Fijian military junta suppresses media

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The Fijian military junta led by Commodore Frank Bainimarama released a sweeping decree on June 28 targeting journalists and the media. The Media Industry Development Decree 2010 contains a series of antidemocratic prescriptions aimed at silencing any voices of opposition against the regime.

Media censorship has been in place in Fiji ever since the military took power in 2006, and restrictions were further extended after Bainimarama consolidated his rule by formally abrogating the constitution in April 2009. Under an emergency decree proclaimed by the military authorities, security forces were placed in news rooms to vet published material. The latest legislation appears aimed at formalising such arrangements, creating media restrictions and censorship that will remain in place even in the event that the military declares an end to the state of emergency.

The Media Industry Development Decree prohibits the publication of any material that is "against the public interest; or is against the national interest; or creates communal discord." All articles comprising more than 50 words must include a by line—a measure clearly intended to intimidate individual journalists. The junta's new media authority established under the legislation has the power to force journalists to produce relevant documents and to reveal their sources. Journalists who fail to comply can be sentenced to two years jail, fined $F10,000 ($US5,000), or both. Editors are similarly threatened with a two-year jail sentence and/or a $F25,000 fine, while media organisations can be fined up to $F100,000. The decree covers all forms of media, including print, television and radio broadcasts, and the internet.

Human rights and media freedom organisations have condemned the media decree. "There is a clear risk that the law's vaguely worded provisions will be used to punish peaceful critics of the government," national director of Amnesty International Australia Claire Mallinson said. "It is another example of the lengths the Fiji regime will go to restrict freedom of speech in the country."

The junta's decree includes a provision that any outlet that has more than 10 percent foreign ownership has three months to divest itself of those interests. This measure appears to be targeted at the *Fiji Times*, owned by Rupert Murdoch, as it is the only outlet with majority foreign ownership. Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum has warned that the *Fiji Times* will be shut down unless Murdoch's News Corporation sells the newspaper to local investors.

The junta openly stated that it wants a change in the editorial content of the newspaper. Chairman of the new media authority, Professor Satendra Nandan, told the *Australian*: "We had a media that was vibrant and vigilant until things went wrong in 2006 and then some parts of the media became abusive and scurrilous. The *Fiji Times* took a strong stand against the current government and the abrogation of the constitution and they didn't consider the national interest."

The *Fiji Times*'s stance against the regime has dovetailed Australian strategic and business interests in the region. Canberra is not concerned for the democratic rights of the Fijian people, but opposes the military junta because it fears the spread of political instability in the South Pacific region and the growing influence of rival powers.

Australian foreign minister, Stephen Smith, condemned the new media decree and defended News Limited's operations in Fiji. He pointedly warned the junta that their "arbitrary move sends a very bad signal so far as future investment in Fiji is concerned".

Smith also defended Canberra's punitive measures against the junta—including travel bans on government members and their families, suspending Fiji's membership in the Pacific Islands Forum and the Commonwealth, and cancelling all Australia-Fiji military links. News Limited chief executive and chairman John Hartigan had criticised the Australian government for failing to do enough to pressure the military government to restore democracy and hold elections. Hartigan's comments reflect growing frustration in Australian ruling circles about Bainimarama's ongoing defiance of Canberra.

Australian-Fijian relations have been at an impasse over the last four years. While elements like News Limited want Canberra to adopt an even more aggressive stance, the

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government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute has articulated the desire of other sections of the political establishment for a rapprochement with the Fijian regime and the normalisation of relations.

Canberra is concerned about the rising influence of other powers, above all China. Bainimarama has developed a "look north" policy, aimed at cultivating Chinese investment and aid. While remaining small in absolute terms, Beijing has provided important revenues. On June 19, for example, the China Railway First Group Company Ltd signed a $F20 million contract with Fiji's Public Rental Board for the construction of 500 flats at Raiwaqa and Raiwai in Suva. The Group was responsible for funding several new projects in Fiji including the Naqali Bridge. The EXIM Bank in China provided the finance for the project which is aimed at reducing the number of squatters in Fiji's capital.

Bainimarama has sought to cultivate relations with other powers. On May 30 the junta signed a memorandum of understanding and held bilateral talks with a delegation from the Russian Embassy in Canberra.

Brigadier General Driti, a senior officer, on June 10 told the *Fiji Broadcasting Corporation*: "Their [Australia and New Zealand] mindset is already negative because they are pushing their agenda on Fiji—couldn't get it—now they are crying. Too late we (are) going to Russia. Tell them China is knocking on our door, Russia is knocking on our door. Russia is now more interested in the Pacific. We want a balance of power, not bullies like these two."

Bainimarama also attended the inaugural Arab League-Pacific Summit held last month in Abu Dhabi. The summit follows a visit by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan to the South Pacific in February. The UAE has pledged $US50 million in aid and infrastructure to the region. Sections of the media have suggested that the Arab League is seeking to cultivate relations with Pacific states in order to gain support in the UN General Assembly for various issues, including moves to censor Israel for its nuclear program.

In his speech to the summit, Bainimarama referred to moves to join the Non-Aligned Movement. "Our joining of NAM stems from the philosophical basis that while determining our own destinies as sovereign states, we must work in collaboration with all with the aim of sustainable world peace, and dignity and respect for all," he declared. "But we cannot achieve goals if we simply fall into predetermined political spheres of influence or have predetermined alignments."

Bainimarama's orientation to Asian and other powers has allowed the junta to resist Canberra's dictates. But the assistance and investment from these sources has not been sufficient to prevent a deepening economic and social crisis in Fiji. The Fijian economy experienced three years of negative growth from 2007 to 2009 and is only expected to grow by 1.8 percent this year.

In a mini budget released on July 2, Bainimarama announced a $F75 million cut in government expenditure. The working class is to bear the brunt of the cutbacks, with $F40 million in "savings" to come from a reduction in government salaries and wage-related costs. Public sector workers have been under attack ever since the military seized power. In its first budget in 2007, the junta announced spending cuts of $F1.7 million, mostly coming from a pay cut for civil servants. In 2009, the junta made all civil servants over the age of 55 redundant, at an estimated cost of 3,000 jobs.

Every section of the Fijian economy is doing badly. The sugar industry is now in terminal decline. Cane production has dropped from 1.2 million tonnes in 1996 to 571,000 tonnes this year. Grower numbers have dropped from 5,472 in 2000 to 3,990 in March 2010. The decline is due to the ending of favourable export arrangements for Fijian sugar into the European Union as well as the forced expiration of sugar leases that has forced thousands of ethnic Indo-Fijian farmers off the land.

The number of poor dramatically expanded after the 20 percent devaluation of the currency last year and the impact of cyclones in 2009-10. The high cost of living is widely blamed on the junta, with the devaluation resulting in the large price rises for imported fuels, foodstuffs, and other basic necessities. The official inflation rate is currently 9.4 percent.

The military regime is sitting atop a social powder keg. Its new media decree underscores the junta's dependence on repressive measures to suppress opposition from within the working class and rural masses.

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