

New Zealand suspends aid to Nauru

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New Zealand Foreign Minister Murray McCully announced on September 3 that \$NZ1.2 million (\$US0.76 million) in aid for Nauru's justice system would be suspended until the Nauru government addresses concerns around "civil rights abuses and the rule of law." Nauru is a tiny Pacific island state with a population of only 9,500.

The decision to suspend the funding—about half New Zealand's annual aid to Nauru—was made a week before the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) held in Port Moresby on September 9-11. The suspension follows a series of allegations over the past year concerning Nauru's expulsion of judges and the arrest of several opposition parliamentarians for attending a protest.

McCully cited the case of Roland Kun, an opposition MP whose family lives in New Zealand. Kun was pulled off a plane by Nauru's authorities in June and his passport was seized, with the government alleging he was a national security risk. McCully claimed that the passport was seized at the behest of Nauru Justice Minister David Adeang—a political rival—rather than by the courts.

Nauru's government also passed a law prohibiting speech intended to "stir up ... political hatred" and issued a ban on the use of Facebook in the country. McCully claimed that as long as New Zealand continued to fund the country's justice system, it would appear that "we were part of the problem."

For nearly a year there has been no effective opposition in Nauru, with five MPs suspended before they could take their seats. Legal moves by the MPs to get their seats back have failed. The country's president, Baron Waqa, has sole power to appoint the cabinet from among the parliamentarians. Nauru has effectively excluded foreign media from the country by imposing a \$US7,000 fee for journalist visas.

Kun appears to have been targeted after he contributed to a television program aired on Australia's

ABC TV in June. Getax, a large Australian phosphate company, was accused of paying bribes to members of the Nauru government, including Waqa and Adeang. Similar claims were made against Getax in 2010.

Protests erupted in June outside Nauru's parliament over government corruption, with some 300 people attending. Mathew Batsiua, one of the excluded MPs, said people were becoming increasingly angry at "the absence of checks and balances on government." Waqa has responded with increasingly authoritarian measures.

PIF secretary-general Meg Taylor, a former World Bank official, told Radio Australia on July 8 that "concern" had been expressed by other member states about what was "going on in Nauru." However, she said Nauru was entitled to "sort out its own problems" before any intervention was considered.

According to Radio NZ on September 4, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said Nauru's legal processes were "progressing and judicial processes are being followed" and Australia's aid assistance was "not under threat." The Wellington-based *Dominion Post* retorted that Australia was not joining New Zealand's action because "Nauru is doing Australia's dirty work" by keeping asylum seekers in its detention centre under "widely criticised" conditions.

The Law Societies in New Zealand and Australia have agitated for action against Nauru. In July, 29 legal academics in New Zealand published an open letter demanding the National government take a "more forceful" approach and remove aid from Nauru's justice sector, which they described as in "disarray."

New Zealand's main opposition parties, Labour and the Greens, endorsed McCully's decision to cut aid to Nauru. Labour's Foreign Affairs spokesman David Shearer called for the government to "take the lead" on the issue, saying Australia was "compromised" by its funding for the asylum seekers' detention centre.

The Nauru government hit back on its Twitter

account, saying that McCully's decision was "misguided & based on misinformation" and that Kun was under investigation for attempting to overthrow "a democratically-elected government." New Zealand's action "seeks to undermine our national sovereignty & influence a criminal investigation," it declared. The tweet also defended Waqa's decision to replace judges, saying reforms were needed to "end corruption and cronyism of the past."

Nauru is a Pacific coral atoll of just 21 square kilometres, with a long history of colonial oppression that left a legacy of poverty and economic backwardness. Villages were cleared in much of the island to make way for phosphate mines, worked by indentured labourers from Asia. The phosphate reserves are now all but exhausted, and the island's environment seriously damaged by the mining. However, the neo-colonial domination continues with Canberra's notorious asylum seeker "processing centre," where refugees are detained indefinitely in breach of their basic rights under international law.

Throughout the Pacific, infighting among small ruling elites are being fuelled by worsening social and economic problems. The two regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, regard the old systems of political ties, based on personal patronage and traditional village hierarchies, as an obstacle to economic liberalisation and market reforms, that must be dismantled by any means necessary, including economic penalties and the use of force.

The need for "democracy" and "stability" has been the pretext by Australia and New Zealand for military interventions (East Timor 1999 and 2006, Tonga 2006), police and administrative state take-over (Solomon Islands, 2003–2015), economic and diplomatic sanctions (Fiji, following the 2006 military coup) and widespread electronic spying as revealed by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden.

None of this has anything to do with genuine concern for ordinary Pacific Islanders. New Zealand's stance is riddled with hypocrisy. The government actively collaborates with Australia's inhumane system of imprisoning asylum seekers, exposing the sham that it cares about democratic rights on Nauru or anywhere else. Under an agreement signed with Australia in 2013, the New Zealand government will be able to send asylum seekers to Nauru and Papua New Guinea,

should any arrive in New Zealand.

New Zealand and Australia give extensive aid to both the autocratic Bainimarama regime in Fiji, and the reactionary Tongan monarchy. New Zealand gave \$NZ1.1 billion in aid to Fiji's military regime between the 2006 coup and 2013, and has contributed over \$51 million in recent development support to Tonga, including \$7.5 million to the Tongan Police.

Behind all these calculations, Canberra and Wellington are determined to maintain their regional hegemony and to shut out rival powers—particularly China—from their "patch." Cloaked in "democratic" trappings, their operations are aimed solely at bolstering their own neo-colonial interests.



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