

Australian Labor government presses neo-colonial agenda at Pacific Islands Forum

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This week's Pacific Islands Forum leaders' summit in Niue, the first held since Kevin Rudd succeeded John Howard as Australian prime minister, underscores the unanimity between the current and former governments regarding South Pacific strategy. The new Labor regime is no less determined than its Liberal predecessor to promote the economic interests of corporate Australia and secure its strategic hegemony by shutting out rival powers and maintaining a heavy military-police presence in the region.

Rudd and his senior ministers, however, have been at pains to stress the dawning of a "new partnership" with the Pacific states, based on "mutual respect". Their rhetoric is aimed at diffusing the immense hostility engendered by the former Howard government among ordinary Pacific Islanders, as well as within local political elites, to its aggressive interventions, "regime change" operations and general bullying.

"In any conversation, the tone you adopt can matter as much as the substance of your discussion," foreign minister Stephen Smith declared in a speech titled "Australia's New Approach to the Pacific" and delivered before the Australian Institute for International Affairs on August 7. "The tone of exchanges with our friends in the Pacific certainly needed changing when we came to office. We committed ourselves from the outset to change. Progress and reform are far more likely to be achieved through a respecting and respectful relationship."

This week's discussion at the 16-member Pacific Islands Forum has made clear that for all the grand rhetoric of "respect" and "partnership", Canberra's neo-colonial agenda remains firmly in place.

The overriding cynicism accompanying this week's proceedings was nowhere more evident than in the government's new "seasonal worker pilot scheme". This involves importing Pacific "guest workers" as agricultural labourers. Each year over the next three years, up to 2,500 workers from Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Kiribati, and Tonga will be granted work permits for the regional horticultural industry. The Rudd government has hailed the

initiative as evidence of its "commitment to assist the Pacific Island countries to address their unique, and some cases significant, development needs".

In reality, the "seasonal workers" will be exploited as cheap labour, doing menial work that is so poorly paid and physically demanding that farmers and agri-businesses have been unable to find enough Australian residents prepared to sign on. The National Farmers Federation, which has backed Rudd's scheme and condemned the Liberals for opposing it, claims that up to 100,000 seasonal workers are required to ensure fruit is picked before it rots. Liberal leader Brendan Nelson's stance has been opposed from within the coalition, with NSW Nationals parliamentarian Kay Hull openly supporting the government on the basis that fruit growers in her electorate are desperate for pickers.

Workers throughout the world, including the South Pacific, should have the right to live and work wherever they wish, with decent employment conditions and full legal and political rights. Under the Rudd government's proposal, however, the Pacific workers will have virtually no such democratic rights. If they object to their working conditions or are identified as being in any way unproductive they could be deported at any time.

The scheme amounts to a twenty-first century version of "blackbirding"—the brutal system in which tens of thousands of indentured Melanesian labourers were exploited on Queensland sugar plantations, beginning in the 1860s and continuing for several decades.

The new "guest worker" program is being introduced as a means of pressuring Pacific states into compliance with Canberra's dictates. It dovetails with longstanding calls by the regional political elite for just such a scheme, which would boost their economies through remittance payments and help alleviate the social tensions arising from escalating youth unemployment.

While the initial scale of the program is relatively small, Rudd has promised a review after 18 months, which will consider increasing the numbers involved as well as allowing additional countries to participate. Australian

officials have clearly implied that such decisions may depend on progress in negotiations for a regional free trade agreement, PACER Plus, which would open up new opportunities for Australian big business in the region by tearing down investment and trade barriers. Regional governments have proved resistant, fearing the loss of vital tariff revenue and the destruction of local industries at the hands of Australian transnational companies. Moreover, Pacific exporters already enjoy preferential access to the Australian market, so the benefits of a new regional free trade deal would be entirely one-sided.

The Rudd government is using new aid packages, “Partnerships for Development”, in a similar manner—to press for accelerated “free market” economic restructuring throughout the Pacific. Signing new development “partnership” agreements with Samoa and Papua New Guinea during the Forum, Rudd stressed that the additional Australian aid money was based on the principle of “mutual responsibility” and would involve “embracing commitments from Pacific partners to improve governance [and] increase investment in economic infrastructure”.

One of the major items on the Pacific Islands Forum agenda was responding to the Fijian military junta’s announcement that it would not permit elections to be held in March 2009 as promised at last year’s Forum. Military ruler Commodore Frank Bainimarama boycotted this year’s proceedings and neither Rudd nor New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark missed any opportunity to sanctimoniously denounce the regime and declare their commitment to “democratic” rule. The Australian leader even accused Bainimarama of “chicken[ing] out” of the meeting.

A formal statement jointly issued by the 15 heads of government concluded that they may meet again later this year to consider “special measures in relation to Fiji (consistent with paragraph 2(iv) of the Biketawa Declaration)”, including the country’s possible suspension from the group. The evocation of the so-called Biketawa Declaration on Regional Security is an especially provocative move by the Rudd government. The former Howard government invoked the alleged authority of this document (agreed by Pacific Island leaders in 2000) to deploy Australian police and/or troops to Solomon Islands (in 2003), Nauru (2004), and Tonga (2006).

Canberra and Wellington’s criticisms of the Fijian regime are entirely hypocritical. As their relations with numerous authoritarian regimes in Asia and the Middle East testify, the embrace of any given government as an ally or its denunciation as a pariah has nothing to do with democratic rights. Strategic calculations are always the primary motivating factor.

In the case of Fiji, the central issue is maintaining Australian hegemony and minimising the influence of rival powers, particularly China. The protracted breakdown of the post-World War II order, combined with the eruption of US militarism in the Middle East and the rise of potential challengers such as China and India, has everywhere transformed geo-strategic relations. The South Pacific has been especially affected, with Beijing’s rising economic and diplomatic influence providing regional governments with a means of at least partially offsetting Canberra’s dominant role.

According to an article in Thursday’s *Australian*, China now delivers about one-third of all aid money in the South Pacific. Unlike funding from Australia and other countries, Beijing does not impose conditions on its aid, leading to concerns within Canberra’s foreign policy establishment that Chinese money has greatly undermined Australia’s leverage. Whereas Australia, New Zealand, and the European Union suspended most “non-humanitarian” aid to Fiji in the wake of the military coup in 2006, China increased its support through a \$US150 million “soft loan” awarded in 2007.

“The longer Fiji drifts, the more open it will be to influence from China, which is working to expand its presence in the South Pacific,” a July 30 editorial in the *Wall Street Journal Asia* concluded. “All the more reason to prod the island nation to make its way back to the league of liberal democracies.”

The WSJA editorial was prompted by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s meeting with South Pacific foreign ministers in Samoa on July 26, during which she castigated the Fijian regime and demanded that elections be held in mid-2009 as previously scheduled. Rice’s visit—the first to Samoa by a US secretary of state in more than two decades—was clearly designed to lend weight to the Rudd government’s position at the Forum and affirm that behind Canberra’s efforts to maintain its grip over the region stands the full weight of US imperialism.



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