

Pressure mounts for Australian rapprochement with Fiji

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Pressure is mounting within the Australian foreign policy establishment for the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to end sanctions and normalise relations with the Fijian military junta. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a prominent publicly funded think-tank, released a report on January 28 titled, “Time for a fresh approach: Australia and Fiji relations post-abrogation”. It urged a tactical shift, saying that the current “hardline” stance was not working and had opened the door to rival powers.

Fiji’s military leader Commodore Frank Bainimarama seized power in December 2006, ousting Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. The military junta has combined a ruthless anti-working class, “free market” economic agenda—backed by violent and repressive measures against political opponents—with a populist appeal to abolish the racist structures built into the Fijian state after the British granted independence in 1970. Bainimarama has pledged to hold a national election in 2014, based on a “one person, one vote” system, rather than the previous communal gerrymander.

Canberra has insisted that elections be held much sooner. It has imposed travel bans, preventing military personnel, regime members and their extended families from entering Australia. Australia-Fiji military links are suspended. Last year the Rudd government pressed to have Fiji suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum and the British Commonwealth. None of these measures was driven by any regard for the democratic rights of ordinary Fijians. Canberra’s sole concern was to prevent the political destabilisation of the wider South Pacific and shore up Australian business interests.

Its stance, however, has been met with open defiance from the Fijian regime, which has turned to other powers, above all China, for support. The Rudd government’s inability to assert its will is a sharp expression of the decline of Australian hegemony in a region previously regarded as its exclusive “sphere of influence”. It also points to the waning international dominance of the US, on which Canberra has long relied for political and strategic backing.

Now ASPI is essentially urging Canberra to forget about paying lip service to democracy and instead get used to doing business with the junta. It stressed that Bainimarama’s abrogation of the Fijian constitution in April last year signalled the military’s

willingness to continue to defy international pressure. “Short of regime change in Fiji, the choice for Australia in terms of relations with the Fiji Government for the intermediate future is either to wait for events to take their own course or to re-engage at a political level,” the report, authored by the University of Fiji’s Richard Herr, concluded. “To persist with the same policies will continue the present futile impasse with Fiji.”

ASPI called on the government to “avoid undiplomatic language,” abandon travel bans, relax defence sanctions and cooperate with the junta on various security issues. The report warned that the Fijian military’s influence “is unlikely to diminish any time soon” and “even if regime change should occur, it is far from clear that such a change would remove the RFMF [Republic of Fiji Military Forces] from its present role as a significant political actor”.

The report noted that Australia had more than \$2 billion in investments in Fiji, and that current bilateral trade is worth about \$1.6 billion annually. “Australian businesses want a speedy resolution to the current political impasse,” it declared bluntly. ASPI also emphasised the wider geo-strategic context, warning that the Fijian regime had “intensified its extra-regional contacts as a counter to its regional constraints ... with special emphasis on China”, adding that ties with India, Japan, Korea and Malaysia were also significant.

ASPI’s call for a rapprochement with Fiji is not new; the think-tank released a similar report in April last year. According to Radio New Zealand, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has responded to the latest report by again reiterating the government’s position that consideration of lifting travel bans and resuming defence cooperation is conditional on “credible and concrete” steps being taken to return to democracy.

There are indications, however, that a different approach is now being discussed behind closed doors—in New Zealand and Australia.

The New Zealand government of Prime Minister John Key announced on January 12 that it and the Fijian administration had agreed to create additional counsellor positions at each others’ embassies. The agreement followed official talks between the two

country's foreign ministers in Fiji.

Foreign Minister Murray McCully declared that since New Zealand's High Commissioner was expelled last November, the country's diplomatic influence in Fiji had been "chiselled away" to the point where "the viability of our operations was under threat". McCully insisted that the new appointments did not indicate a shift in policy, and said sanctions remained in place. "But it does signal the determination to improve the relationship and in particular to be able to agree to disagree about some things," he declared. "Countries that disagree with each other have over a long period of history learned how to maintain diplomatic relations."

Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith said that he had discussed the issue with McCully before the new diplomatic posts were announced and expressed his support. Smith added, however, that the Australian government had no need to make an equivalent move because it had diplomatic personnel already in Suva. He said he looked forward to reappointing a high commissioner, but added that before that happens "there will be a fair bit of water which goes under the bridge".

The New Zealand government has maintained that it will not appoint its new High Commissioner for Fiji until Canberra makes a similar appointment. It is yet to be announced who will fill the two new diplomatic counsellor positions. Fiji has reportedly nominated one of Bainimarama's right-hand men in the military, Lieutenant Colonel Neumi Leweni, for a post in New Zealand.

McCully's announcement came just a few days before US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was due to travel to Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea. (The trip was later called off because of the Haiti earthquake disaster.) Some New Zealand commentators drew a connection between the two events. "New Zealand and Australia are regarded warmly in Washington for their influence in the Pacific, a sphere of interest and friendship that the US would be loath to let slip," the January 15 editorial in the *Otago Daily Times* declared. "The fear of seeing a chain of tiny Pacific nations succumb to the expansive charms and pecuniary largesse of another superpower is likely to be pressing in both the Pentagon and the White House."

Whether the New Zealand government's initiative was directly related to Clinton's visit, there is no question that there are serious concerns in Washington over the ability of Canberra and Wellington to resolve the Fiji crisis and counteract Beijing's growing influence.

Stephen Smith last month said that he expected to discuss Fiji with Clinton, but insisted that the US and Australia "are at one" in their stance against the junta. Asked about fears over China's rising standing in the Pacific, Smith avoided a direct answer, declaring: "The fear so far as Fiji is concerned, is not influenced by any particular nation, it is its continued and continuing isolation and its withdrawal from democracy." It remains unclear how much

longer the Rudd government can maintain such posturing.

The Fijian regime has given no indication of backing down. Emergency rule remains in place, and the first few weeks of 2010 have seen an intensification of repressive measures against regime opponents. On January 5, Fiji's land force commander, Brigadier Pita Driti, declared that "adversaries" of the government should "keep low and try to cooperate with us in trying to maintain peace, otherwise they will be in for something really hard in terms of how we will treat them this year".

On January 13, the junta announced that any retired people who criticised the government would have their pensions cancelled. The Methodist Church, a bastion of ethnic Fijian chauvinist politics, has also been targeted, with Bainimarama insisting its national conference will not be allowed to proceed for another five years. Apparently seeking to create rifts within the former government's support base, the military leader announced that several Methodist ministers were informants on the payroll of the Fiji police special branch.

The regime is continuing its assault on the living conditions of the Fijian working class and rural masses. Desperate to revive economic growth and attract international investment, Bainimarama is slashing public spending and cutting thousands of public sector jobs. These measures have won plaudits from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In a "Public Information Notice" issued January 25, the IMF declared that "authorities have made commendable efforts to restrain current spending and limit the overall fiscal deficit in 2009, while the devaluation of the Fijian dollar has helped reverse the sharp decline in foreign exchange reserves". The report also "welcomed the authorities' intention to work closely with the Fund on the design and implementation of their economic policies".

After recording three consecutive years of negative GDP growth, the Fijian economy is forecast to grow 2 percent this year. Poverty and unemployment remain at record levels.



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