

Australian government woos Fijian military regime

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Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop visited the Pacific state of Fiji last Friday and Saturday, promising steps to drop sanctions against its military government as part of efforts to “normalise” diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Canberra imposed various sanctions after the Fijian military, led by Commodore Frank Bainimarama, seized power in 2006. The Australian government’s response to the coup did not reflect any concern whatsoever for the democratic rights of the Fijian people; rather, Canberra feared that the coup would destabilise the region and open the door for rival powers, above all China, to gain influence at Australian imperialism’s expense. But the sanctions badly backfired—instead of forcing the military regime to capitulate to Canberra’s demands, Bainimarama announced a “look north” foreign policy aimed at winning economic, diplomatic and military support from Beijing.

Bishop became the first senior Australian minister to meet with the regime’s leader since 2008. Before leaving for Fiji, Bishop declared that there were no preconditions ahead of her talks with Bainimarama. The two figures posed for the media shaking hands and joking together. Bishop presented Bainimarama with a signed jersey of a Fijian-born Australian Rules Football player, before the two entered a closed-door discussion that reportedly went for twice as long as scheduled. “The atmospherics were warm,” Bishop later declared. “He was engaged. He laughed a lot.”

Bishop announced that Australian and Fijian public officials, including in finance and foreign policy departments, will begin work exchange programs. A military “co-operation program,” involving joint exercises and training, will be re-established and moves made toward exchanging defence attaches. Suva will

reportedly be asked to resume participation in Canberra’s Pacific patrol boat program.

Bishop said the Australian government was preparing to formally junk travel sanctions that block Fijian regime members and senior military personnel and their families from entering Australia. She added that the policy had not been enforced since the Australian Liberal-National government took office last September. The travel ban has long angered Bainimarama, forcing him and other regime figures to take long diversions when travelling to other countries, as flights from Fiji are typically routed through Australia or New Zealand.

Fijians will now be eligible for Australia’s Pacific Seasonal Workers Program, a guest worker visa scheme designed to give Australian agribusinesses access to temporary cheap fruit picking labour during harvesting seasons.

The Australian about-face on Bainimarama and the Fijian regime is another demonstration of the cynicism with which the imperialist powers use the pretexts of human rights and democracy when it suits their purposes to do so, while doing business with dictators when that is in line with their geostrategic and economic interests.

Canberra’s diplomatic shift is not in response to any changed circumstances within Fiji. The military-dominated government remains in firm control. Demonstrations are banned, with groups of more than three people requiring a permit to gather together. The media remains heavily censored, and there are sweeping restrictions on workers’ ability to take industrial action or engage in collective bargaining. Bainimarama has pledged to hold elections before the end of the year, but these will be held under a new constitution, drafted by the regime last year, designed

to retain the military's grip on power.

Bainimarama juked a draft constitution that had been prepared in January last year, before endorsing a revised version last September that gives the government sweeping authority to suspend basic rights in a declared "emergency." He plans to formally stand down as military chief and continue his rule as prime minister by heading an as-yet-unformed political party.

In other circumstances, Bainimarama could be the subject of a frenzied Australian media campaign and the Fijian election denounced as a sham process held under the jackboot of the country's armed forces.

Now, however, the strongman is welcomed as a figure with whom Canberra can do business. The *Australian*'s foreign editor Greg Sheridan yesterday declared: "Bainimarama is no angel, but on the scale of global dictators he is an extremely mild variant ... Australia has deep national interests at stake in Fiji and these continue no matter who rules in Suva or how." Sheridan noted longstanding US concern over the sanctions regime. "Privately, they [US officials] thought it very poor policy," he explained. "It certainly led to increased Chinese influence in the South Pacific."

The Lowy Institute, a prominent Australian foreign policy think tank, praised the resumption of military ties between Australia and Fiji, stating: "It means Fiji will be less likely to continue making overtures to China and Russia for military assistance, which will mitigate the concerns of Australia's defence and strategic planners about the influence of other major powers in the Pacific Islands region."

The Australian government is entirely integrated into the Obama administration's preparations for a potential military confrontation with China. The US "pivot to Asia," formally announced in Australia in 2011, involves the attempted military and diplomatic encirclement of China as part of Washington's efforts to maintain its unchecked domination of the entire Asia-Pacific region. Ever since the end of World War II and the establishment of the US-Australia alliance, Canberra has been delegated responsibility for blocking rival powers from establishing a presence in the South West Pacific. In the past seven years, however, Bainimarama openly defied the Australian government and developed close ties with Beijing, raising the spectre of Fiji providing the Chinese navy with a

Pacific base.

Last May, Bainimarama travelled to Beijing and met with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang. A series of aid and assistance deals were subsequently announced, including the training in China of 300 senior public service, government and police officials. A Fiji-China educational cooperation program, also begun in 2013, which provides 30 fully-funded scholarships to Fijians studying in China. Other Chinese aid provides government luxury vehicles, prominent public infrastructure, including road works, and police equipment, as well as funding projects such as providing free sewing machines to women's groups in every Fijian province.

The Chinese and Fijian militaries signed a memorandum of understanding in 2011, formalising ties. This was further strengthened last August when People's Liberation Army deputy chief of general staff Lieutenant General Wang Guanzhong visited Suva and signed a document with Fijian defence minister Joketani Cokanasiga that pledged "closer cooperation and technical assistance." Last November, Cokanasiga and senior Fijian military figures travelled to Beijing to discuss further "development co-operation and assistance, including exchanges between the two military forces."

The Australian government's moves to normalise relations with the Fijian junta are aimed, more than anything else, at undercutting these developing relations, as part of the provocative US-led strategy of isolating Beijing and undercutting its emerging economic, diplomatic and strategic influence in Asia.



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