Fijian military regime reimposes emergency rule

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Fijian military dictator Frank Bainimarama reimposed emergency rule on September 5 following deposed prime minister Laisenia Qarase's return to the capital, Suva. An earlier emergency decree, declared after last December's coup, was lifted in May. Its reimposition underscores the depth of the crisis facing the unstable military regime.

Under the state of emergency, there is a total ban on public meetings and the military can disperse any parades, demonstrations, or private meetings it deems a threat to security. Police and soldiers are also permitted to use lethal force. So far, however, there has not been a significant military mobilisation and, unlike the period of emergency rule in the months immediately following the coup, there have been no military marches or checkpoints erected on Suva's main roads.

The state of emergency has been aimed primarily against Qarase and the former ruling United Fiji Party (SDL). "Qarase and his political affiliates have been holding public speeches and falsely accusing the Fijian military of making threats against them," Fiji's land forces chief, Colonel Moses Tikoitonga declared. Emergency rule, he continued, was a "proactive stance to maintain stability".

Qarase, who was exiled to his home island of Vanuabalavu after the coup, has returned to Suva to oversee a legal challenge to the constitutional validity of the military regime. Fiji's High Court will begin hearing the case on October 2.

While the former prime minister has declared his intention to stand as a candidate in elections scheduled to be held in March 2009, he has made no attempt to rally mounting public opposition against the regime. On his return to Suva, Qarase adamantly denied military allegations of "incitement". "I am neutral and I have offered my service to the interim government," he declared.

Qarase's legal case against the military regime follows Bainimarama's efforts to cover his coup with a pseudo-constitutional façade. The military took to the streets on December 5 last year and overthrew Qarase's government. In a series of complex manoeuvres, Bainimarama then took over the presidency only to subsequently reappoint President Ratu Josefa Iloilo on January 5, after an agreement had been reached. Iloilo publicly endorsed the coup and formally nominated Bainimarama as prime minister.

The military dictator claimed that all his actions were legally justified and that the Fijian constitution remained intact. While obviously absurd, Bainimarama's position was aimed, above all, at securing the support of the major powers, particularly Australia, New Zealand, the US and the European Union.

The Qarase government represented the interests of a chauvinist layer of the ethnic Fijian elite. It initiated "affirmative action" programs providing ethnic Fijian businessmen with various benefits denied to Indo-Fijians, and passed land rights legislation that gave a small layer of chiefly leaders a financial stake in coastal developments, including tourist resorts. These aspects of Qarase's program cut across the interests of important foreign investors, as well as layers of Fiji's ruling elite.

After seizing power, Bainimarama immediately abolished these measures and promised other reforms to attract international investment. His regime then set about cutting government spending and slashing jobs and wages in the public sector.

This open "free market" program has intensified opposition within the working class towards the military regime. Last month, military threats failed to avert a civil service strike. Ultimately, Bainimarama only prevailed due to the role of the union heads who refused to pursue the strike and mount a political challenge to the government. The union bureaucracy is directly tied to the Labour Party, which now forms a critical component of

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Bainimarama's regime. Labour leader Mahendra Chaudhry, who was deposed as prime minister in the 2000 coup, is the new finance minister.

Amid worsening economic problems, Bainimarama's efforts to attract international investors have achieved very little. Fiji's sugar and textile industries, which previously formed the backbone of the country's economy, appear to be in terminal crisis. The other major industry, tourism, is continuing to suffer the effects of the coup, with hotel occupancy at less than 50 percent.

In a speech delivered on September 3, Fijian Reserve Bank governor Savenaca Narube revealed that the economy was in worse shape than previously thought. Narube anticipated it would contract by 3.1 percent in 2007 rather than the 2.5 percent predicted earlier this year. According to reports, the crisis has provoked the regime to consider taking on more foreign debt—including a $US500 million loan brokered by investment bank Merrill Lynch. One estimate has Fiji's debt, already equivalent to more than 50 percent of gross domestic product, set to increase by another 20 percent.

In the face of the military's inability to resolve the country's economic problems and establish a stable regime, Australia and other powers are stepping up their pressure. The Howard government has condemned the reimposition of emergency rule, while the European Union is reportedly considering suspending its sugar subsidy program, valued at $US30 million annually. This aid is critical in propping up what remains of the Fijian sugar industry.

The major powers' criticisms have nothing to do with any concern for the democratic rights of ordinary Fijians. On the contrary, they fear that increasing instability could undermine their struggle for strategic advantage in the South Pacific against incursions by rival powers—particularly China and Taiwan. Canberra, for example, has attempted to advance its political domination over the region under the cover of promoting "good governance" and "the rule of law".

While the Howard government had little sympathy for Qarase's economic program, it nevertheless made a number of highly provocative moves in the lead-up to the coup in an attempt to forestall his overthrow. Three Australian warships, with at least 100 soldiers on board, were stationed just off Fijian waters. At the same time, other Australian personnel, possibly including elite SAS troops, were positioned in the Australian High Commission in Suva, after secretly entering the country on November 3.

Last week, Bainimarama claimed that shortly before the coup he was warned that Australia would invade if Qarase were overthrown. According to the military ruler, Australia's chief of defence force, Angus Houston, told him: "Do not do anything that would pit my soldiers against yours."

Both Houston and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer have denied the allegation. Whatever the truth of the matter, there is no doubt that Bainimarama is appealing to anti-Australian and nationalist sentiment in Fiji. The regime has charged Qarase with treason for requesting, on the eve of the coup, that Canberra send in the troops and save his government. The case is due to begin next month.

Bainimarama appears increasingly frustrated by the reluctance of the Howard government and its allies in the region to endorse the regime. His position has been made more difficult by Beijing's apparent unwillingness to offer significant aid and trade deals. After the coup, Bainimarama warned Canberra that he would look to China unless an accommodation was reached. Increased Chinese economic activity in the South Pacific has shifted the strategic balance and allowed a number of regional governments to manoeuvre between the rival powers.

So far, however, Bainimarama's regime seems to be out of favour. On September 3, a Fijian trade delegation returned from Beijing after securing an agreement on economic and technical co-operation and contracts for the construction of a bridge. But there were no negotiations on substantial aid or trade contracts. The Chinese government has evidently decided to maintain, at least for now, a somewhat cautious approach, avoiding any direct challenge to Canberra over Fiji.

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