

New Zealand widens sanctions on Fiji following high commissioner's expulsion

John Braddock
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In response to the expulsion from Suva last month of its high commissioner, the New Zealand government announced last week that its travel ban on Fijians associated with the December 2006 military coup has been extended.

The new ban covers all senior officials, including heads of government departments, agencies and statutory boards, and their immediate family members. It also applies to transit visas, and to high-level contacts with Fiji's interim government. Any such contact will now require NZ Prime Minister Helen Clark's personal permission or that of Foreign Minister Winston Peters.

An earlier ban imposed on travel or transit by Fijian national or club sports teams to New Zealand will be maintained. Ordinary Fijians will be affected even further. An existing ban on those seeking seasonal work in New Zealand will be extended to Fijians who are already in New Zealand for other reasons.

Clark said the visa ban on coup perpetrators, the military and members of Fiji's interim government and their families was having the twin effect of "putting pressure" on Fiji's coup leader Commodore Frank Bainimarama and his supporters and making people "think twice about supporting the regime". She added that the measures were designed to show Fiji's leaders how seriously New Zealand considered the expulsion of its diplomatic representative.

Michael Green was expelled from Fiji on June 14, following claims by Bainimarama that the ambassador had interfered in Fijian domestic affairs. While no precise details were given, the coup leader said that Green had "stepped out of line despite repeated warnings", and that he had persistently been "in the face" of the administration since December. In a recent interview with TVNZ, Bainimarama added that Green had been passing on "false information" about the

situation in Fiji to the Clark government. Emphasising that Fiji did not wish to break off diplomatic relations altogether, Bainimarama has invited Clark to send an alternative ambassador.

Clark dismissed the claims of interference as an "erratic" lashing out by Fiji's "self-centred and narcissistic" regime. The New Zealand media circulated a story that Bainimarama was retaliating over Green's appearance at a recent New Zealand versus Fiji rugby game, where the Fiji Rugby Union gave him pride of place in the official enclosure ahead of the military chief. The *New Zealand Herald* editorialised that New Zealand had been singled out for diplomatic sanction because its criticism of the Bainimarama regime "has been vigorous, vocal and largely unremitting".

Clark responded to the expulsion by calling for a tourist boycott of Fiji—the tourist industry is vital to the Pacific island country's economy, and has already suffered as a result of the coup—and by turning to other countries for support. Australia and Britain immediately condemned Green's expulsion. "[W]e have been briefing a number of our close partners about this most regrettable turn of events in Fiji, and we have received nothing but sympathy, support, understanding and solidarity," Clark boasted.

In fact, the action followed a series of complaints by the Fijians over the activities of both New Zealand and Australia over the period since the coup.

In April, Foreign Minister Peters was forced to deny alleged attempts to encourage senior members of Fiji's military to stage a mutiny. Colonel Pita Driti, Fiji's land force commander, declared he had been approached by the high commissioners of Australia and Britain and a United States representative last year when Bainimarama was in New Zealand. He said the

group had told him it did not like Bainimarama's approach and encouraged him to take over. Although New Zealand's high commissioner was apparently not present, Driti said he assumed New Zealand was involved.

At the same time, Driti told the *Fiji Times* that Australia's planned \$A11 billion purchase of advanced destroyers and amphibious warships was yet another reaction to the coup. "Their plans to purchase and strengthen defence equipment came about in December when it could not respond to an alleged request by [ousted prime minister] Laisenia Qarase for Australia's intervention in what was happening in Fiji," Driti told the newspaper. He said the new equipment could lead to a speedy attack on his country.

While Howard promptly denied the claim, he had earlier declared that the new purchases constitute "a massive lift" to the navy's air warfare capability. "They will greatly enhance Australia's ability to send forces in strength, when required, particularly in our own region, but not of course restricted to our own region," Howard noted. New Zealand last month also took delivery of a new troop transport vessel, built for the explicit purpose of enhancing its capacity to carry out amphibious assaults.

Late last month, Mahendra Chaudry, Fiji's interim finance minister, accused Australia of trying to sabotage Fiji's economy by blocking its loan arrangements with world lenders such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. He also claimed Australia and New Zealand were trying to harm the country through unjustified travel warnings.

The expulsion of the New Zealand high commissioner, and the Clark government's vehement reaction to it, has served, once again, to heighten tensions in the region. Bainimarama said the latest moves by Clark amounted to "hypocrisy of the highest order".

Whatever the immediate excuse, intimidation and bullying by Australia and New Zealand have nothing to do with promoting "democracy". While initially posturing as opponents of the military regime, both Howard and Clark have backed away from demands for the reinstatement of the former Qarase government—whose indigenous land reform policies had threatened to cut across foreign ownership and

investment.

The more the interim government has acceded to the economic agenda of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the more acceptable it has become. Its anti-working class agenda—including reducing public sector wages by five percent and slashing jobs through a reduction in the retirement age, raising regressive taxes, and cutting spending on health, education, and other social services—has won it a degree of support.

In April, the Howard government, in collaboration with Clark, signalled its readiness to tacitly recognise the regime and normalise diplomatic relations, while seeking a commitment to a return to "constitutional government".

Clark's latest retaliation underscores the two-pronged approach of both Australia and New Zealand: accommodation on the one hand, and threats and pressure on the other, all aimed at fashioning thoroughly compliant regimes throughout the Pacific region. Behind it lies their underlying strategy of asserting their interests against incursions by rival powers, such as China, Taiwan and the European Union.

New Zealand's exports to the Pacific, for example, are running at about \$1 billion year, compared with imports of only \$160 million. Last month, NZ Trade Minister Phil Goff announced negotiations for a free trade agreement with the Pacific, prompted by concerns that local exporters will lose out if Pacific nations give duty free access to the EU.

Both Australia and New Zealand reserve for themselves the right to remove, appoint or bestow favour upon whatever local administrations suit their purpose, regardless of their "democratic" credentials—or lack of them.



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