

Fiji: Military junta proposes new constitution, elections by 2014

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In a national address delivered on July 1, Fijian military dictator and self-appointed Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama announced plans to draft a new constitution and hold elections over the next five years.

The so-called Strategic Framework for Change has been welcomed by the governments of other Pacific states, including Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, but condemned by the Australian government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Coming ahead of the Pacific Islands Forum leaders' summit in Australia early next month, Bainimarama's defiant speech and the reaction to it are indicative of Canberra's waning hegemony in the South Pacific.

Bainimarama claimed that a constitution would be framed from September 2012, finalised by September 2013, and elections called by September 2014.

After it seized power in December 2006, ousting the government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, the military insisted that its actions were lawful and that the constitution remained intact. It was forced to change tack in April this year, after three Australian judges on the Fijian Appeals Court ruled the coup illegal. Bainimarama responded by expelling the judges and junking the constitution—again in defiance of the Australian government.

Canberra's stance has nothing to do with any genuine concern for the democratic rights of the Fijian population. The government is primarily concerned that rival powers such as China will gain ground in the region at Australia's expense, as well as with Fiji's internal stability and the security of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) secretariat and other Australian-dominated regional bodies based in the country's capital, Suva.

There were moves towards a rapprochement between the Australian government and the junta after October 2007, when Bainimarama pledged to hold a national

election in mid-2009. But when this proposed date was abandoned shortly afterwards, Canberra moved to step up sanctions, including suspending Fiji from the PIF last May.

These efforts have now been significantly undermined by a meeting of leaders of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) in Vanuatu on July 10. In a joint communiqué, Bainimarama and the prime ministers of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu—Michael Somare, Derek Sikua, and Edward Natapei respectively—welcomed the Fijian government's "Strategic Framework for Change" as "set[ting] out key milestones and timelines on major political and structural reforms which are necessary for sustainable democracy".

The leaders "noted the importance of Fiji being continuously engaged in the PIF". The communiqué also insisted that the continued exclusion of Fiji from regional trade agreements "would be invalid and therefore the decisions pertaining to those agreements would be null and void". This was clearly aimed at the Australian government's attempt to ram through the PACER Plus free trade agreement without Fiji's participation.

Jenny Hayward-Jones, of the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, described the MSG statement as a "diplomatic triumph for Bainimarama" and "the stuff of nightmares for the Australian government". She noted that Canberra had hoped to focus discussion at the PIF leaders' summit being held in Cairns next month on the world economic crisis and progress on PACER Plus.

"Having suspended Fiji from the Pacific Islands Forum in May, there was reason to hope that Fiji's absence in Cairns might allow the Forum to get on with substantive business ... [but now Rudd] has to ensure that division among the leaders on the question of Fiji does not deliver a mortal wound to the Forum itself," Hayward-Jones said.

PNG Prime Minister Somare has since attempted to soft-pedal the MSG statement, saying that member countries

will abide by majority PIF decisions on Fiji.

The episode nevertheless demonstrates the Australian government's growing inability to impose its agenda in the region amid intensifying great power rivalries driven by China's enhanced economic and strategic influence. Canberra has long opposed the development of the Melanesian Spearhead Group as a regional political body, but the member states have been able to turn to China for assistance. The MSG's first director general was appointed last year, with the position funded by Beijing. The MSG's secretariat building in Vanuatu was constructed in 2007 with Chinese aid money.

China also plays a central role in Fiji and is now the country's leading aid donor. Rudd government officials have lobbied their Chinese counterparts to restrict the money flow so as not to undercut Australian sanctions—apparently with little success.

Canberra has few options. An Australian military intervention has been discussed behind closed doors ever since the 2006 coup. Unlike most other South Pacific states, however, Fiji has a well trained and heavily armed army, potentially making an intervention a bloody and unviable prospect.

The other possibility is that the Rudd government backs down and cobbles together a deal with the Fijian junta. On July 8, a week after Bainimarama's speech outlining his five-year plan for a new constitution and fresh elections, Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith declared: "At some point in the process we need to successfully engage Fiji in a dialogue about its return to democracy on a timetable which is much more realistic than the timetable, the unreasonable timetable, which Commodore Bainimarama published through his speech."

It remains to be seen what this proposed "dialogue" will entail. Similarly, the Rudd government has not publicly specified what it regards as a "realistic" timetable for a return to civilian rule in Fiji.

Bainimarama would undoubtedly welcome a rapprochement with Canberra. With the Fijian economy in deep crisis, the junta is desperate for international investment.

Much of Bainimarama's July 1 address was devoted to outlining his pro-business economic program. The regime is seeking to place the full burden of the crisis on the back of the working class—ethnic and Indo-Fijian alike. The Fiji dollar has been devalued by 20 percent, drastically lowering living standards by hiking up the cost of vital imported goods such as food and fuel. "In May the inflation rate was 0.8 percent," Bainimarama explained.

"Following the devaluation, we should expect an increase in the inflation rate in the coming months, with the year-end inflation forecast at 9.5 percent."

The regime is moving to suppress wages, sack thousands of public sector workers, and slash government spending. Bainimarama has also promised a "fast tracking of divestment of government shares, the closure of non-performing entities, and/or the amalgamation of different departments and entities... outsourcing to the private sector shall also be pursued vigorously."

The junta leader also pledged to resolve the long-standing issue of making available communally tenured land, currently controlled by the ethnic Fijian chiefly elite, for international investors. "My government shall work with the i taukei [ethnic Fijian] land owners to ensure that they get a fair and market return on their land when they lease it [and] that they lease their lands for a tenure that will make it commercially attractive for the lessees," Bainimarama declared, adding that he would also eliminate "archaic laws such as those that affect town and country planning, development processes and approvals".

The military government's right-wing economic program has been widely welcomed.

The Lowy Institute's Hayward-Jones declared Bainimarama's renewed emphasis on economic reform was "a positive development", and said that "his encouragement of the private sector to seize the opportunity to engage with the interim government is constructive." The only caveat was the refusal to heed Canberra's demands on the timetable for political reform: "This address was an opportunity for Bainimarama to show Fiji and the international community that he could walk and chew gum; to make difficult decisions about economic reform and increase his commitment to accountability by engaging in open discussion about the nation's political future at the same time. He did not convince."

The problem for Canberra, however, remains that the Fijian junta can turn elsewhere for aid and investment.



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