Fijian government ousted in military coup

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The Fijian military yesterday overthrew the government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. Military head Commodore Frank Bainimarama declared himself interim president and appointed 77-year-old military doctor Jona Senolagakali as prime minister. Heavily armed soldiers are patrolling the streets of Suva, Fiji's capital.

Qarase was placed under house arrest yesterday, then escorted to his home island of Mavana early this morning. He insisted that he remained the legitimate prime minister and accused the military of "raping" the constitution. "I believe there will be a peaceful reaction by thousands and thousands in the next few days and I believe that may change things," he told ABC Radio.

Dozens of government supporters, backed by Fiji's church leaders, protested outside Qarase's Suva residence yesterday. Bainimarama has warned against any unrest and appealed for calm. According to the latest reports, a state of emergency has been declared today, and senior police and civil servants have been detained.

Soldiers have been dispatched to various media outlets to prevent any reporting of Qarase's statements and to suppress criticism of the coup. Protesting this censorship, the *Fiji Times* did not publish its print edition today and Fiji TV yesterday cancelled its 10 p.m. news bulletin.

The military takeover follows days of uncertainty, in which several deadlines set for the government came and went. The protracted standoff indicates that Bainimarama is not operating from a position of political strength. The divisions in the Fijian elite undoubtedly run through the military, which has been under intense international pressure not to carry out a coup.

It appears that Bainimarama would have preferred to operate within the constitution, nominally at least. Right up to the last minute, he was pressing for Qarase to resign or President Ratu Josefa Iloilo to dissolve the parliament and call new elections. When they refused, he felt forced to directly seize power.

The military regime now faces international sanctions. Australia and New Zealand have already cancelled defence co-operation programs and imposed a travel ban on members of the armed forces. Further measures will likely follow. The US has suspended its aid, including a $US2.5 million annual military assistance program, and the European Union may soon follow suit, potentially depriving Fiji of about $US200 million each year. UN secretary-general Kofi Annan also condemned the coup. He previously warned that Fiji's participation in international peacekeeping operations would be suspended if the government were overthrown.

These diplomatic reprisals have nothing to do with defending the democratic rights and welfare of ordinary Fijians, but are directed at re-asserting the authority of Australia, the dominant regional power, and its allies, which is threatened by Bainimarama's seizure of power in defiance of their repeated calls not to proceed with a coup.

Bainimarama yesterday attempted to deflect international condemnation by claiming legal authority for his takeover. The military leader firstly compared the situation in Fiji with that in Australia in 1975, when the governor-general dismissed the Labor government and, secondly invoked the "doctrine of necessity" to defend the government's overthrow. Neither pretext justifies his abrogation of the constitution and arbitrary assumption of the presidency.

Bainimarama claimed the Qarase government had "undermined the constitution by engaging in bribery and corruption" and proposed legislation that seriously disadvantaged Fiji. His opposition has centred on two bills proposed by the Qarase government—the first establishing indigenous Fijian tribal ownership over the country's coastal land, and the second granting amnesty to the 2000 coup plotters. Bainimarama's adamant refusal to accept these measures reflects deep-rooted divisions within the country's ruling elite.

The Qarase government—which Bainimarama installed after the 2000 coup attempt led by ethnic Fijian businessman George Speight—oriented itself towards sections of the indigenous tribal elite on the basis of anti-Indo Fijian communalism. Asserting indigenous land rights over coastal areas was a central aspect of this perspective, but the measure threatened to undermine international investment, particularly in the country's tourism industry.

Exactly who is behind Bainimarama remains unclear,

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though significant elements of the country's political and business establishment are no doubt involved. Fijian police and media reports have referred to unnamed prominent indigenous figures, civil servants and tourism operators.

Bainimarama has attempted to garner support by opposing the Qarase government's communal politics. Some media reports suggest the military chief has won significant sympathy from the Indo-Fijian population, who make up about 44 percent of the country's 900,000 citizens. The military regime, however, has trampled on the basic democratic rights of ordinary working people—whether of ethnic Fijian or Indian origin—and will do nothing to improve their lot.

Significantly neither Bainimarama nor his hand-picked prime minister has spelled out any program or policies beyond their criticisms of the Qarase government. However, the new regime will undoubtedly attempt to impose drastic economic restructuring measures in a desperate bid to woo back foreign investors.

Fiji is already wracked by deep social tensions. The ruling elite's dependence upon communalism stems from the need to divert sharp class tensions. Poverty and unemployment are widespread in Fiji. Faced with few prospects beyond a low-paying tourism or sugar industry job, tens of thousands of people have emigrated. In particular, predominantly Indo-Fijian skilled and educated workers have left en masse in recent years. Remittances, including those from the hundreds of Fijians serving as mercenaries in Iraq, now comprise Fiji's third largest "industry".

The plight of the working class and rural poor will only worsen when international sanctions take effect. Sanctions imposed after the 2000 coup saw the Fijian economy contract by 10 percent.

Qarase's removal represents a further setback to the Howard government's attempts to assert its dominance in the South Pacific. While the government did not support Qarase's communal program, it feared the potentially destabilising consequences across the region of a coup. In the end, however, Canberra's warnings to Bainimarama fell on deaf ears. The government's provocative dispatch of three warships off Fiji's coast last month backfired after the military publicly condemned Australian neo-colonialism and mounted preparatory exercises against the threat of intervention.

Howard yesterday revealed that he had turned down an appeal from Qarase to send in Australian troops, after deciding it was not in Australia's "national interest". "The possibility of Australian and Fijian troops firing on each other in the streets of Suva was not a prospect that I for a moment thought desirable," he declared. No doubt, however, other Pacific island governments that have been subject to Canberra's threats and bullying will be drawing their own lessons from the Fijian military's refusal to back down.

A major factor in the reluctance to directly intervene at this stage is the Australian government's sensitivity to public sentiment at home. Howard is acutely aware that Australian casualties in Fiji could trigger opposition to its operations in East Timor, Solomon Islands and Tonga. Two SAS soldiers were killed last Wednesday when a Blackhawk helicopter crashed off Fiji's coast, supposedly while on a "training exercise".

The wider implications of the Fijian crisis were emphasised in a gloomy editorial in the *Australian* today. It notes that "the billions of dollars spent over the decades across the region have done little to avert the slide into chaos and lawlessness, even as other players—notably China and Taiwan—attempt to gain sway". The Murdoch editorialists conclude that Canberra can now do little in Fiji besides enacting some sanctions, but warns that "more broadly, Australia will have to figure out more effective ways to get involved in the region and head off a disaster".

This is an ominous warning. Developments in the South Pacific are dominated by intensifying great power rivalries. The Howard government is determined to secure control over a region it has designated as Australia's "patch" and shut out other challengers from Europe and Asia who are seeking to advance their economic and strategic interests.

Canberra has decided to refrain, at least for now, from any military operations in Fiji. But there is no doubt that it will ruthlessly defend Australian interests by means of diplomatic and economic pressure while at the same time preparing more aggressive future interventions in the region as a whole.

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