

# Fiji PM threatens “severe punishment” for 70 people charged with sedition

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Fiji’s prime minister, former military ruler Frank Bainimarama, has warned of “severe punishment,” including many years in jail, for anyone attempting to form a breakaway state or overthrow the government. Bainimarama called on people to report “illegal activity” and vowed to “crush” any “insurrections.”

Bainimarama’s comments were made as about 70 people awaited court appearances over charges of sedition. Radio New Zealand reported on August 31 that Bainimarama described those allegedly involved as “enemies of the country” who would be “tracked down and brought to justice.” Bainimarama further claimed “high-profile figures” in Australia were among the plotters, whom he described as “enemies of a modern Fiji.”

The first group of 16 accused appeared in the Lautoka High Court on September 1 and pleaded not guilty to charges of sedition and inciting communal antagonism. They are due to reappear on September 22.

The sedition trials, and Bainimarama’s comments, underline the continuing undemocratic nature of the Fijian regime, despite a bogus election in September 2014.

The election was held under conditions of press censorship, severe restrictions on opposition political parties and military provocations. The vote was dominated by the country’s military, which held power following a coup led by Bainimarama in 2006. His Fiji First Party (FFP) purportedly won 60 percent of the ballot.

The US, Australia and New Zealand, after earlier feigning opposition to the military regime, embraced the new government as a means of countering China’s growing influence in the geo-strategically significant South Pacific state.

The regional powers have all remained silent about

the “sedition” arrests. Canberra and Wellington are both working to strengthen their relations with Bainimarama. In July, the Royal Australian Navy sent the HMAS Leeuwin to Fiji for joint training with Fijian forces for the first time since 2006. New Zealand and Australian police have resumed working with their Fijian counterparts, recently providing them with six trained sniffer dog teams to help “counter organised criminal groups.”

According to Fiji’s Director of Public Prosecutions Christopher Pryde, three separate sedition cases are under way. The first and largest group are accused of engaging in military training in the northern province of Ra on the main island Viti Levu, where a movement has allegedly been pushing for a separate “Christian” ethnic Fijian state. Ra is part of a region the government singled out for aggressive economic expansion. According to the pro-government *Fiji Sun* newspaper, military-style training in the remote tropical region started about three months ago, overseen by a former British Army soldier, most likely a Fijian national.

Another group from the Nadroga-Navosa region, also allegedly involved in military-style training, has been charged with sedition and inciting communal antagonism. This group is accused of holding meetings in October and November 2014, and signing a document also calling for a separate “Christian” state.

A further five people, including opposition Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) parliamentarian Mosese Bulitavoare, have been charged with sedition for allegedly spraying anti-government graffiti in various locations. Bulitavoare is known for his chauvinism towards the country’s ethnic Indian minority.

Details of the alleged offences are scarce. Defence

lawyer Aman Ravindra-Singh told Australia's ABC News on August 19 he was yet to receive any information from prosecutors and police. "We have been kept in the dark as counsel for these persons and we have yet to see any shred of evidence with regards the allegations of guns and firearms being involved in military-style training," he said

Ravindra-Singh accused the police and prosecution of creating a "climate of fear and insecurity," adding that the local media was subjected to censorship over the cases. He said the constitutional rights of three men were violated. After their bail was revoked, they were in custody beyond the 48 hours allowed before a court appearance.

The Fijian government has ratcheted-up military activities around the country. Reports from Fiji said 140 soldiers were deployed to help investigate suspected "rebel groups." The *Fiji Times* reported a "heavy military presence" in the town of Tavua on August 26 as villagers arrived for a bail hearing for the group from Ra. More than 100 soldiers, some carrying rifles, were seen patrolling the streets and stationed on every corner.

Ravindra-Singh said police also barred the public from the Lautoka court on September 1. "Police were not allowing family members to come into the court house," contrary to the constitution that provides for "open access to justice," he declared.

Calls for a "Christian" state, if true, signal a revival of overt racial politics, which was repeatedly whipped up in the past to pit indigenous Fijians against ethnic Indians, and others. Of Fiji's 900,000 people, about 57 percent are indigenous Fijians and nominally Methodist, and 38 percent Indian, principally Hindu.

The Indian population is descended from indentured labourers brought to the islands as cheap labour by Britain, Fiji's colonial ruler, during the nineteenth century. Communal divisions have constantly been fostered by rival sections of the ruling elite, particularly over land, in order to keep the working class and rural poor divided.

While Bainimarama postures as a "national unifier," his regime is oriented to sections of the Fijian capitalist class and pro-business members of the chiefly elite. His military junta adopted measures aimed at eliminating barriers to investment and private profit. This has continued with an increasing orientation toward China,

which has opened up business opportunities and funded infrastructure projects.

The ethnic Fijian nationalist wing of the country's ruling elite, which sought to maintain political and economic privileges for the traditional chiefs, remains bitterly opposed to aspects of Bainimarama's rule.

Last week Bainimarama attacked SODELPA, which represents the interests of a layer of the chiefly Fijian elite, for not joining his condemnation of those threatening the "integrity of the nation." SODELPA hit back at Bainimarama, claiming his threats were becoming aggressive and "similar in tone" to his behaviour before his 2006 coup.

Bainimarama is under pressure from the financial markets. The Asia Development Bank warned in its 2015 Outlook for Fiji that tightening fiscal conditions require the "implementation of structural reforms announced in the 2015 budget to further encourage private investment and rebalance the economy." That means deepening the attacks on already precariously low living standards.

Having previously enacted "public order" laws with harsh measures against riot, violent disorder, affray, public processions and public assemblies, Bainimarama is preparing to use the "sedition" cases as a precedent for harsher measures to suppress struggles by the country's working class and poor.



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