

Fiji's military junta strong-arms its political opponents

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Since seizing power last December, the Fijian military junta has not hesitated to ride roughshod over basic democratic rights and use brute force to silence any opposition. Arbitrary arrests, the use of physical violence against detainees and at least one death in custody all point to the ruthless methods being used.

Significantly, the Labour Party is a central component of the military regime. Labour Party leader and former prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry is the junta's finance minister and is preparing to hand down an austerity budget in a desperate bid to revive the country's failing economy. Former deputy Labour leader Poseci Bune is in charge of public service reform.

Previous military coups in 1987 and 2000 ousted Labour-led governments, one in which Chaudhry was finance minister, and the other in which he was prime minister. Now the Labour Party is legitimising and directly participating in a military regime, which is using violence to intimidate and terrorise working people.

The junta took power on December 5 after a protracted standoff between former prime minister Laisenia Qarase and Bainimarama, the military commander. The self-styled "interim government" immediately imposed a state of emergency and mounted armed checkpoints around the capital Suva and throughout the country.

The military swiftly moved against the media, dispatching soldiers to the *Fiji Times* editorial offices to ensure it did not publish the views of the ousted government. Military spokesperson Sergeant Talei Tora told managing director Tony Yianni and editor Samisoni Kakaivalu that no material would be tolerated which "might incite trouble". The *Times* and *Daily Post* suspended publication, and the country's only television station stopped all broadcasts. While they reopened the next day, the intimidation has continued unchecked.

On December 25, six anti-coup activists were arrested and taken to Queen Elizabeth Barracks (QEB) in Suva. On January 17, Laisa Digitaki, a prominent Fijian businesswoman, issued an Internet statement outlining her

brutal treatment when arrested by the military: "We were told to lie face down with our arms beside us and chin up ... A pair of boots immediately jumped onto my lower and middle back and bounced on it for a few seconds. The soldiers started calling us names and were swearing at us. One of them walked to our faces and told us to kiss his boots which we did."

Anyone making critical statements is liable to arrest and beatings. Bainimarama has openly stated he will not countenance any opposition. He told the *Fiji Times* on January 3: "We are going to do this cleaning up process and if there's an intention on some people's part to voice objections in the hope that Qarase will come back again, that's not going to happen."

The death of Nimilote Verebasaga, a 41-year-old land surveyor, whilst in military custody after being held on January 5, underlined the regime's thuggish nature. Police claimed Verebasaga died before he reached QEB but village head man Timoci Talaki, who identified the body at the Suva mortuary, said: "There were visible bruises on Verebasaga's face and a big gash on the back of his forehead." On January 17, Divisional Crime Officer Eastern Keshri Lal said the police had received a medical report on the death, but would not reveal the cause. The authorities feel no compunction to explain anything at all about Verebasaga's death.

The repression has continued. On January 24, Laisa Digitaki and Angie Heffernan went into hiding after the military threatened to arrest them for anti-coup statements. Heffernan heads an NGO, the Public Centre for Public Integrity, and opposed Bainimarama's criticisms of the ousted government. She said she feared the country was heading into dictatorship and declared that President Ratu Josefa Iloilo's grant of legal immunity to the military was unconstitutional.

Heffernan was arrested by the military on January 30, along with another government critic, Fiji Law Society vice-president Tupou Draunidalo. Land Force Commander Colonel Pita Driti said they had been arrested for having,

“incited the public to oppose the military led government”.

Prominent Suva lawyer Richard Naidu was also detained and taken to QEB for criticising as unconstitutional the military’s retention of Iloilo as president. “He’s the military’s president, he’s not the Constitution’s president,” Naidu said. The Law Society has opposed the coup, questioned its legality, and warned lawyers against accepting the positions of attorney-general and solicitor-general.

On February 1, a *Fiji Times* photographer Sitiveni Moce was severely assaulted by soldiers in full combat gear. A witness described the arrest to the newspaper: “The soldiers began shouting at Siti [veni Moce] who was just a few centimetres away and they took him by the collar of his shirt and dragged him across the road to where the truck was parked. He was punched twice on the face by one of the soldiers and his nose started bleeding before he was hauled onto the back of the truck and forced to lie down before he was kicked on the side of his face by one of the soldiers.”

The next day, Interim Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum blandly stated that Moce “should lodge a complaint with authorities”. Moce was previously assaulted while a photographer for the *Fiji Sun* when covering the seizure of parliament in 2000 by businessman George Speight and sections of the military.

On February 24, a second man died after maltreatment in army custody. Sakiusa Rabaka, 19, was picked up by the military in front of his home in Nadi on January 28 along with two of his friends. They were taken to Black Rock—a military facility in Nadi—made to take off their clothes and forced to run while carrying sacks of sand. They were then told to crawl with pine logs tied to their backs as soldiers kicked them. After the three were released, Rabaka was admitted to hospital and underwent surgery to his head. He collapsed at home and died last weekend.

The junta’s ruthlessness toward its political opponents is a stark warning to the working class, which will bear the brunt of the economic austerity measures. Finance minister Chaudhry is revising the 2006 budget and has foreshadowed severe cuts to the public service. Chaudhry said \$F200 million (\$US120 million) had to be cut from the budget in order to “stabilise government finance[s]”.

In a revealing comment on January 17, commerce, industry, investment and communication minister Taito Waradi spelled out the economic calculations behind the coup. He told the *fijilive.com* web site that the country was heading for bankruptcy. If the coup had not occurred, an IMF intervention would have been inevitable. “We would then have been compelled to approach the IMF to bail us out in which case IMF would impose austerity measures, including strict conditions regarding monetary and fiscal policies as well as structural reforms/changes,” he said.

A number of budget proposals have been mooted, such as reducing the retiring age from 60 to 55 years and a 5 percent pay cut for public servants. The lower retirement age will slash the number of teachers by about 900 and remove about 3,000 public servants. Interim public sector reform minister Poseci Bune said this would save \$F70 million this year. The junta has already reneged on a 2006 budget agreement to pay a cost of living allowance (COLA) to public servants.

Various public sector unions have foreshadowed strike action against the job and wage cuts, reflecting the mounting hostility of their members to the austerity measures. On February 7, the *Fiji Sun* warned workers to submit to the government’s demands: “They should be mindful that we now have a government that inherits it political power from the barrel of a gun—so follow its plans.” The following day, Attorney-General Sayed-Khaiyum declared that workers had no right to strike under emergency rule and could be detained for up seven days without charge.

The junta’s measures will cause further severe hardships to ordinary people. The cut to teacher numbers will only exacerbate the already appalling situation in schools, with the teacher-student ratio at one teacher for every 50 students. The overall budget cuts will create further poverty. The Fiji National Provident Fund assisted more than 20,000 people last December and acting chief executive officer Parmod Achary said it had received double that number of applications in January.

There are signs that the Howard government in Australia, the major regional power, will seek an accommodation with the military regime, just as Canberra did following the 1987 and 2000 coups. On February 9, Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer condemned the military’s actions, accusing the Fijian military of trying to “suppress any form of dissent or disagreement ... through extreme intimidation of critics.” Yet, Chaudhry’s budgetary measures are in line with Canberra’s demands that Fiji become a more attractive investment destination by making it cheaper to do business there. In spite of Downer’s condemnation, his department has eased its advisories against Australians travelling to Fiji, boosting the all-important tourism trade, and Australian officials are continuing to conduct “free trade” negotiations with the junta and 13 other Pacific nations.



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