Fijian political crisis intensifies amid continuing threats of a coup

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4 December 2006

Amid a highly unstable and uncertain standoff, Fijian Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase and military head Commodore Frank Bainimarama are both claiming control of the country. Bainimarama has declared that his long-threatened "clean up campaign" against the government is now underway. He claims the military will soon install a new interim cabinet to replace Qarase's, but it has not yet done so, despite the passing of numerous deadlines for the government to meet its demands. Qarase continues to insist he will not resign and remains in charge.

A fortnight ago, Bainimarama set the government a deadline of December 5. Last Thursday this was brought forward when the military head announced that Qarase had just one more day to comply. But the military made no attempt to replace the government on Friday, and Bainimarama exacerbated confusion when he spent the day watching a local rugby match. Qarase claimed he had been told the deadline had been extended, although this was denied by the military. Rumours are rife within Fiji of a coup in the next few days or even hours.

In a television interview yesterday, Bainimarama left little doubt he planned to get rid of Qarase and suggested the prime minister would be arrested. "The government will be changed," he declared. "If he [Qarase] does not resign then will find a way to make him resign. Nukulau [an island prison] is a beautiful place to relax and think about what you've done to the country. I just want to say that there is not only three ways to remove the government. There are 5,001 ways to skin a cat."

Bainimarama's statement followed his rejection of Qarase's attempt to satisfy the military's demands. The central point of contention is the fate of two bills drafted by the government, one of which grants amnesty to leaders and participants in the 2000 coup, and the other which establishes indigenous tribal ownership over Fiji's coastal areas. Following a New Zealand government-sponsored meeting in Auckland between Qarase and Bainimarama on November 29, the Fijian prime minister promised to refer the contentious legislation to a constitutional review. He said the bills would be dropped if they were found unconstitutional.

Qarase also effectively acquiesced in the military's demands that former Australian Federal Police officer Andrew Hughes be dismissed as Fijian police commissioner, and that legal proceedings initiated by Hughes against the military be dropped. The police chief, backed by Canberra, has played a particularly provocative role in the crisis against the military. He is presently on leave in Australia, after reportedly receiving death threats in Fiji.

Bainimarama's refusal to accept Qarase's overtures reflects deep divisions within the Fijian ruling elite. Qarase's government relies upon openly chauvinist and communalist appeals to layers of indigenous Fijians in the ruling elite who are hostile to the Indo-Fijian minority. Both the amnesty bill and the land rights legislation are pitched to this constituency.

Bainimarama has warned that the extension of tribal land rights will undermine international investment, particularly in the tourism sector. The military is also adamantly opposed to freeing the 2000 coup leaders, who were headed by indigenous-chauvinist businessman George Speight. Bainimarama fears that the same social and political forces who were behind Speight are consolidating their influence through the Qarase government, which the military chief initially installed in power after suppressing the attempted coup.

While Bainimarama has refused to come to an accommodation with Qarase, he has also thus far not

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forcibly overthrown his government. A major factor in his hesitations is the immense international pressure that has been brought to bear against a military coup. The governments of Australia and New Zealand, the two leading regional powers, have repeatedly condemned Bainimarama's threats and have called for a negotiated and constitutional resolution to the crisis. Neither Canberra nor Wellington has much sympathy for Qarase's economic and social program, but they fear the potentially destabilising effects throughout the region of a coup in Fiji.

In another exercise in south Pacific gunboat diplomacy, the Howard government stationed three warships, with at least 100 soldiers on board, off Fijian waters more than five weeks ago, and secretly sent an unknown number of troops together with military equipment to the Australian High Commission in Fiji's capital, Suva, on November 3. Last Wednesday, two elite SAS troops died when an Australian Blackhawk helicopter crashed into the landing deck of HMAS Kanimbla and rolled into the ocean. The military claimed the helicopter had been involved in a "training exercise", but did not provide any details.

Exactly what the SAS troops are doing off Fiji's coast remains unclear. What is certain, however, is the absurdity of the Howard government's claim that the Australian military operation is merely a precautionary measure aimed at evacuating Australian citizens in the event of a coup. Canberra's military deployment is intended to maximise its room for manoeuvre, potentially including a direct intervention into Fiji, as it has done in East Timor, Solomon Islands, and Tonga. Deputy Prime Minister Mark Vaile last Friday declared that the government would "consider very seriously" any intervention request from Qarase.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer played down the prospect of military intervention after convening a meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum foreign ministers in Sydney. "We would rule out declaring war on Fiji," he declared. "Of course we're not going to do that".

Downer's remarks were carefully worded and clearly not intended to ease the pressure on the Fijian military. He warned that the army's ties with the Australian Defence Force would be immediately severed in the event of a coup, and cautioned that the British military would similarly review its relationship with the Fijian forces. An estimated 2,000 Fijian soldiers currently serve in the British army, many of which are stationed in Iraq.

UN secretary-general Kofi Annan earlier warned that Fijian participation in international peacekeeping operations would be immediately suspended if a coup occurred. Annan and Downer's comments are intended to raise the stakes for the military. British and UN salaries provide a lifeline for numerous Fijian families, and play an important role in propping up the impoverished national economy. Remittances, the majority of which are derived from foreign military service, make up 7 percent of gross domestic product.

Washington has endorsed threats of economic and other sanctions. In a rare and highly significant intervention in South Pacific politics, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns spoke with Qarase on November 30 and offered him the Bush administration's full support. The State Department subsequently issued a statement noting that it had stressed to the Fijian military, "both publicly and privately", that it "must remain subordinate to the lawfully elected government".

Whether Washington's intervention helps dissuade Bainimarama from overthrowing the government remains to be seen. The ongoing standoff is damaging the Fijian economy, particularly the lucrative tourism industry, and the power vacuum cannot be indefinitely sustained. Either the military officers will be forced to strike a deal with Qarase or they will install their own administration. For now at least, Bainimarama appears committed to maintaining the pressure. Earlier today the military erected roadblocks throughout Suva, and seized weapons from the police force's only armed unit.

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