

Australian government tightens grip over Pacific Islands Forum

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Last week's Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders' summit, held in the northern Australian city of Cairns, saw the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd move to extend its control over the regional body. Despite earlier statements from a number of Pacific governments expressing disquiet over Canberra's stance on issues including Fiji, climate change, and regional trade, every PIF member state toed the line and signed the final summit communiqué drafted by the Australian government.

Held on August 5 and 6, the PIF was attended by the leaders of Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Marshal Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, as well as representatives from several other Pacific states. The Fijian military government was excluded as part of diplomatic sanctions imposed following its suspension from the Forum last January.

The PIF is billed as a regional meeting of independent and equal member states—but in reality the Australian government and its junior partner in New Zealand call the shots. Under the former Howard government, the Forum became entwined with Canberra's drive to assert its regional hegemony amid intensifying great power rivalry fuelled by China's growing economic and diplomatic muscle. In 2003 an Australian official, Greg Urwin, was installed as PIF secretary general for the first time.

Prime Minister Rudd is now seeking to further consolidate Australian imperialism's control over the regional body. This year's meeting in Cairns marks the first time since 1994 that it has been held in Australia and the Australian government has now assumed the chair of the PIF for the next twelve months. It will be formally responsible for ensuring that the decisions made during the Cairns summit are implemented.

The final communiqué backed the further implementation of the "Pacific Plan", which outlines an open-ended agenda for regional political and economic reform under Canberra's aegis. PIF member states formally noted the "new

challenges presented by the global economic crisis" and acknowledged their "continuing vulnerability to external shocks".

The communiqué also instructed negotiations on the PACER Plus regional free trade deal to commence immediately. The proposed agreement—which aims at opening up the South Pacific to Australian and New Zealand investors—has raised concerns among the impoverished PIF countries. Their economies have little to gain, as Pacific exporters already enjoy preferential access to the Australian market, and they stand to lose what little industry exists in the face of competition from more efficient transnational firms. Vital government revenue collected from tariffs would also be lost, creating pressure to slash public spending programs.

Many Pacific governments have called for PACER Plus negotiations to be delayed until funding is secured for an international trade expert to advise them on the various legal and economic issues. Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu have also challenged the legality of proceeding with the proposed free trade agreement without including Fiji. In the end, however, the Australian government got its way at the Forum—any delay in negotiations was ruled out, and Fiji's exclusion was explicitly endorsed.

Melanesian Spearhead Group member states had previously issued a statement calling for the lifting of Fiji's suspension from the PIF. But during the Forum, the governments of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu backed down, no doubt in the face of intense pressure exerted behind closed doors by Australian officials. The final communiqué reiterated the Rudd government's demand for "political dialogue between parties on the principles of genuine, inclusive dialogue without preconditions or pre-determined outcomes", aimed at facilitating a return to civilian and constitutional rule in Fiji.

This position has nothing to do with any concern for the democratic rights of the Fijian people. On the contrary, it reflects Canberra's concerns about regional political stability and about the potential implications of Beijing's

close ties with the Fijian junta. Military leader Frank Bainimarama has proven able to defy the Australian government's dictates in part because of increased Chinese aid and investment. Fiji's intransigence has underscored the role of the rising Asian power in providing to ruling elites throughout the South Pacific a potential counter-weight to Australian influence.

In a revealing episode, both Rudd and New Zealand Prime Minister John Key rejected a public call issued by Niue Premier Toke Talagi for the people of Fiji to rise up and overthrow the military government. Opposing this demand, Rudd insisted that he wanted a "peaceful solution". Key declared: "We have encouraged Frank Bainimarama to engage with former leaders in Fiji, and we think that's the right course of action, not some sort of uprising against the military coup."

In the course of the summit, the Rudd government promoted climate change as a major issue for deliberation. Rising sea levels threaten some of the Pacific nations such as Tuvalu and *Kiribati* with inundation. The PIF communiqué called on world leaders to sign a post-Kyoto agreement limiting the increase in global average temperatures to two degrees Celsius or less and reducing global carbon emissions by at least 50 percent below 1990 levels by 2050.

Rudd trumpeted this statement as proof of his government's environmental credentials and humanitarian concern for the potential Pacific victims of climate change. But again the reality was markedly different from the media spin.

The Smaller Island States (SIS) grouping within the PIF—including Cook Islands, Nauru, Niue, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Palau and Kiribati—issued a statement before the Cairns meeting calling on the Forum to push for a 45 percent reduction of greenhouse gases by 2020 to keep global temperature rises below 1.5 degrees. The final Communiqué ignored SIS concerns and simply reiterated the Australian government's climate targets.

Also suppressed was any discussion of Australia accepting any climate change refugees made homeless by rising seas flooding their home countries. The Australian government's indifference to the plight of the people of the South Pacific was highlighted by Rudd's pledge to produce a DVD for the benefit of participants in upcoming international climate negotiations. "One of the things that we're working through is how do we actually produce, although it might sound trite, a DVD which actually puts together documentary evidence and presents it to leaders of the world," he told the ABC.

Crikey.com noted that the Rudd government had "gagged efforts to discuss the issue [of more stringent emission targets] publicly".

Islands Business reported that the leaders of Marshall

Islands, Kiribati and Tuvalu were hurried through a side door by Australian officials at the end of the Forum's press conference on August 6 to avoid journalists' questions. The tightly controlled and stage managed nature of the proceedings was commented upon by some of the journalists in attendance. In an outright act of censorship, which pointed to the political concerns underlying the organisation of the PIF, Australian officials barred *World Socialist Web Site* reporters from covering the event. (See: "Australian officials exclude WWSWS from reporting on Pacific Islands Forum")

The Cairns Forum underscored the continuity between the Rudd Labor government's agenda in the Pacific and the former conservative government's aggressive assertion of Canberra's economic and geo-political interests.

The Howard government created an Australian Federal Police paramilitary wing, the International Deployment Group, and a series of military-police interventions including in East Timor (1999 and 2006), Solomon Islands (2003 and 2006), and Tonga (2006). The 2006 interventions were accompanied by provocative and unlawful regime change operations against governments perceived to be obstacles to the interests of Australian imperialism—East Timor's Fretilin administration of Mari Alkatiri and the Solomons' Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare.

In opposition, Labor fully backed Howard's initiatives. After coming to office, however, Rudd engaged in a tactical shift after recognising the extent of hostility generated by the Howard government among both ordinary Pacific Islanders and regional elites. The new prime minister announced the "Port Moresby Declaration", supposedly outlining a "new era" of mutual respect and cooperation. Underlying the rhetoric, however, lay the same strategic imperative—securing and advancing Australia's neo-colonial interests within what it regards as its sphere of influence.

The suppression of discussion and any critical scrutiny at the Cairns leaders' summit points to the ruthlessness with which the Rudd government is prepared to prosecute this agenda.



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