

South Pacific countries defy Australian government and back Fijian military regime

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The Fijian military regime headed by Commodore Frank Bainimarama hosted a leaders' summit of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) last Thursday, in defiance of Australian government efforts to diplomatically isolate the country.

The MSG members—Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and the New Caledonian pro-independence Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste—endorsed Bainimarama's political reform plans, including elections scheduled for 2014, and demanded Fiji's re-inclusion in regional political and economic forums. Officials from Indonesia, East Timor, and Luxembourg attended the event as observers.

Canberra's strategy of shoring up its control over the South Pacific by forcing the military to return Fiji to civilian rule now lies in tatters. After Bainimarama seized power in 2006, Canberra imposed various sanctions, including travel bans on Fijian military and government personnel, and orchestrated Fiji's suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum and the Commonwealth. While the Australian government has never had the slightest concern for the democratic rights of ordinary Fijians, it feared the coup would trigger regional instability and open the door for rival powers to gain ground, especially China.

Since 2006, Beijing has done just that, substantially increasing its aid, economic investment, and military cooperation with the regime. China has also helped keep the Melanesian Spearhead Group functioning in the face of Australian government hostility. Chinese aid money funded the construction of the MSG's secretariat building in Vanuatu in 2007, and the 2008 appointment of the group's first director general.

The Australian government regards the MSG as an unwelcome rival to the Pacific Islands Forum, the major regional political and economic grouping, which is dominated by Canberra. In July last year, the Labor government sabotaged a scheduled MSG summit by pressuring Vanuatu's then Prime Minister Edward Natapei from attending. Since then, Sato

Kilman has become prime minister of Vanuatu, having defeated Natapei in a parliamentary vote of no confidence in December 2010. In an article last Wednesday, the *Australian* noted that Kilman's "campaign against Natapei was based on casting him as a man prepared to betray a Melanesian brother in exchange for more than \$60 million in Australian aid."

At the MSG summit, the Melanesian leaders agreed that Bainimarama chair the organisation for the next two years, and demanded the normalisation of diplomatic relations with Fiji. Papua New Guinea's foreign minister, Don Poyle, representing Prime Minister Michael Somare, was especially strident. "What Fiji does internally is Fiji's business," he declared. In a thinly-veiled criticism of the Australian government, he added that the MSG "cannot be subjected to the dictates of anybody or any entity, whether they be regional or international."

The MSG summit discussed various plans for further economic and political cooperation. The event also saw progress towards a transnational Humanitarian and Emergency Response Force—to respond, according to *PacNews*, "to threats of illicit activities along regional and international borders, natural disasters and internal conflicts within Melanesian countries"—and discussion about setting up a regional police force. Canberra opposes all these measures, because they threaten to undermine the operations of the paramilitary wing of the Australian Federal Police, the International Deployment Group (IDG) which has been deployed throughout the region on the basis of various pretexts, including humanitarian problems and transnational crime.

The MSG summit has highlighted the crisis confronting the Australian government in the Pacific. Internationally, Canberra stands alone in its "hardline" posturing against Fiji.

Last September the US made a unilateral shift, embarrassing the Labor government, when the State Department announced it agreed with Bainimarama's plans for elections in 2014, and hoped for "dialogue and partnership with Fiji." The move formed part of the Obama administration's "full court press" against China's increasing strategic weight in East Asia. (See:

“US moves to normalise relations with Fiji’s junta”).

The New Zealand government, which has long functioned as Canberra’s accomplice in the Pacific, now appears to be moving towards the US position of “engagement” with Fiji. New Zealand Foreign Minister Murray McCully said last week that if the military government provided “evidence” that it would hold elections in 2014, then travel bans could be relaxed. McCully reportedly said that allowing Fijian soldiers, who are also members of the national rugby union team, into New Zealand in September and October for the Rugby World Cup could serve as a “carrot” for political reform.

These moves have resulted in a growing clamour, within the Australian ruling elite, for the Labor government to junk its rhetoric about Fijian “democracy” and reach a rapprochement with the junta.

The opposition Liberal-National coalition has demanded that the Labor government line up with the Obama administration. Last week, on the same day the MSG summit was held, opposition foreign affairs spokeswoman, Julie Bishop, declared: “I believe it’s time for the Australian government to review its stance on Fiji, particularly time to assess whether the sanctions imposed on Fiji are working or whether they are potentially counter-productive.”

Bishop said she was “disappointed” that Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd had failed to announce a shift on Fiji last year, in accordance with Washington’s changed policy, adding: “I’m urging [foreign minister] Mr. Rudd to follow the lead of the United States, and other European nations who are reviewing their policies towards Fiji.”

Asked whether “China’s growing influence in the Pacific” was one reason to normalise relations with Fiji, Bishop bluntly replied: “I am concerned that the Australian government appears to be losing influence in the Pacific.”

The *Australian* published an editorial last Thursday, “Memo Mr Rudd: don’t ignore the neighbours”, which noted: “Australia’s failure to convince Dili over the offshore [refugee] centre is bad enough, although not surprising, but the absence from the Bali summit of East Timorese Foreign Minister Zacarias da Costa, who is at a Melanesian Spearhead Group meeting chaired by Fiji’s military leader Frank Bainimarama, points to a broader problem with our regional diplomacy.”

The newspaper demanded greater diplomatic resources and a “reconfigured” aid program for the South Pacific. “Canberra can no longer presume that its influence will persist purely by default,” the editorial concluded. “Seductive alternative forms of governance are emerging—from China, to a degree, but more

worryingly from Commodore Bainimarama’s militarised Fiji.”

The *Australian*’s demand for a revised foreign aid program dovetails with a report issued by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) last week, “A better fit: National security and Australia’s aid program”. Urging that aid be even more closely integrated into Australia’s “national security” strategy, ASPI noted: “The island Pacific is becoming a more contested space. China is fast growing in importance as an aid donor, investor and trade partner, while others—the United Arab Emirates, Russia and Georgia, for example—are creating new Pacific links for themselves with small aid commitments. Australia has compelling security interests in remaining predominant in this region.”

Helen Hughes of the right-wing think tank the Centre for Independent Studies added her own, somewhat hysterical, voice to calls for a greater diplomatic focus on the region. In an article written just prior to the MSG summit, titled “Fiji meeting would be a farce if it were funny”, Hughes warned: “China’s advisers to Bainimarama will be keeping a watchful eye on the proceedings in Suva. If Australia has any interest in the South Pacific not becoming a Chinese lake, the Department of Foreign Affairs should be paying greater attention than collecting votes for a temporary seat on the Security Council.”

The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard is still refusing, however, to change tack. Interviewed on New Zealand television on March 27, Rudd was visibly irritated when challenged over whether a change in policy was required. “We’re doing a lot in holding the line that this country, Fiji, and its people, deserve to have freedom of expression,” he declared. “We’re not in the business of legitimising what has been a very ugly military coup.”

It remains to be seen how much longer the Labor government can maintain its demagogic rhetoric against the Bainimarama government, with its position in the strategic balance of forces in the South Pacific steadily deteriorating.



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