

New Zealand PM's diplomatic debacle in Fiji

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Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama used what would normally have been a bland official speech in Suva on June 9 to bluntly air continuing grievances over the policies of the region's imperialist powers, directing his remarks to his visiting New Zealand counterpart John Key.

The diplomatic strains are a sign of unresolved and deepening geostrategic tensions in the Pacific. Australia and New Zealand are determined to ensure their continued regional dominance as part of the US-led drive to counter growing Chinese influence and prepare for war.

Key's 24-hour visit, the first by a New Zealand prime minister to the impoverished South Pacific country since Bainimarama's 2006 military coup, was intended to advance New Zealand's foreign policy interests. Australia and New Zealand both regard Fiji, the largest South Pacific island state, as critical to their hegemony.

Following the coup, Canberra and Wellington imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions. These had nothing to do with defending democratic rights in Fiji but were driven by concerns that the coup could destabilise the region and open the way for Chinese influence.

The sanctions, however, backfired. Bainimarama responded with a "Look North" policy, seeking and receiving economic, diplomatic and military aid from China, Russia and elsewhere. In 2007, New Zealand's high commissioner to Fiji, Michael Green, was accused of interfering in the country's affairs and expelled.

In January this year a consignment of gifted weapons arrived from Russia for the Fiji army, followed by a 10-member team of Russian military instructors. The response by the Australian and New Zealand governments was muted, at least publicly, but Murdoch's *Australian* declared that Bainimarama was "making a bad mistake" if he believed that the consignment was "a good idea for his nation."

Canberra and Wellington are determined to counteract the growing presence of "outside" powers in what they regard as their own backyard. In March, the two governments exploited the devastation caused by Cyclone Winston to send warships, aircraft and hundreds of military personnel to Fiji. It was New Zealand's biggest military deployment since World War II. While the intervention was characterised as a "humanitarian and disaster aid" mission, it was consistent with the intensifying militarisation of the Pacific.

Following the cyclone, China provided aid of \$US100,000 to the Fiji Red Cross Society, the first country to do so. Beijing later increased its disaster relief package to \$US10 million. Key derided the contribution, telling reporters that "when the need was great for Fiji ... it was Australia and New Zealand that turned up."

New Zealand Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee visited Fiji in March to reinforce Wellington's "help" in the disaster relief. It followed a visit by Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop. The Lowy Institute, a Sydney-based think tank, noted that Bishop's visit presented "a big opportunity for Fiji" to put behind it "all the bad blood between the two countries since the 2006 coup" and "normalise relations."

Key's visit this month had a similar agenda. Before leaving, Key told reporters that following the 2014 elections in Fiji, the military coup was now "ancient history." Although democratic rule was still not "absolutely perfect," the time was "right" for the highest-level diplomatic relations to resume.

No sooner had Key arrived in Suva than it became clear the trip would not go according to script. At the welcoming banquet, Bainimarama reminded Key that he won Fiji's 2014 election with an overwhelming majority. "It is on that basis I stand before you tonight. Not as a coup maker or dictator, as some in your

country would still have it, but as a properly elected, freely chosen leader of Fiji,” he declared.

During Key’s visit, Bainimarama refused to give way on two central matters. Firstly, he refused to rescind a ban on New Zealand journalists identified as being critical of the regime. Bainimarama claimed there was “a substantial body of opinion” in New Zealand, led by “your generally hostile media,” that “what is happening in Fiji somehow lacks legitimacy. That somehow I lack legitimacy. And my government lacks legitimacy.” Such claims, Bainimarama stated, were “not borne out by the facts.”

In reality, the government still rests directly on the military. The election in which Bainimarama’s Fiji First Party purportedly won 60 percent of the ballot was held under conditions of press censorship, military provocations and severe restrictions on opposition political parties.

The government remains anti-working class and authoritarian, ruling largely through fear and intimidation. A week before Key arrived, Bainimarama’s government used its numbers in parliament to suspend an opposition MP, the National Federation Party’s Roko Tupou Draunidalo, for more than two years after alleging she called a minister a “fool.”

Secondly, Bainimarama again refused to return to meetings of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), from which Fiji was earlier suspended. The Australian and New Zealand-dominated PIF rescinded the suspension after the 2014 elections. Bainimarama declined Key’s invitation to re-join the PIF. In return, Key said New Zealand would not quit the regional organisation, as Bainimarama previously sought.

Fiji has encouraged other Pacific nations to take a more “independent” stance, setting up the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) in 2012, from which Australia and New Zealand were excluded. In the lead-up to the COP21 environmental summit in Paris last year, Pacific leaders were highly critical of Australia and New Zealand for refusing to support their call to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to keep global temperature increases below 1.5 degrees centigrade. The PIDF declared the target was required to protect their tiny island states from rising sea levels.

Tensions between the official parties following Bainimarama’s outburst in Suva were reportedly

palpable. Fairfax Media columnist Tracy Watkins described Wellington’s delegation as “seething over the Fijian prime minister’s extraordinary diplomatic slapdown.” Nor did it go unnoticed that Bainimarama was “hardly effusive” in his low-key acknowledgement of New Zealand’s assistance during Cyclone Winston. Watkins declared that, by the time it finished, Key’s trip had been stripped of any “diplomatic wins.”

New Zealand Labour Party foreign affairs spokesperson David Shearer described Key’s trip as a “disaster,” writing: “He [Bainimarama] didn’t step back from the restrictions on media [or] the heavy-handedness within parliament.” Key’s government needed to keep pushing Fijian officials “for a better democracy,” he declared.

Labour’s position is completely hypocritical. It was the previous Labour government that imposed New Zealand’s sanctions regime on Fiji after the 2006 coup. In 2014, Labour endorsed the “democratic” election of Bainimarama and the rehabilitation of his regime.



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