

Canberra prepares rapprochement with Fijian military junta

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6 April 2007

The Howard government, in close collaboration with the US, European Union, and New Zealand, has signalled its readiness to tacitly recognise the Fijian military regime and normalise diplomatic relations. The rapprochement underscores the cynicism of Canberra's purported concern for democratic rights in Fiji following the military's takeover last December. Howard's real priority, both then and now, is to preserve stability in the South Pacific and prevent any diminution of Australia's regional strategic position.

In the four months since the coup, the military regime led by Commodore Frank Bainimarama has stressed its willingness to deal with Australia, New Zealand, and the US, and has simultaneously appealed to international investors by attacking workers' wages and conditions and implementing a pro-business austerity budget. The Howard government clearly recognises that this is an administration with which it can now do business.

Foreign ministers of the 16-member Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), including the Australian and New Zealand foreign ministers Alexander Downer and Winston Peters, met in Vanuatu on March 16. They endorsed the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) report on the latest Fijian coup, which refrained from calling for the reinstatement of the overthrown government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. The PIF foreign ministers, however, went even further and, in an annex to their official statement, buried the EPG's demands for the military to return to barracks and for Bainimarama to relinquish power.

The Australian-dominated Pacific Islands Forum originally set up the EPG just before the December 5 coup to mediate an ongoing dispute between Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase and Bainimarama. The impasse centred on two proposed laws—an amnesty bill

for the perpetrators of the 2000 coup and the Qoliqoli Bill to give Fijian chiefs customary rights over the island's foreshores. After weeks of threats and counter-threats, Bainimarama finally ousted Qarase's government and formed a junta made up of the military, the Labour Party, the National Alliance Party and various technocrats.

The PIF communiqué endorsed the EPG's recommendation that the interim government should hold elections within 18 to 24 months. This tacit recognition of the regime made a mockery of the foreign ministers' declaration that the military coup was "unconstitutional and unacceptable" as well as their demand that the junta curb its human rights abuses and guarantee the independence of the judiciary. The communiqué's criticisms of the military regime's human rights record were purely for public consumption. The foreign ministers called for a "staged process of engagement with the interim government" and effectively endorsed the junta's program by offering a "phased package of financial and technical assistance" for its so-called "independent anti-corruption commission".

Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon summed up the new approach when he addressed a New Zealand foreign affairs parliamentary subcommittee on March 29. According to New Zealand's *newswire* web site, McKinnon said: "it is now time to stop criticising the coup leaders in Fiji and start talking to them".

Australian Foreign Minister Downer has confirmed that the Howard government was considering providing the Fijian regime with more than \$A40 million in aid money supposedly required to assist a return to parliamentary democracy. "The Fijians originally were saying [that elections] were going to happen in three

years, now they are saying it could be a bit quicker than that,” he stated.

The military regime enthusiastically welcomed the outcome of the PIF foreign ministers’ meeting. “This path forward recognises the acceptance by the [Pacific Islands] Forum of the Interim Government and its pivotal role to take Fiji to sustained parliamentary democracy,” Foreign Minister Epeli Nailatikau declared. “So the door has not been shut on us.”

Canberra originally vehemently opposed the coup and stationed three warships and a group of elite SAS troops just outside Fijian waters. While the Howard government finally decided not to intervene militarily, it imposed a number of sanctions. The US cut off \$US2.8 million in military assistance, and the European Union threatened to withdraw \$US195 million in aid to Fiji’s failing sugar industry. As recent developments demonstrate, however, none of these measures was driven by a concern for the democratic rights of ordinary Fijians.

Relations between the western powers and the junta have improved despite ongoing repression in Fiji. In the months since the coup, the military has dragged dozens of political opponents into their barracks and assaulted them. Others, including journalists and media operators, have been threatened. Soldiers are implicated in the deaths of two people who were taken into custody. Former Prime Minister Qarase is under investigation on charges of treason.

Canberra has no interest in backing Qarase. The ousted prime minister’s government relied upon open supporters of the 2000 coup led by ethnic Fijian businessman and chauvinist George Speight and sections of the military, who seized parliament and held the Labour government of Mahendra Chaudhry hostage for several weeks. Qarase failed to carry out promised cuts to the public service and promoted a series of discriminatory policies for the ethnic Fijian elite which cut across international investors’ interests. His government’s Qoliqoli Bill would have extended tribal chiefs’ customary rights over coastal foreshore land used by large foreign-owned tourist resorts.

Since seizing power, Bainimarama has appealed for international support by launching an anti-corruption “clean up” campaign, centrally aimed at restructuring the economy to make it more attractive for foreign investors to do business. The military regime has now

embarked on a drive to reduce public sector wages by at least five percent and slash jobs through a reduction in the retirement age. Its budget has further attacked the social position of the working class by raising regressive taxes, and cutting spending on health, education, and other social services. These measures have long been demanded by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Unsurprisingly, neither the EPG nor the PIF foreign ministers’ meeting issued any criticism of the military regime’s economic and social agenda, nor its repression of the working class.

Bainimarama expects the Labour Party—which was granted critical cabinet positions, including the finance ministry, headed by former prime minister Chaudhry—to work with the trade union bureaucracy and stifle opposition within the working class to the regime’s attacks on wages and working conditions. The junta has also demonstrated its willingness to resort to repressive measures. Soldiers detained Public Employees Union (PEU) general secretary Pita Delana on March 22 after he criticised the regime. Acting army commander Captain Esala Teleni warned that “if they want to go on strike, tell them to go on strike. But they will never come back to work.” On March 28, police broke up the AGM of the National Union of Public Workers claiming it didn’t hold a permit. The union’s general secretary Alfred Manuel, president Moses Sova, and a union lawyer were questioned and held for two hours at the Central Police Station.



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