

Fijian military defiance triggers Australian foreign policy debate

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The Fijian military junta's determination to defy the Australian government has exacerbated the dilemma confronting Canberra in the South Pacific. The rise of China as an alternative source of economic and political support is undermining the previous dominance of the US over the region and therefore Australia's role as Washington's proxy.

Developments in Fiji have triggered a broad discussion in the Australian foreign policy establishment over how to proceed.

In December 2006, Fiji's Commodore Frank Bainimarama overthrew the government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, while insisting that the coup was lawful and that the country's constitution remained in place. Last month, three Australian judges on the Fijian Appeals Court ruled against the regime. Bainimarama responded by expelling the judges, shutting down the judiciary and overturning the constitution.

All this was carried out in the face of the Australian government's opposition. Canberra had suspended non-humanitarian aid, imposed travel bans on military personnel and their families entering Australia, and threatened Fiji with expulsion from the Pacific Islands Forum unless elections were scheduled. None of these measures was driven by concern for the democratic rights of ordinary Fijians, but rather reflected the government's fear that instability would spread and Beijing would increase its influence.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a government-funded think-tank, has now called on the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to abandon its previous stance and come to a rapprochement with the Fijian junta. The reasons for this proposed shift were outlined in a policy analysis paper released on April 15 entitled, "Democracy postponed: Fiji and Australian policy choices".

"Smart sanctions have pushed Fiji away from its traditional friends and suppliers to others, notably China," the report stated. "And cutting our defence links has resulted in Fiji's military replacing our training and other ties with China, India, and Malaysia... Expelling Fiji from the Forum would leave the body a much weakened regional organisation."

ASPI called on the Rudd government to back Bainimarama's so-called People's Charter, which outlines a series of measures involving "free market" and pro-investor economic reforms, as well as changes to the electoral system aimed at preventing the return to power of the ethnic Fijian chauvinist layers that the Qarase government represented.

The report concluded: "We must be realistic about our ability to influence developments within Fiji: we learnt to live with a military dominated government in Indonesia for thirty years. Thailand, with its history of coups, is one of our closest regional partners. The road back to democracy will not be easy. The military in Fiji will remain highly influential even after it returns to barracks."

Another think-tank, the Lowy Institute, in a report entitled, "Fiji: The Flailing State," was not as explicit as ASPI in calling for the government to drop the pretence of concern for democracy, but stressed the importance of developing an effective response.

"Ongoing instability in Fiji has reputational consequences for Australia's political leadership in the region. The United States and the European Union look to Australia to solve problems in the South Pacific... A failure to deal effectively with the serious domestic and regional effects of the crisis in Fiji, however complex the policy challenge it poses, will harm the Australian government's regional standing".

Concern has been growing in Washington over mounting instability in the South Pacific and Australia's actions.

On April 22, Eni Faleomavae, a non-voting member of the US Congress, who represents the Pacific territory of American Samoa, sharply criticised Canberra's stance on Fiji. Addressing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, he declared: "For too often and for too long we've permitted Australia and New Zealand to take the lead even when Canberra and Auckland operate with such a heavy hand that they are counterproductive to our shared goals."

Clinton's brief reply was notable in that she chose not to defend the Australian and New Zealand governments. "I would welcome your advice about Fiji, because our coverage of what's going on from Australia, New Zealand in particular, does paint a picture of turmoil and chaos," she said.

One of the Lowy Institute's main recommendations was that the Australian government press Beijing to cease its unilateral aid and assistance to Fiji. As a result of sanctions imposed after the 2006 coup, Australian aid for 2008-2009 is just \$26.9 million, compared to the estimated \$US161 million given to Fiji by China in 2007.

According to an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on April 21: "Australian diplomats in both Canberra and Beijing are understood to have raised the situation in Fiji with Chinese officials in recent days [and] the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has confirmed it has raised concerns about Fiji with China".

In an op-ed piece published in the *Australian* on April 23, the Lowy Institute's Fergus Hanson and Jenny Hayward-Jones declared: "China wants rewards from Australia (such as approval for resources investments), which offers some room for compromise. For China's policy in Fiji, these changes would have few costs and some important benefits."

In other words, the Rudd government should use Australia's supply of minerals and resources as a bargaining chip to ensure China does not continue to cut across Australia's interests in the South Pacific. This extraordinary suggestion points to the seriousness of the strategic crisis confronting the Rudd government in Fiji.

Important economic interests are also at stake. The Lowy Institute noted that Australia is still the largest investor in Fiji, with an estimated \$A2 billion of investment. The Institute raised the spectre of the junta seeking to "nationalise private investments, seize private land or deny foreign investors the right to repatriate profits".

In New Zealand, the Pacific Business Council warned against expelling Fiji from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) because it is an export market worth \$A395 million "which is being eyed by other countries". Another concern in both New Zealand and Australia is that finalising the "PACER Plus" free trade deal will be impossible if Fiji is expelled from the PIF.

Despite the calls for a different approach, the Australian and New Zealand governments proceeded with suspending Fiji from the Forum on Saturday, the first step toward potential expulsion. Bainimarama responded by calling for talks, but reiterating that no elections would be held in Fiji before 2014.

The underlying tensions were highlighted by Bainimarama's claim to Sky News that Australian defence chief, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, had in 2006 threatened Fiji with possible military intervention. "He woke me up early in the morning to tell me 'don't ever do anything that will pit my troops against yours'," the Fijian leader said. While Houston denied the comment, three Australian warships were dispatched to waters near Fiji in the lead up to the coup.

On April 20, New Zealand Prime Minister John Key raised the possibility of military action against Fiji—not in 2006, but now. Key declared that he would contribute troops to such an operation if it were overseen by the UN as in East Timor in 1999. Within hours of making the statement, he attempted to backtrack, saying that he was merely speaking hypothetically and he did not think that any intervention was likely. Australia's Foreign Minister Stephen Smith insisted: "We certainly don't have in mind military action of any description."

Despite these public denials, the military option is clearly being considered behind closed doors in Canberra and Wellington if sanctions and diplomatic pressure fail to force the Fijian regime to accede to Australian and New Zealand demands.



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