# Fiji expels senior Australian diplomat

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The Fijian military government headed by Commodore Frank Bainimarama has declared Australia's acting High Commissioner Sarah Roberts persona non grata and expelled her from the country. The sanction was in response to Canberra's sabotage of a meeting of Melanesian Spearhead Group heads of government that was due to be held in Fiji next week. Roberts and other Australian officials successfully pressured Vanuatu's Prime Minister Edward Natapei, Papua New Guinea's Michael Somare, and Solomon Islands' Derek Sikua to withdraw their involvement.

The diplomatic expulsion underscores the heightened tensions across the South Pacific that are being generated by intensifying great power rivalries, particularly between the US and China.

Bainimarama had actively promoted the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) leaders' summit as a potential rival to the Australian-dominated Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). The PIF has been the primary means through which Canberra has both advanced its strategic hegemony in what it considers its rightful "sphere of influence" and opened up the region's economy to Australian investors and business. The MSG, on the other hand, excludes both Australia and New Zealand. Its first director general was appointed in 2008, with the Chinese government funding the position. The MSG's secretariat building in Vanuatu was constructed in 2007, also with aid money from Beijing.

Bainimarama had promoted next week's scheduled meeting as "MSG Plus", for the first time inviting non-Melanesian countries in the South Pacific to participate. The Kiribati and Tonga heads of government were among those who had accepted Fiji's invitation.

Last Saturday, however, Vanuatu's Edward Natapei, the current chair of the MSG, unexpectedly announced that the summit was being indefinitely postponed. Announcing the "collective decision of the leaders of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, the FLNKS [*Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste*, New Caledonian nationalists] and Vanuatu", Natapei said that Fiji's pending assumption of the MSG chair raised "potential long term ramifications [involving] basic fundamental principles and values of democracy and good governance".

The claim that the MSG meeting was cancelled due to concerns for democracy in Fiji is absurd. The military has been in power in 2006 without incurring even a token reprimand from the Melanesian regional body. The real issue was the Australian government's opposition.

Responding to the high commissioner's expulsion, Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith openly admitted: "Australia has been making representations that such a proposed meeting, a so-called Melanesian Spearhead Group Plus Meeting, would be inappropriate, because it would undermine the Pacific Island Leaders Forum (PIF) as the premier forum for nations in the Pacific."

Smith said the expelled diplomat had "made representations to other diplomats in Fiji about Australia's view". Smith nevertheless insisted that these "representations" were all "perfectly appropriate". He condemned Roberts' expulsion as "unjustified and unjustifiable". Prime Minister Julia Gillard weighed in, declaring "Fiji continues to take itself beyond and outside the workings of the international community".

A PIF leaders' meeting will be held August 4-5 in Vanuatu. The MSG Plus summit had threatened to overshadow and undermine the PIF event. The last time the MSG met, in Vanuatu 12 months ago, member states endorsed the Fijian junta's planned political changes and rejected Australia's attempt to exclude Fiji from a regional free trade deal. At the time, Jenny Hayward-Jones, of the Lowy Institute for International Policy, an Australian think tank, described the MSG statement as a "diplomatic triumph for Bainimarama" and "the stuff of nightmares for the Australian government".

The full extent of the Gillard government's operation against the MSG remains to be revealed. There can be little doubt—given the Australian government's recent record in East Timor, Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea—that it involved behind-the-scenes dirty tricks, intimidation, and blackmail directed at key officials and government personnel in the targeted Melanesian countries.

Even before Vanuatu's prime minister pulled the plug on the MSG meeting, reports of Australia's campaign began to emerge in the South Pacific media. A column in the July edition of *Islands Business* magazine reported that Australian officials "right around the region" had been "working behind the scenes to influence senior officials of the various countries they're represented in not to attend the MSG. 'They even spoke to the Solomon Islands Prime Minister, not to attend the MSG,' the diplomatic source said."

