

Fiji's army commander unveils new military regime

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16 January 2007

Fiji's coup leader Commodore Frank Bainimarama announced his cabinet last week and, in doing so, made clear the sharp divisions in the country's ruling elite that underlay his seizure of power on December 5. The military leader assumed the post of prime minister while the remainder of the cabinet is drawn from opposition parties—the Labour Party and National Alliance Party (NAP)—as well as a number of technocrats.

Bainimarama ousted the previous government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase after a protracted standoff over two proposed laws: an amnesty bill for the perpetrators of the 2000 coup attempt and legislation to give rights to traditional Fijian chiefs over foreshore areas. Supporters of the 2000 coup formed a significant component of the Qarase government, which increasingly based itself on openly communal politics favouring sections of the ethnic Fijian elite at the expense of Indo-Fijians.

Qarase's actions had alienated sections of business, which has been pushing for an accelerated program of market reform. The country's expanding tourist industry—a major prop to the flagging economy—reacted against the foreshore legislation that threatened to embroil resort developers and operators in lengthy negotiations and costly payments. The preferential treatment for local Fijians and their businesses cut across attempts to boost foreign investment.

Bainimarama, the Labour Party and the NAP all accused the Qarase government of corruption and failure to implement economic reforms. The chief plank of the new military regime will be to press ahead with austerity measures designed to attract foreign capital. At his swearing in, Bainimarama declared his administration would “steady our economy through sustained economic growth and correct the economic mismanagement of the past six years” and “improve ties with our neighbours and the international community.”

Significantly, former Labour prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry took over the key economic posts of finance, public enterprise and sugar reform. In 2000, Chaudhry, the country's first Indo-Fijian prime minister, was held at gunpoint for weeks at parliament house, along with the rest of his cabinet, by Fijian communalist George Speight and a handful of special forces troops. Bainimarama, who imposed martial law, finally brokered a deal to end the siege, but refused to reinstall the elected government and instead selected Qarase, a former merchant banker, as the new prime minister.

Chaudhry's willingness to accept a post in the military junta demonstrates once again the venal character of the Labour Party, which in no way represents the interests of working people. Following the coups in 1987 and 2000, Labour played a pivotal role in helping to suppress opposition and reached an accommodation with the military-installed administrations. Now Labour leader Chaudhry is part of a

military regime that has imposed a state of emergency and trampled on basic democratic rights. The army has detained and beaten a number of political opponents. Nimilote Verebasaga, a 41-year-old land surveyor died in military custody after been arrested on January 5.

Chaudhry has already made clear that he intends to impose tough economic measures. “The country's financial situation is not good and one of the major reasons is that some \$400 million is currently outstanding in loans and \$400 million is taken up in wages and salaries so there is very little left for anything else,” he told the *Fiji Sun* on January 13. He announced that the unpopular Value Added Tax (VAT) increase would be rescinded, but planned to revise revenue and expenditure in the 2007 budget “in light of circumstances”.

Chaudhry's comments foreshadow new taxes and deep inroads into public sector jobs. At the election last May, he campaigned against Qarase's Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewe ni Vanua (SDL) insisting Labour would be a more responsible economic manager. On the same basis, Labour MPs joined the Qarase government under the constitutional requirement that all parties be proportionally represented in the cabinet. Labour has one other minister in the present military cabinet. In addition, former deputy leader Poseci Bune, who was expelled in November, is in charge of public service reform. Bune described his “biggest challenge” as being a “bloated public service.”

Chaudhry's role as minister for sugar reform is likely to provoke fierce opposition from a layer of the Fijian chiefs. The country's sugar farms are largely run by Indo-Fijians, descendents of Indian indentured labourers brought to Fiji under British colonial rule. After taking office in 1999, Chaudhry attempted to secure the renewal of land leases held by sugar farmers from Fijian chiefs under the country's system of communal land ownership. He was accused of ignoring the rights of indigenous Fijians.

The other main component of Bainimarama's cabinet is the NAP formed by Ratu Epeli Ganilau prior to last year's election to oppose Qarase and his legislation. Ganilau has strong connections to the faction of the Fijian chiefly elite associated with his late father-in-law, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, Fiji's founding former prime minister who died in 2004. His father was closely associated with Mara and was governor general at the time of the 1987 coup. Ganilau was army commander from 1991-99 and head of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) from 2001 to 2004.

Ganilau's NAP was an attempt to resurrect Mara's conservative Alliance Party but it failed to win a seat at last year's election. While there were accusations of vote rigging, the NAP's defeat reflected the

sharp polarisation of electorate on communal lines. After assuming office in 2000, Qarase increasingly relied on communal politics to bolster support for his government from sections of the ethnic Fijian population. At the 2006 poll, his SDL amalgamated with the Conservative Alliance—open backers of the jailed Speight and the 2000 coup. Qarase’s ability to narrowly win the election was further accentuated by the 1997 constitution, which allocates seats on a communal basis.

