

Regional dispute erupts over arrest of Fijian opposition leaders

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Fiji's prime minister, former military commander Frank Bainimarama, last week hit out at "interference" in the country's domestic affairs by Australia and New Zealand. Bainimarama was responding to comments on the arrest of six leading Fijian opposition figures for criticising the country's 2013 constitution at a political forum. The police claimed the forum did not have an official permit and breached a public order decree.

Bainimarama made the remarks while opening the Joint Fiji-Australia, Fiji-New Zealand business councils meeting at Pacific Harbour, near Suva. After expressing gratitude for New Zealand's and Australia's continuing trade relations and assistance following Tropical Cyclone Winston, he raised the issue of the arrests: "Why is the spotlight being turned on Fiji simply because it insists on its laws being upheld? Why all the unwarranted expressions of concern from foreign governments and organisations?"

Five opposition figures were detained on the weekend of September 10-11 and kept in custody overnight. They were 1987 coup leader and current head of the SODELPA Party, Sitiveni Rabuka, National Federation Party (NFP) leader Biman Prasad, academic Tupeni Baba, Fiji Council of Trade Unions general secretary Attar Singh, and Jone Dakuvula from the organisation Pacific Dialogue, which called the meeting. Fiji Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry, a former prime minister, later handed himself into police.

Following the arrests, New Zealand Prime Minister John Key said he was keeping a "watch" on the situation and warned the Fiji government against doing anything "silly." Australian Minister for International Development and the Pacific Concetta Fierravanti-Wells declared that her country took "freedom of assembly and freedom of speech seriously" and would also be watching closely. NZ Labour Party foreign

affairs spokesman David Shearer said Bainimarama's forthcoming state visit to New Zealand should be "quietly put on hold."

Bainimarama told the business audience that Key had been "disrespectful" and "condescending." He accused Australia and New Zealand of being hypocritical toward Fiji. "We have not lectured to you about the allegations of human rights abuses in your own countries," he said. "These include the extreme disadvantage suffered by indigenous people in New Zealand, and Australia, and in the case of Australia, the inhumane treatment of asylum seekers." Bainimarama claimed that it was up to Fiji's Director of Public Prosecutions to make a decision on the case and the courts would deal with the issue "independently" if the DPP decided to prosecute.

Bainimarama continued his boycott of the Pacific Islands Forum, which met the same weekend as the arrests. Bainimarama demands the expulsion of Australia and New Zealand from the regional body. Last week Fiji also announced its withdrawal from negotiations for the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (Pacer Plus), citing backtracks on commitments by Australia and New Zealand.

In June, Bainimarama lambasted Canberra and Wellington, almost scuttling Key's visit to Suva, the first by a NZ prime minister in 10 years. At the official welcome, Bainimarama reminded Key that he won Fiji's 2014 election with an overwhelming majority. "It is on that basis I stand before you tonight," he declared. "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."

The Fiji government still rests directly on the military, which carried through Bainimarama's 2006 coup. The 2014 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 parties. The government is anti-working class and authoritarian, ruling largely through fear and intimidation.

The Public Order Amendment Decree, under which the opposition figures were detained, was issued in 2012 by the military dictatorship. Government permits are required for any political meeting, and opposition meetings can be deemed threats to “public order.” It is not yet clear whether charges will be laid against the arrested men, but if they are convicted it could prevent them from contesting the next election.

Earlier this year, Bainimarama’s government used its numbers in parliament to suspend an opposition MP, the NFP’s Roko Tupou Draunidalo, for more than two years after she allegedly called a minister a “fool.” The NFP last week boycotted the president’s address for the opening of the new term of parliament. The party said the move was “in protest over the continuing political persecution and intimidation of the opposition and the draconian muzzling of free expression and assembly in Fiji.”

Interviewed by Radio NZ on September 13, Chaudhry described Fiji as “a dictatorship.” The former prime minister said “you don’t require a permit for forums of that nature where it is not a political meeting.” He said the prime minister and the attorney-general had been invited to the forum, but declined to come. “We want to live in a free society, not where there are restrictions on free speech,” he said.

The intervention of Australia and New Zealand, however, has nothing to do with defending democratic rights in Fiji. They have supported coups in Fiji as long as the resulting regime lines up with their neo-colonial interests. Speaking to Radio NZ on September 13, Key did not actually condemn the arrests, claiming they were “legally authorised.”

The diplomatic strains are a sign of rising geostrategic tensions in the Pacific. At stake are deepening concerns about alleged Chinese influence. After the regional powers imposed sanctions on Fiji following the 2006 coup, Bainimarama turned elsewhere, primarily to China and Russia, for trade, aid and military equipment. Australia and New Zealand remain determined to ensure their dominance in the

southwest Pacific as part of Washington’s “pivot” to Asia and the US-led drive to counter Beijing and prepare for war.

On Radio NZ on September 14, Auckland-based strategic analyst Paul Buchanan described Fiji as the “tip of a spear of Chinese influence projected into the South Pacific.” China’s presence, facilitated by its growing economic and military association with Fiji, was increasingly “assertive.” Unless China was pushed back, the South Pacific was “going to become like a Chinese lake,” supposedly “like the South China Sea.”

In fact the principal aggressor in the Pacific is not Beijing, but US imperialism. US Vice President Joe Biden used his visit to the region in July to restate Washington’s determination to maintain its economic and strategic dominance in the Asia-Pacific. In a thinly veiled warning of reprisals against any country intending to preserve ties with China at the expense of the US, Biden declared: “It’s never a good bet to bet against the United States.”



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