

Australia normalises relations with Fijian regime

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Australia has re-established full diplomatic ties with Fiji and dropped most of the sanctions that were imposed against the military regime after the 2006 coup. The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard is seeking to counter China's growing diplomatic influence in Fiji and the South Pacific region.

Foreign Minister Bob Carr met with Fiji's foreign minister Inoke Kubuabola in Sydney last Monday. Carr then announced that travel restrictions on government members and their families would be reassessed on a "case by case basis" and the two countries would exchange high commissioners. Carr later explained that only serving members of the military in the government would remain potentially subject to the travel ban.

Australia's last senior diplomat in Fiji was expelled in November 2009. Carr described his meeting with Kubuabola as "a very good one, a very constructive one that looked to the future." He said the normalisation of diplomatic relations represented "a token of the progress that has been made" toward holding elections in Fiji.

Military leader Frank Bainimarama, Fiji's self-appointed prime minister, has outlined plans to hold a vote in 2014. Previously, the Australian government condemned these election proposals, but Carr this week hailed "the commitment the interim government in Fiji has made to the process of constitutional consultation [and] the work that's taken place towards a constitution, their work on the electoral rolls, their work towards an election in 2014."

The abrupt about-face has nothing to do with any

change in the situation in Fiji. The military regime continues to violate the democratic rights of the Fijian population and has foreshadowed that it will continue to intervene in the country's political affairs after the 2014 election. There have been several reports that the military plans to remain in power by forming a political party modelled on the Golkar party of former Indonesian dictator Suharto.

Bainimarama appears to be targeting his rivals ahead of any election. Laisenia Qarase, who was deposed as prime minister in 2006, was yesterday imprisoned on corruption charges dating back to the early 1990s. Qarase's conviction, on charges that his lawyers insist were politically motivated, means that he cannot contest the election. Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry, another former prime minister, also faces the prospect of being barred from standing. He has been prosecuted for violating foreign exchange laws by allegedly holding party donations in Australian bank accounts.

The Australian government's rapprochement with the regime underscores that it has never been concerned about the democratic rights of the Fijian people.

The initial imposition of sanctions, like the latest diplomatic initiative, was driven by strategic calculations. Canberra did not want the 2006 coup to trigger wider political instability in the South Pacific that could undermine its strategic dominance in the region and open the door for rival powers to gain ground.

But the "hardline" stance backfired—the sanctions and diplomatic censures failed to force the military from

power, while encouraging the regime to look to other countries for support, above all China. Defying the Australian government's pleas not to support the regime, Beijing stepped up its aid and investment in Fiji, and also developed close ties between the Chinese and Fijian armed forces.

By 2010, the US State Department regarded this as an untenable situation. The Obama administration had announced a strategic "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific, launching diplomatic and military initiatives to counter China's growing influence and maintain the dominant position that US imperialism has enjoyed throughout the region since World War II. Washington's shift included normalising relations with authoritarian governments, such as in Burma, which had previously been subjected to sanctions but are now embraced as part of the drive to strategically encircle China.

In September 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with the Fijian foreign minister and declared that Washington agreed with the proposal to hold elections in 2014. The Obama administration subsequently announced greater US aid for Fiji. These initiatives opened up an unprecedented breach between the US and Australia on a key issue of foreign policy in the South Pacific. After 1945, Washington primarily delegated responsibility to Australian imperialism for maintaining control of the South West Pacific and shutting out rival powers. In turn, the US backed Canberra's aggressive pursuit of its own predatory economic and strategic interests in the region.

Following Clinton's meeting with her Fijian counterpart, the Australian government came under intense pressure to junk its "human rights" posturing on Fiji. Foreign policy think tanks, and the opposition Liberal-National coalition, called on the Labor government to follow the US lead.

Kevin Rudd's replacement by Bob Carr as foreign minister earlier this year facilitated the diplomatic turnaround. Initially, however, Carr maintained the line of his predecessors. As recently as April, Carr declared that lifting sanctions against the Fijian government "would be several steps into the future" and that "we need to see a robust democracy functioning in Fiji."

The timing of the sudden reversal may be due to pressure from Washington. Secretary of State Clinton is reportedly planning to attend the Pacific Islands Forum annual meeting later this month in the Cook Islands. It would be the first time that a US secretary of state has attended the Forum. The event was previously a little noted diplomatic affair, with Australian prime ministers frequently declining to attend, but amid the US diplomatic "full court press" in the Asia-Pacific it has taken on a greater political significance. The State Department is expending considerable resources ahead of the Forum, with Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell and Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Cecil Haney currently on a week-long tour of seven Pacific Island states.

US officials are determined to use the Forum to advance their diplomatic and strategic influence and to combat Beijing's initiatives in the region. Clinton undoubtedly has no intention of participating in a summit that is instead preoccupied with the question of Fiji's diplomatic status.



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