Ganilau represents sections of the Fijian chiefly elite who regard the turn to openly chauvinist politics as detrimental to the economy and their interests. A December 20 article in *Time* magazine pointed out that the NAP’s campaign was financed by American millionaire Richard Evanson, owner of the exclusive Turtle Island resort. According to *Time*, Evanson felt “cheated” by Qarase’s foreshore bill. He introduced Bainimarama to leading US Republican Senator John McCain and also to Australian lawyer Andrew Fairley, who provided legal advice that the legislation was unconstitutional.

Ganilau’s support for Bainimarama’s coup has been evident. In its aftermath, he cautiously told Fiji Television that he supported the “cause” of the military, but not its method, and denied that he had planned the coup. He is now minister for Fijian affairs. Two other NAP members are also in the cabinet—lecturer and businessman Netani Sukanaivalu is education minister and Manu Korovulavula is transport minister. While not an NAP member, Ratu Epeli Nailaitikau, former parliamentary speaker and the new foreign minister, is also one of Mara’s sons-in-law.

Only one other military figure has been included in the regime—Dr Jona Senilagakali, the army chief medical officer, who was originally nominated as prime minister, is the new health minister. The remainder of the cabinet includes Ganilau’s sister-in-law Bernadette Lavenia Rounds Ganilau from the opposition United People’s Party, Ratu Jone Navakamocea from Qarase’s SDL and several technocrats. Taito Waradi, president of the Fiji Chamber of Commerce, who opposed Qarase’s legislation is the new commerce minister.

One of the factors in the protracted manoeuvring prior to the December 5 coup was Bainimarama’s determination to give his regime a figleaf of constitutional legitimacy. The army commander pushed Qarase to resign and only directly seized power when he refused to go. Bainimarama took over the presidency—a move for which there was no constitutional basis—then re-installed the frail President Ratu Josefa Iloilo on January 5 once an agreement had been reached.

Iloilo publicly endorsed the coup, saying: “I thank him [Bainimarama] and his men and women for having the courage to step in. I also thank him and the RFMF (Royal Fiji Military Force) for handing back all my executive powers.” On January 6, Iloilo appointed Bainimarama as prime minister and announced that ways should be found to give legal immunity to the army commander and the troops involved in the coup. Even though the military has prevented the Great Council of Chiefs, which has wide constitutional powers, from meeting, its chairman, Ovini Bokini, has effectively endorsed the new regime, saying it was “time to move on”.

Bainimarama’s constitutional manoeuvring is aimed above all at securing international support for his regime. The Australian and New Zealand governments have denounced the coup and imposed some limited sanctions on Fiji. The European Union has threatened to cut off sugar subsidies which would be catastrophic for the already troubled industry. The UN and other major powers have warned that Fijian troops may not be included in peace-keeping missions—a

lucrative source of income for Fiji and the army.

Foreign Minister Nailaitikau told the *New Zealand Herald* that Bainimarama would try to restore trade and diplomatic ties with its neighbours, including Australia, but that it would also seek to strengthen relations with China and other Asian countries. Bainimarama has warned that he will turn to China if faced with continued Australian opposition—a move that threatens the Howard government’s plans to strengthen its domination in the Pacific. The Melanesian Spearhead Group, which includes Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, has already announced its support for the Fijian interim administration.

There are some signs that Canberra may reach an accommodation with the new military regime—as it did after the 1987 and 2000 coups. The Australian military has withdrawn its three warships and troops that were stationed near Fiji on the pretext of being on hand to assist Australian citizens. While concerned about the instability caused by the coup, the new administration’s market-oriented economic policies are more in line with those advocated by the Howard government. Moreover, Fiji, which houses the administration of the Pacific Islands Forum, has been central to Canberra’s broader regional plans.

An article in Murdoch’s *Australian* on January 11 openly advocated reaching an understanding with Bainimarama, commenting: “Australia and New Zealand will also have to decide on the wisdom of continuing to back the deposed prime minister at the expense of losing any remaining influence with the new regime. Commodore Bainimarama’s position has been further strengthened by his appointment of a number of Indo-Fijian cabinet ministers, who have given his administration a badly needed multi-racial face.”

At the same time, however, Australia has announced that James Batley will be the new High Commissioner to Fiji—an indication that Canberra intends to exert strong pressure on the new administration. Batley has been centrally involved in Australia’s neo-colonial interventions into the region. He was previously special co-ordinator to Solomon Islands as part of Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and was first ambassador to East Timor at independence in May 2002.

Far from ending the political crisis, the installation of the new Fijian cabinet will inevitably lead to further turmoil. The country’s economic decline has already led to growing levels of unemployment and poverty, particularly in the squatter settlements around the major towns. Opposition is certain to deepen as the regime imposes austerity measures and continues to ride roughshod over basic democratic rights.



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