According to the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation (FBC): "It is

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understood that the Fiji Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried several times to stop [Australian High Commissioner] Ms. Roberts from pursuing her anti-Fiji efforts. Reports say Ms. Roberts was summoned twice for a meeting after regional High Commissions in Fiji complained about the pressure she was putting on them."

The FBC also reported: "Foreign Affairs Minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola says Fiji is being subjected to undue pressure and frustrated in its efforts by the use of Australia's economic, financial and political clout. He says Australia's strategies—dangling carrots of increased aid to countries like Vanuatu—has worked with Vanuatu announcing a deferment of the MSG-Plus meeting in Fiji. Ratu Inoke pointed to the recent $66.4 million Australia gave to Vanuatu from a special aid budget—the highest ever in the country's aid from Australia."

Australia had other potential levers against the Melanesian leaders. PNG's Michael Somare—who has remained completely silent on the MSG-Fiji furore—faces a parliamentary no-confidence motion next week. Somare no doubt well understood that unless he toed the line, Canberra would have mobilised its forces in Port Moresby to ensure that enough MPs switched sides to bring down his government.

Similarly, the Solomons' Prime Minister Derek Sikua is facing re-election, with a national election scheduled for August 4. Having come to power in 2007 courtesy of a provocative Australian regime change campaign against his predecessor, Manasseh Sogavare, Sikua knows what is expected of him.

The Gillard government's opposition to the Fijian regime has nothing to do with any regard for the democratic rights of the country's population. Instead, the concern is that permanent military rule in the country will destabilise politics in other parts of the South Pacific, opening up further opportunities for rival powers to gain ground at Canberra's expense. Australia has imposed various measures against the Fijian regime—including suspension from the PIF and Commonwealth, and travel bans against senior military and government figures—but Bainimarama has remained defiant, stressing his "look north" foreign policy, oriented to China and other Asian powers.

Beijing has delivered important sums of aid to Fiji and deepened ties between the two countries' military forces. This has coincided with China developing its relations with other countries in the region, such as East Timor. Chinese naval personnel are now stationed in the former Portuguese colony, training Timorese forces to use Chinese armed patrol boats. Rumours persist that China will soon be asked to build a small naval base off the Timorese coast, potentially paving the way for a permanent naval presence off Australia's coast.

Canberra's military and diplomatic relationship with Washington involves denying rival powers naval access to the South West Pacific. After removing the Japanese from the region in World War II, the US delegated this assignment to Australia.

Now the decline of US capitalism and rise of regional rivals is disrupting the old strategic balance of forces. The *Sydney Morning Herald*'s international editor Peter Hartcher wrote a comment on Tuesday, "Full steam ahead for China's territorial ambitions," which highlighted the geo-strategic implications of Beijing's naval expansion. He cited recent comments of Chinese Rear-Admiral Zhang Huachen, deputy commander of the East Sea Fleet, who told the *Straits Times:* "With the expansion of the country's economic interests, the navy wants to better protect the country's transportation routes and the safety of our major sea lanes." Hartcher also quoted the head of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Robert Willard, who said: "Of particular concern is that elements of China's military modernisation appear designed to challenge our freedom of action in the region."

Amid these heightened tensions, the Australian foreign policy establishment has hailed the successful sabotage of Bainimarama's MSG meeting. The *Australian*'s editorial yesterday declared: "Since the December 2006 coup, Australia's approach has been to stay calm and paddle below the surface. Now there is just a chance the strategy is paying off, with Fiji increasingly isolated in the Pacific."

In a blog post titled, "Australia outplays Fiji's supremo", Graeme Dobell of the Lowy Institute for Foreign Policy wrote: "The diplomatic tug of war is not merely between Suva and Canberra. It is about visions of the region and the definition of regional norms. The ultimate prize in this contest is the ownership and direction of regional instruments. In this fight, Australia and the Pacific Islands Forum have just had a significant win."

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