

WikiLeaks cables reveal Australian government divisions over Fijian junta

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US diplomatic cables recently published by WikiLeaks have revealed sharp tactical divisions within the Australian Labor government over the Fijian military regime. In 2009, amid rising fears that China was gaining strategic ground in the region, Labor's parliamentary secretary for Pacific Island affairs, Duncan Kerr, secretly urged Washington to pressure Prime Minister Kevin Rudd into abandoning his "hardline" stance and reaching an accommodation with the junta.

The cable describing the discussion between Kerr and US diplomatic officials, titled "Australia rethinking its Fiji policy", was sent from Canberra on August 14, 2009 by the American ambassador to Australia, Daniel Clune. Classified "NOFORN" (not releasable to foreign nationals), it was sent to the State Department, Central Intelligence Agency, US embassies throughout the South Pacific as well as in Paris, and the US Pacific Command in Hawaii.

Under a subheading, "Diplomatic dead-end?" the cable reported: "With Fiji's suspension from the PIF [Pacific Islands Forum] and imminent suspension from the Commonwealth, Kerr expressed concern that Australia will have 'exhausted' its diplomatic arsenal with no clear next step. He questioned the utility of gradually reducing engagement with Fiji, and appeared supportive of an idea by the GOA's [government of Australia] High Commissioner in Fiji to conduct 'a surprise gesture of goodwill' towards the military regime."

Under another subheading, "Searching for a way out," the cable reported Kerr's advice that junta leader Frank Bainimarama "cannot give up power as he would end up at the mercy of his enemies," and that "the international community should find a safe way for him to step down." Kerr warned that Bainimarama could be ousted by "less senior officers [who] are getting the taste of being in power", and emphatically concluded that the junta leader will "either be shot or we'll have to do business with him".

After noting that "a decision to change course must ultimately come from Prime Minister Rudd", Kerr "encouraged US ideas on how to address Fiji". He urged Washington to "ask

us the obvious questions" about what happens if Fiji's suspension from the Commonwealth produces no results. In the cable, Ambassador Clune then commented: "Kerr's request for the US to ask 'the obvious questions' appears to be an attempt to spur re-evaluation of Australia's Fiji policy. It seems that the GOA is on cruise control toward increasing disengagement with Fiji, without achieving any desired effect."

The extraordinary episode underscores the extent of the longstanding crisis confronting the Australian government in the South Pacific—and the cynicism of Canberra's claims that it supports "democracy" in Fiji.

In December 2006, the Fijian military seized power in a coup. A US diplomatic cable sent shortly afterwards confirmed that then Australian prime minister John Howard considered a military intervention, but decided that an invasion was "not in Australia's national interest". The cable added that Howard "could not countenance Australian and Fijian troops fighting one another on the streets of Suva". The Australian and New Zealand governments instead imposed diplomatic sanctions and moved to isolate Fiji internationally as a means of forcing a return to civilian rule.

Canberra and Wellington were never concerned for the democratic rights of ordinary Fijians. They instead feared that the coup would trigger political instability across the South Pacific, undermining their economic and strategic interests, and, above all, opening the door for China to gain ground. A US cable sent from Canberra in January 2008, noted that "Rudd is especially concerned with Chinese influence in the Pacific and sees Australian leverage ebbing thanks to massive Chinese aid flows."

By 2009 it was clear to everyone that the sanctions regime was not advancing US-Australian interests. Bainimarama defied Canberra's diktats and deepened ties with Beijing, receiving significant Chinese financial, diplomatic, and military support.

The Chinese government contemptuously dismissed

Australia's entreaties to toe the line on Fiji. US cables previously published by WikiLeaks revealed a highly unusual diplomatic incident in February 2009, when Beijing lied to Canberra about a visit to Fiji by Vice President Xi Jinping that involved the announcement of major new aid and investment projects (see "WikiLeaks cables reveal Chinese vice president's secret visit to Fiji, in defiance of Australia").

The affair clearly raised alarm bells both in Canberra and Washington. A rift within the Australian foreign policy establishment was evident with the publication in April 2009 of a report by the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) think-tank that urged a rapprochement with Bainimarama. ASPI warned that sanctions had "pushed Fiji away from its traditional friends to others, notably China". The latest round of WikiLeaks' published cables now make clear that these tactical divisions extended right into Rudd's cabinet.

Immediately after the 2006 coup in Suva, the US made clear to Australia that it would not sacrifice its independent interests in relation to Fiji. Canberra wanted Fijian soldiers barred from UN peacekeeping operations, to remove a lucrative source of income for the military and place greater pressure on the coup leaders. Washington refused to countenance this, because Fijian soldiers played a useful role in assisting its imperialist operations in the Middle East.

A US cable sent from Canberra on the day of the coup in Fiji described the issue of peacekeepers as a "US redline". A US State Department official instructed Australian and New Zealand officials that there could be no "rush to remove Fiji's participation in UN peacekeeping operations, noting the importance of Fiji to UN peacekeeping operations in Baghdad and elsewhere". Another cable explained: "we are looking for steps that put pressure on Fiji but are not detrimental to larger US interests."

The leaked cables have revealed that in September 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton invited Fiji's UN representative to a meeting of Pacific Island officials in New York during a UN General Assembly summit. One cable refers to "Australian and New Zealand concerns" about the initiative, but the Fijian government apparently declined the invitation. Australian National Security Advisor Duncan Lewis told the US embassy in Canberra that the failure to accept Clinton's invitation was a "blunder" on Fiji's part, adding that he was not surprised that Bainimarama had "missed another opportunity".

One year later, in September 2010, another US invitation was extended and this time accepted, with Fiji's foreign affairs minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola speaking with Clinton and other Pacific leaders in an hour-long meeting in New York.

Clinton told Kubuabola that the US wanted "dialogue and partnership with Fiji", and the State Department subsequently indicated that they accepted Bainimarama's proposed "road map" for elections in 2014.

This marked an apparent breach between Australia and the US on a key policy issue in the South Pacific. Recently, however, the US appears to have shifted back to support for sanctions and diplomatic isolation. Last June, a State Department delegation conducted a week-long tour of the western Pacific, but excluded Fiji. Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell denied any differences with Canberra on their approach towards the junta.

The various diplomatic shifts no doubt reflect continued behind-the-scenes discussions between the Australian and American governments over how to forge a pliant administration in Fiji and sideline Beijing.

The ruthlessness of these calculations clearly emerges in the US cables that describe Australian moves to instigate an economic crisis in Fiji without causing a complete collapse that could backfire on Canberra.

In August 2009, Kerr told US officials: "We've made a cabinet-level decision that we don't want to see Fiji move to a social and economic collapse." The cable continued: "He [Kerr] said that Australia would be responsible for picking up a failed state, at a cost much higher than the GOA's intervention in the Solomon Islands." Another cable sent from Canberra in October 2009 reported: "Australia supports International Monetary Fund (IMF) engagement (with tough conditionality) sooner rather than later 'when the inevitable fall comes', so that people and processes are already in place to pick up the pieces."

Earlier in 2009, according to one US cable, New Zealand's foreign minister Murray McCully privately indicated that "perhaps things need to get much worse in Fiji before Fijians themselves decide to create the circumstances under which the international community can help things improve".

What is apparent throughout these cables is the callous disregard for the plight of ordinary Fijian people as the US, Australia and New Zealand all manoeuvre to protect their economic and strategic interests in the South Pacific against rival China.



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