

Split erupts within Fijian military regime

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The Fijian military government of Commodore Frank Bainimarama is confronting a major crisis in the wake of a call by former army chief of staff Lieutenant Colonel Tevita Mara for “regime change.”

Mara fled Fiji for Tonga two weeks ago, after skipping bail on sedition charges filed against him. Brigadier General Pita Driti has also been accused of plotting against the government and is awaiting trial. The charges against Driti and Mara, formerly the third and fourth highest ranking military commanders in the country, point to deepening divisions within the Fijian ruling class.

These divisions have developed together with mounting great power rivalries across the South Pacific. Ever since 1945, Washington has regarded the Pacific as an “American lake”, with its junior ally Australia delegated responsibility for maintaining control over the impoverished Melanesian states and shutting out rival powers from gaining a strategic and military foothold in the region. Now, however, China’s rising influence—and the aggressive US counter-response aimed at preserving its hegemony—has lent an explosive character to the political situation throughout the South Pacific.

Fiji is at the centre of these great power struggles. After Bainimarama seized power in December 2006, the Australian and New Zealand governments imposed diplomatic sanctions in an attempt to maintain their dominant role by isolating Fiji. However, Beijing has ignored Australian imperialism’s prerogatives and has extended significant diplomatic, economic, and military support to the military regime, which has allowed Bainimarama to defy Canberra’s diktats. As a result of these developments, competing sections of the notoriously fractious Fijian ruling elite have become more closely identified with one or another of the rival powers active in the South Pacific.

Lieutenant Colonel Tevita Mara has coupled his demand for regime change with an appeal to Australia and New Zealand to intervene and “use more force” to bring down Bainimarama.

In addition to being a military leader, Mara is a key member of the chiefly elite from the eastern Lau Islands. His father,

Ratu Kamisese Mara, is regarded as Fiji’s “founding father” and served as prime minister and president for most of the time between 1970 and 2000.

Bainimarama seized power in December 2006, ousting a civilian government that was based on an ethnic Fijian chauvinist program hostile to Indo-Fijian interests. Its promotion of “land rights” and other privileges for certain chiefs cut across the interests of many international investors, especially in the tourism sector. The “free market” economic program promoted by Bainimarama was more in line with these interests.

In addition to winning the support of the Indo-Fijian elite—Labor Party leader and former Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry joined the post-coup administration for a time—Bainimarama was backed by powerful members of the chiefly elite who had close ties with the tourism sector. Notable among these was Epeli Ganilau, leader of the National Alliance Party and an associate of the Mara clan.

The disparate coalition assembled by Bainimarama is now disintegrating. Ganilau quit the government last November—while serving as acting prime minister when Bainimarama was visiting China—reportedly over a taxation row with the American-owned Fiji Water company. The resignation came just three weeks after Tevita Mara and Pita Driti were suspended indefinitely from their military posts. Bainimarama gave no public explanation for the move, though media reports at the time suggested it was due to alleged adulterous affairs committed by both men. Clearly, however, more was at stake.

This month, on May 5, Driti was charged with mutiny and Mara with sedition, over an alleged plot they hatched while visiting South Korea last year. The truth of this allegation remains unclear. The Fijian media remains heavily censored, while anti-regime web sites are rife with innuendo and speculation regarding the real reason for the falling out of Bainimarama and Mara. There have been suggestions that Mara’s clan was hostile to a decree passed last year by Bainimarama allowing surfing tourists free access to the country’s beaches, a move that removed a source of income for

chiefs in the Lau Islands. Mara has also been accused of corruption over the disappearance of \$F3 million (\$A1.6 million) from Fiji Pine, the state-owned timber company, though he has denied the allegation.

From Tonga the former commander has released a series of YouTube statements. Despite his record as a key figure in the repressive military junta over the last five years, Mara is now absurdly posturing as a champion of “democracy.” He is, however, consciously appealing to chauvinist layers of the ethnic Fijian elite, including the formerly powerful Methodist Church leadership. Mara has accused Bainimarama of being the “hand-puppet” of his attorney general, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, an Indo-Fijian Muslim.

Mara also issued the following statement: “Australia, and New Zealand too, what are they waiting for? Can’t they see that everything they’ve done, the sanctions and cutting Fiji off, haven’t done nearly enough to hurt the regime. They need to show themselves to be regional powers and use more force to bring this regime down.”

The appeal raises the question as to whether Australian intelligence or federal police agents incited Mara and other elements within the Fijian military to mutiny.

The Labor government’s “hardline” stance on Fiji has neither forced the regime to make concessions to its demands, nor deterred the Chinese government from pursuing its own interests. The impasse caused US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last September to announce a rapprochement with the Fijian government that was clearly aimed at discouraging Suva from further deepening its relationship with Beijing.

The Labor government has since come under pressure to follow suit, with the opposition Liberal-National coalition and major think-tanks including the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and the Lowy Institute all demanding a shift, in line with the US. But Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd has insisted that the sanctions will remain unaltered, maintaining his bogus rhetoric about the need for democracy in Fiji.

Rudd’s ability to permit an unprecedented breach between Australian and American foreign policy on a key issue in the South Pacific may indicate that Canberra was aggressively working behind the scenes to provoke a crisis in Fiji.

It remains unclear whether Australian operatives in Suva had previously developed a relationship with Mara. The other alleged mutineer, Brigadier General Pita Driti, was previously the most outspoken figure in Bainimarama’s government against Australia and New Zealand, repeatedly denouncing them as acting like “bullies” and colonial powers.

Many questions have been raised about how Mara was able to flee to Tonga. The New Zealand government has denied involvement, but Prime Minister John Key declared Tuesday that offering Mara asylum was “a possibility.” He added that the commander was no longer subject to New Zealand’s sanctioned travel bans on regime members.

Bainimarama has accused the Tongan navy of breaching Fiji’s sovereignty. Tensions between the two countries have mounted in recent months over a disputed border claim to the Minerva Reefs that has been fuelled by the drive by rival powers for control of lucrative minerals. Australian, American, Chinese, and South Korean mining companies are among those involved in deep sea exploration for high grade gold, silver, zinc, copper, and other raw materials—including strategically significant rare earths—on sea beds throughout the South Pacific.

Tonga has claimed the Minerva Reefs, sitting atop a potentially lucrative sea bed, since 1972, but Fiji insists they are within its maritime exclusive economic zone. Earlier this year the Fijian government threatened to forcibly dismantle a lighthouse that Tonga built on the semi-submerged reefs. The Tongan monarchy has signed prospecting licensing applications with mining companies from Korea and also the Australian-dominated but Canadian-based Nautilus Minerals.

Nautilus has also been issued access to Fiji’s sea bed, but the regime has indicated it is looking for greater Chinese investment. In April, Fiji’s Permanent Secretary for Lands and Mineral Resources, Filimone Kau, announced that a Chinese company, Zinfa, was awarded the licence to open an important bauxite mine. Kau stressed that deep sea mining projects were also being discussed. “There is a lot of interest to come and explore and there is the possibility to come and mine in the country,” he said of the Chinese. “We have discussed procedures that they need to follow.”

These developments underscore the predatory calculations of all the major powers vying for influence in Fiji and other regional states.



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