

Australia threatens Fiji with suspension from Pacific Islands Forum

Frank Gaglioti
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A "special leaders' retreat" of the 16-member Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), convened in Papua New Guinea (PNG) on January 27, concluded with a threat to suspend Fiji from the regional body unless the military junta announces elections by May 1 and conducts the poll by the end of the year. The ultimatum was insisted upon by the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd who, like his predecessor John Howard, has sought to utilise the forum as an instrument for advancing Canberra's economic and strategic interests in the region.

Although the summit's final communiqué was issued in the name of all the PIF members, Australia and New Zealand called the shots. A number of the Pacific states, including PNG, were reportedly reluctant to impose sanctions but in the end went along with the threatened suspension. The communiqué invoked paragraph 2(iv) of the so-called Biketawa Declaration and warned of "targeted measures" if Fijian Prime Minister Commodore Frank Bainimarama did not meet the PIF's demands. Stated targeted measures included the suspension of Fiji government personnel from Forum meetings and events, and the exclusion of Fiji from "regional cooperation initiatives, and new financial and technical assistance."

Canberra's invocation of the Biketawa Declaration is particularly provocative. This text, adopted by the former Howard government in 2000, was subsequently used to justify Australian police and military interventions in the Solomon Islands (2003), Nauru (2004) and Tonga (2006). In the lead-up to the December 2006 Fijian coup, Howard invoke the authority of the Biketawa Declaration to station

Australian navy warships just outside Fijian territorial waters and secretly deploy military personnel in Suva, the country's capital.

Bainimarama did not attend the PIF summit, dispatching Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum to represent Fiji. Bainimarama later rejected the PIF threat, saying, "I have never come across a situation where a country gives an ultimatum to another country unless, of course, there is a declaration of war." He had earlier announced that an election could take 5 to 10 years to organise.

Rudd's aggressive stance has nothing to do with any concern for the democratic rights of ordinary Fijians. Canberra's real concern is that prolonged military rule in Fiji may trigger further instability throughout the South Pacific. A previous coup in Fiji, in 2000, was immediately followed by a similar overthrow of the Solomon Islands government. The Australian foreign policy establishment especially fears that regional instability could allow rival powers to increase their influence.

The Fijian junta has increasingly turned to a "look north" policy aimed at forging closer relations with China. According to a recent Lowy Institute report written by Fergus Hanson, Beijing increased its aid to Fiji from \$A1.6 million in 2005 to about \$36 million in 2006. After the coup, Chinese aid rose to more than \$251 million in 2007. This money, while small in absolute terms, has played a significant role in allowing the military regime to defy the dictates of Australia and New Zealand.

Bainimarama initially came to power in December

2006 with the intention of developing closer relations with Canberra by pushing through a far reaching "free market" economic reform program. The junta abolished various communalist measures promoted by the previous government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, including "affirmative action" programs for ethnic Fijians and land rights legislation allowing tribal chiefs to claim foreshore areas. These programs cut across the interests of major foreign investors, including tourist resort operators.

While Qarase appealed to the chauvinist sentiments of sections of the Fijian ruling elite, Bainimarama represents a rival wing, comprised of the Indo-Fijian bourgeoisie and those ethnic Fijian chiefs with closer ties to international investors. His program includes slashing the civil service, restructuring failing industries such as sugar, and opening up more land for foreign investment in the tourism and other industries.

In October 2007 Bainimarama told the PIF member states that he would hold elections by March 2009. This was generally accepted and there were indications that Canberra was moving towards a rapprochement. Last July, however, the military leader reneged on the agreement and said that more time was needed to implement the electoral and legislative reforms outlined in his "People's Charter for Change, Peace and Progress". The junta was clearly concerned that unless it could design an electoral system that would install its favoured candidates then Qarase and his allies could return to power and junk Bainimarama's measures.

Canberra rejected the indefinite postponement and responded by cutting aid and imposing additional sanctions. In response, the military junta stepped up its anti-Australian rhetoric. Bainimarama recently expelled another Australian newspaper publisher, **Rex Gardner** of the *Fiji Times*, the third expulsion in the past 12 months. **The Murdoch-owned *Fiji Times* has provoked Bainimarama's ire after echoing Canberra's criticisms of his government.**

The Australian government's options are limited, however. No Pacific Island state has ever been suspended from the PIF in the body's 38-year history. If Bainimarama refuses to hold elections this year and the

PIF fails to suspend Fiji, Canberra's authority will be badly undermined. If, on the other hand, the country is suspended, then a host of other problems will emerge. Fiji's capital Suva functions as the effective hub for Australian operations in the region, with the PIF secretariat, Australian Federal Police, and other organs based there. A forced withdrawal of all or some of these organisations from Suva would be a serious blow to Australian interests.

The Fijian government is itself sitting atop a social powder keg. The economy went into sharp decline after the December 2006 coup, contracting 6.6 percent in 2007. It only made a marginal improvement in 2008, with growth of 1.2 percent. The global economic crisis has hit tourism and remittances from expatriate Fijian workers, and another major contraction is likely in 2009, further exacerbating widespread unemployment and poverty. A coordinated aid embargo by Australia, the US, and the European Union would have a devastating impact.

Despite its dilemma, Canberra has given every indication that it will step up its provocative threats against the Fijian regime. The unfolding crisis has served to expose Rudd's hypocritical declaration of a "new partnership" and "mutual respect" between Canberra and the Pacific Islands countries. In reality, the Labor government will prove no less ruthless than its predecessor in seeking to further Australia's aggressive, neo-colonial agenda in the region, and to exclude rival powers such as China from gaining a foothold.



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