesday evening a truckload of soldiers were dispatched to order a group at Lami near Suva to dismantle a "shrine to democracy". The residents refused to obey the military's orders and insisted their protest would continue as long as the impasse continued. In Suva itself, a family had draped their home in Fijian flags and banners reading, "Say yes to democracy. Say no to guns."

Bainimarama has no more concern for the interests of

ordinary working Fijians than does Qarase. The struggle between the two forces represents a bitter faction fight within the ruling elite. The forces aligned behind the military oppose Qarase's agenda—particularly concerning the extension of tribal land ownership—because it jeopardises international investment and the stability of the tourism sector. While Bainimarama has appealed to anti-communist sentiment in an attempt to win support from the Indo-Fijian population, any illusions that may exist in the military regime will be quickly dispelled as it moves to attract international investment and resolve the country's economic crisis by attacking the living standards of the working class.

The *Australian* yesterday reported that Bainimarama has appealed to public service workers to accept a salary cut in order to reduce the budget deficit. Acting Prime Minister Senilagakali has publicly stated that his priority is to cut government expenditure, which will inevitably mean fewer resources committed to education, health, and other social services. These measures will exacerbate the effects of the austerity budget passed by the Qarase government shortly before its overthrow, which steeply raised indirect taxes on the working class and rural poor in order to reduce the country's massive debt.

The situation is set to worsen once sanctions take effect, with economists forecasting negative economic growth in 2007 and a prolonged recession. The Fijian Central Bank moved to shore up its foreign exchange reserves on Wednesday and tightened capital controls in a desperate effort to limit international capital flight. Such moves will have little effect. Tourism, the leading economic activity in the country, is already suffering the effect of international travel warnings.

Fiji's other main export industries—sugar and textiles—have long been in decline and will now suffer a further blow. Like the Qarase government, the military regime will inevitably attempt to shift the burden of the deteriorating economic situation onto the backs of ordinary working people.



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