

Fiji: Pacific Islands Forum report urges coup leader to stand aside

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A Pacific Islands Forum Eminent Persons Group (EPG) report, leaked to the PacNews agency on February 20, urges the Fijian military regime to stand aside and install an interim civilian administration. However, it does not call for a return of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase's government, which was forced out of office on December 5.

In effect, the report applies diplomatic pressure to the junta to bow to the dictates of the main regional powers, Australia and New Zealand, which want the army to return to its barracks so that a new regime can be fashioned that will be more amenable to their interests.

The Australian-dominated Pacific Islands Forum originally set up the EPG just before the December 5 coup to mediate the protracted dispute between Qarase and the military chief, Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama. The impasse centred on two proposed laws—an amnesty bill for the perpetrators of the 2000 coup and legislation to give traditional Fijian chiefs control over coastal lands. Bainimarama finally carried out his threat to oust Qarase's government, forming a junta made up of the military, the Labour Party, the National Alliance Party and various technocrats.

The EPG was comprised of Vanuatu's deputy prime minister Sato Kilman as chair, Samoa's natural resources minister Faumuina Liuga, Papua New Guinea's retired chief justice Arnold Amet and retired chief of the Australian Defence Forces, Peter Cosgrove; who effectively called the shots.

The group visited Fiji at the end of January, interviewing Bainimarama, Qarase and other political leaders. Its report is to be considered by Pacific Islands Forum foreign affairs ministers at a meeting on March 16 in Vanuatu, but was leaked to a Suva-based news agency and subsequently posted on the Internet.

It is significant that the EPG report criticises every aspect of the military regime except its proposed austerity budget due on March 2, which will axe \$F200 million, mostly through cuts to the public sector. The report states, "the Commander's action seizing power on 5 December was illegal". The State of Emergency was "unwarranted" and a "major obstacle to a return to normality and a resumption of the rule of law."

The report is couched in terms of a return to "democracy", but the reality is that its major proposals call for negotiations to organise Qarase's formal resignation so that President Josefa Iloilo can form a new interim regime to organise elections in two years' time.

The EPG treads a fine line. Whilst condemning the coup for threatening stability, at the same time it effectively endorses the removal of the Qarase government, which came into some conflict with Canberra.

Australia strongly opposed the coup, while seeking to exploit the standoff between the military and Qarase to further its economic and strategic interests in the South Pacific. In a bid to forestall the coup, the Howard government stationed three warships just outside Fijian territorial waters and secretly deployed military personnel in Suva, violating Fiji's sovereignty.

At the same time, Canberra was hostile to Qarase's "affirmative action" program, aimed at enriching the ethnic Fijian elite through public subsidies, interest-free loans, exclusive land rights and reserved shares in privatised public services and industries.

Qarase's regime included open supporters of the 2000 coup led by Fijian businessman George Speight and sections of the military, who seized parliament and held the Labour government of Mahendra Chaudhry hostage for several weeks. Bainimarama then stepped

in to appoint Qarase, a merchant banker known for his sympathies with Fijian communal politics, as interim prime minister, a move that was immediately endorsed by Australia and New Zealand.

Bainimarama later fell out with Qarase, opposing aspects of his discriminatory policies for the ethnic Fijian elite. Today, Bainimarama's program, including his "clean-up campaign" against corruption and the promise to restructure the economy in order to attract foreign investment, is attractive to the regional powers.

On December 2 the foreign editor of the *Australian*, Greg Sheridan, expressed Canberra's dilemma on the eve of the 2006 coup. He said there were "plenty of arguments on Bainimarama's side, except for the overwhelming argument that he should not dismiss a democratically elected government."

Sheridan then went on to itemise why "the Qarase Government is undeniably smelly and vulnerable on many fronts". He describes Qarase proposed amnesty for the 2000 coup plotters as "profoundly ill-advised, not to mention utterly offensive". But his real concern was the Qarase government's proposed legislation to give Fijian chiefs rights over foreshore areas, thus undermining foreign investment, particularly in tourism.

Even though the EPG report calls for the military to renounce its hold on the reins of government, there are definite signs that Canberra may reach an accommodation with the junta, as it did in 1987 with military head Sitiveni Rabuka who had ousted the Labour government of Timoci Bavadra.

New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark immediately endorsed the EPG report and highlighted the fact that Qarase would not be returned: "The report was not a call for a return to the status quo but finding a way forward." Australian foreign affairs minister Alexander Downer called on Bainimarama to implement the report's findings.

At first, Bainimarama refused to comment on the report, saying it was "only proper" for the Pacific Islands Forum foreign ministers to consider the report first. Then on February 22, he accused Australia and New Zealand of "bullying tactics", declaring: "This clearly illustrates the insensitiveness and total lack of understanding on part of these two dominant powers within the Forum about the special circumstances, problems and aspirations of the respective Pacific

Island Countries."

The military regime has published its own "roadmap" to parliamentary elections in 2010. It proposes to "kick start" the national economy by restructuring the sugar industry. Sugar still accounts for around \$F200m annually in export revenues—about 22 percent of total export earnings—and provides a livelihood to about 31 percent of the population.

But no formula has been established for the renewal of sugar cane farm leases, held by mainly Indo-Fijian lessees from tribal Fijian landholders. It has been estimated that 5,000 families will abandon cane farming by 2008, if leases are not renewed, leading to a further decline of about 1.8 percent in the country's GDP.

The military regime's March budget aims to slash the national deficit to less than 2 percent of GDP, whereas Qarase's last budget forecast a debt level of 3.6 percent. The junta plans to decimate the public service by reducing the retirement age from 60 to 55 years. Fiji Public Service Association general secretary Rajeshwar Singh estimates that between 800 and 900 civil servants will be removed, with an extra 487 from the Public Works Department and 900 teachers.

Public sector wages will also be cut by 5 percent and the cost of living allowance paid to public servants will be waived. These cuts will have a devastating effect on the living standards of ordinary working people, which will inevitably lead to growing dissatisfaction and opposition to the junta.



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