

Fiji's military junta consolidates power in defiance of Australian government

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The Fijian military junta has scrapped the country's constitution after three Australian judges ruled in the Fijian Appeals Court last Thursday that the 2006 army takeover was unlawful. Commodore Frank Bainimarama's rejection of the court ruling, his crackdown on the media and his defiance of Australian government threats, reflect the shifting balance of power in the South Pacific. With Beijing's economic and diplomatic influence rapidly growing, Canberra can no longer be sure that its dictates will be obeyed in its long-standing sphere of influence.

Bainimarama ousted the former government led by Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase in December 2006, insisting that the constitution remained in force and that the coup was lawful. His position was given a degree of legitimacy last October by Fiji's High Court, when it ruled that President Josefa Iloilo's formal ratification of Bainimarama's coup was a legitimate use of his constitutionally enshrined prerogative powers. That ruling has now been overturned by the three Appeals Court justices—Australian judges Randall Powell, Ian Lloyd and Francis Douglas.

The three judges delivered a highly political ruling. While declaring the 2006 coup unlawful, they did not demand the reinstallation of the Qarase government. The Appeals Court instead ordered President Iloilo to select someone other than Qarase or Bainimarama as a caretaker prime minister to prepare Fiji for immediate elections. The ruling was entirely in line with the Australian government's approach. Canberra's objection to the military takeover in Fiji has had nothing to do with concern for the democratic rights of the population, but centres on its geo-strategic interests in the South Pacific. From the outset, it feared that the 2006 coup could trigger similar destabilising developments in neighbouring countries, and serve to bolster China's standing in Fiji and throughout the region.

The Australian Rudd Labor government has no particular

interest in seeing Qarase return to power. The former prime minister headed an administration representing the most chauvinist elements within the ethnic Fijian elite. Aspects of his domestic agenda—such as granting “land rights” on foreshore areas to different chiefs—cut across the interests of key international investors, including in the tourism industry, and angered bodies such as the International Monetary Fund.

Bainimarama rests upon a section of the chiefly elite whose interests are closely tied to those of various international investors, and on Indo-Fijian business layers who lost out under Qarase's communalist “affirmative action” policies. The military junta has advanced a “free market” agenda—involving the slashing of social spending, mass sackings of public service workers, and freeing up of land for foreign business interests—while at the same time attempting to appeal to anti-communist sentiments within the population. The junta's “People's Charter” outlines a series of regressive economic reforms that will further increase poverty and social inequality, together with proposed political reforms such as the abolition of racially segregated electoral seats and elimination of racial identification categorisations in government records and registers.

On April 10, President Iloilo responded to the Appeals Court ruling by reiterating his support for the “People's Charter” as he abrogated the constitution and revoked the appointments of all judicial officers. He announced he would appoint a new head of government (revealed, the following day, to be Bainimarama) and that the interim administration would hold elections in five years. The president also announced a thirty day state of emergency and ordered police checkpoints on the streets. Policemen and “information officers” were sent to all news agencies to censor any media stories critical of the regime.

Justices Powell, Lloyd and Douglas were deported back to Australia. ABC journalist Sean Dorney has also been booted

out, along with New Zealand TV reporter Sia Aston and cameraman Matt Smith. Fijian television reporter Edwin Nand was arrested, reportedly for giving footage to a New Zealand television network.

The junta's resort to repressive anti-democratic measures reflects its deep-going crisis. The economy went into sharp decline after the 2006 coup, with gross domestic product contracting by 6.6 percent in 2007. Last year there was only modest positive growth, with GDP 1.2 percent higher. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) expects the economy to again contract this year, anticipating negative growth of 0.5 percent. The situation may prove far worse, however, as the impact of the world economic crisis begins to hit the small island nations of the South Pacific.

On April 1, Public Service Commission acting chairman Mohammed Yunush said that the government would have to reduce its operational budget by 50 percent due to the global financial crisis. This will drastically worsen social inequality, recently pointed to by the ADB: "25 percent of the population have incomes below a basic needs poverty line. Pockets of deep poverty are found in town squatter settlements and more widespread poverty is apparent in rural areas. Much of the poverty reflects poor housing and lack of access to health and education services."

The ADB's "2009 Outlook" for Fiji also cited the "lack of progress toward elections has led to a reduction in assistance from traditional donors and multilateral agencies." The European Union has only approved €4 million of the €64 million earmarked for the restructuring of the sugar industry in 2006 to 2010. Australia and New Zealand had already suspended all aid deemed non-humanitarian.

After taking power in 2006, Bainimarama announced a "look north" policy aimed at winning support from China as a counterweight to the traditional regional powers. Beijing, insisting that it takes no position on the "internal affairs" of allied countries, has responded. According to a recent Lowy Institute report, Chinese aid to Fiji increased from \$A1.6 million in 2005 to about \$36 million in 2006. In the year after the coup, it rose to more than \$251 million. Beijing now provides more financial assistance to Fiji than to any other Pacific nation.

In February this year, Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping visited Fiji and said that he wished to "further enhance exchanges and cooperation in such fields as culture, education, public health and tourism." According to the Chinese news agency Xinhua, Xi had signed a number of "cooperative deals" that would provide Suva with "economic and technical assistance."

Chinese assistance, while small in absolute terms, has played a critical role in allowing Bainimarama to defy the Australian and New Zealand governments. His defiance has triggered a crisis for Australian foreign policy in the South Pacific, as the regional balance of power, in place since World War II, begins to disintegrate. China is developing a blue-water navy—a direct challenge to US imperialism's military dominance in the Pacific Ocean—while at the same time cultivating political and military ties with a number of South Pacific states that previously followed the dictates of Australia and New Zealand. Canberra's reliability and utility as a US ally depends on its ability to maintain control in the region, if not through diplomatic influence then through financial threats, bullying and military force.

The Rudd government has threatened to eject Fiji from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) unless elections are held there by the end of the year. With the Fijian junta repeatedly ruling this option out, Canberra has the choice of backing down from its ultimatum, and appearing even weaker, or proceeding with the expulsion, a measure that threatens to undermine the PIF itself. The PIF secretariat and its various auxiliary bodies are based in Suva, as are other important Australian-dominated regional organisations and infrastructure.

Canberra is no doubt weighing up the possibility of launching a military-police intervention. In 2006, as the protracted political crisis leading up to the military takeover unfolded, three Australian warships were stationed off the Fijian coast and an unknown number of elite SAS troops stationed in the Australian High Commission. The Australian prime minister at the time, John Howard, rejected Qarase's desperate pleas to intervene only because he feared involving Australian forces in violent clashes with the Fijian military. Labor's Foreign Minister Stephen Smith has now publicly ruled out an Australian military intervention, but has nevertheless fielded questions from journalists regarding the possibility of a Solomon Islands or East Timor style operation—indicating that a discussion on such a course of action is well underway within military and foreign policy circles.



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