

Fijian military junta targets bloggers

Patrick O'Connor
24 May 2007

The Fijian military junta has targeted anti-regime web logs (blogs), and threatened to arrest the people behind them. On May 17, army commander Colonel Pita Driti announced that blogs “critical of the army and members of the government” would be shut down as they posed a “threat to national security”.

“There is still an active state of emergency and people must be aware that some freedoms need to be restrained, including freedom of expression,” Driti declared. “When we catch up with these bloggers, we will take them to our military quarters and explain to them how their remarks constitute a threat to the country.”

This is an ominous warning, particularly given the regime’s record. Since launching its coup last December, the military has detained dozens of prominent oppositionists, including former government members, activists in various non-government organisations, and others opposed to the trampling of democratic rights in Fiji. Many have been assaulted and one person has allegedly been beaten to death while in military custody.

The regime’s attempted crackdown on independent blogs is another indication of the weakness of its grip on power. The coup marked the culmination of a protracted power struggle within the Fijian ruling elite, particularly within the ethnic Fijian upper strata. Former Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase’s government rested upon chauvinist elements hostile to the country’s Indo-Fijian minority. Qarase enacted a series of discriminatory “affirmative action” and land rights measures which cut across the interests of some international investors, particularly in the lucrative tourism industry, as well as those Fijian business layers connected to these investors.

Immediately after seizing power, military leader Commodore Frank Bainimarama declared his intention to form a pro-business and pro-investment regime by

slashing government spending and lowering workers’ wage levels. Public sector workers are still threatening to strike against threatened job cuts and an across-the-board salary cut of 5 percent. The military regime has no social base. While it has appointed a government in which the predominantly Indo-Fijian Labour Party plays a prominent role, it faces opposition from ordinary ethnic Fijians and Indo-Fijians alike.

As a result, the junta depends on repression, intimidation, and censorship. Blogs, and the Internet generally, provide the sole medium through which Fijians can express their opposition to the military regime and gain access to uncensored news and information.

Some of the blogs are openly supportive of the former Qarase government and feature racist denunciations of Indo-Fijians, as well as unsubstantiated allegations about government members’ sexual misconduct, corruption, etc. The military has seized upon such sites and claimed that their campaign against blogs is directed against “hate speech” and slander. This is nothing but a pretext, however. The majority of the anti-regime blogs are genuinely concerned with defending democratic rights and free speech.

The most prominent blog, <http://intelligentsiya.blogspot.com>, released a statement on May 14: “While some other blogs (namely Resistfrankscoup) could be termed ‘racist’, Intelligentsiya will never condone racism or violence. We therefore despise being put under the same label as other blogs that have called for violence and made racist comments. Notwithstanding the racist and ‘call-to-arms’ comments on other blogs, we still passionately defend our right to raise our voices.”

Fiji is an impoverished country with a comparatively low Internet access rate, but the impact of the blogs has nevertheless been significant. Young people in

particular take advantage of relatively cheap access in Internet cafes in the main towns. The military's announced crackdown has only increased ordinary Fijians' determination to gain access to the proscribed information.

One blogger, "Fijian Black", told *Global Voices Online*: "Not only do our posts get read, they get emailed all over the world, to people who are interested in our country, they get printed out (I'm talking reams of printouts here) in totality for the consumption of the Fiji public who don't have internet access, and now, they are getting widespread media coverage, in Fiji and regionally."

Another blogger, "Discombobulated Bubu", said: "The reaction of the average Fijian has been overwhelming—people that have access to computers download and print out stuff on the blogs. This then gets sent out to the remote villages by bus, boat and fax (those who have it) and by the 'coconut wireless'—people talking to each other. The military has grossly misjudged this means of communication—hence I think their panic now to shut the 'people's voices' up."

According to one report, which was later denied by the military, the regime was recruiting Indian-based information technology (IT) experts to help track down the anonymous bloggers. On May 11, businessman and IT specialist Ulaiasi Taoi was detained by the military for 24 hours and assaulted in Suva's Queen Elizabeth Barracks after being accused of running one of the blogs.

"The line of questioning, [Taoi] said, was largely about the objectives and membership of the Fiji Indigenous Business Council, including the residential addresses of members," the *Fiji Times* reported. "Soldiers also asked him if he was related to deposed Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase and why the council supported the [former ruling party] Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua. He said soldiers took his laptop computer and mobile phone to try to determine the allegations of his involvement in the blog sites.... Around 10pm, he was summoned outside his cell where eight soldiers in balaclava, green T-shirts, black pants and boots took turns at kicking and punching him."

Another person, Rowland Fenton, was accused of running a blog and detained on May 17. Few details have emerged of this incident, although soldiers

allegedly assaulted the man.

The military also asked Fiji's sole Internet provider, FINTEL, whether it could block access to the targeted websites and common blog hosting sites such as www.blogspot.com. This had little effect, however, aside from forcing some bloggers to move to a different blog-hosting site. Bloggers from around the world, together with international organisations, including Reporters Without Borders and Global Voices Online, rallied to the support of the Fijian bloggers and offered technical assistance to help maintain their web sites and their anonymity.

The junta's inability to suppress the blogs demonstrates some of the dilemmas facing authoritarian regimes in the twenty-first century. In addition to the inherent logistical difficulties in censoring the Internet, international investors react negatively to any interference in Internet service provision. Chris Hammond-Thrasher, an IT security consultant told the *Fiji Times*: "Off-shore service centres rely on the perception of data communications security in order to assure their customers that the confidentiality of their data will not be compromised."

The military announced on Tuesday that it was calling off the campaign against the bloggers. "We are not interested any more in what's been said about us on the blog sites," Colonel Driti declared. "It doesn't bother us any more. We won't pursue it any further. It has taken us two to three weeks to develop thick skin. On the second week, we developed a second thick layer of skin, and third week another layer of thick skin, so we don't care now what they say."

Driti's feigned indifference, however, was belied by his warning that the military was still prepared to arrest anyone suspected of publishing the blogs.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact