

Fiji First Party retains power in sham election

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In the second election since the 2006 coup, the Fiji First Party (FFP) of former coup leader Frank Bainimarama retained office with a 51.8 percent majority after last Wednesday's poll. The FFP has been in power since the 2014 election following eight years of military rule.

Results at the end of provisional vote counting showed the FFP's votes had dropped from 59 percent at the previous election. The Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) was on 37.9 percent, up from 28 percent, followed by the National Federation Party with 7.5 percent.

The turnout, based on over 600,000 registered voters, ranged from 53 to 61 percent across Fiji's four divisions. Heavy rain and flooding forced the closure of 26 polling stations, affecting 7,800 people. Nevertheless, the turnout was well below the 84.6 percent who voted in 2014, indicating widespread disenchantment. A *Fiji Times* poll published in late October showed one in five voters were still undecided.

Following the 2014 election, the US and its local allies, Australia and New Zealand, rushed to legitimise the result as "democratic." These powers, however, have supported coups in Fiji as long as the resulting regime lines up with their imperialist interests. Since 2014, they have sought to re-forge ties with Bainimarama in order to undercut China's influence in the geo-strategically significant South Pacific state.

The 2018 election was a contest between two parties run by former coup leaders and military strong men. SODELPA, which benefited from the swing against the FFP, represents the interests of a nationalist layer of the privileged chiefly Fijian elite. It has been led since 2016 by Sitiveni Rabuka, the instigator of two military coups in 1987, the prime minister following the 1992 election and also the former chairman of the unelected Great Council of Chiefs.

The Labour Party, which has historically had a base

of support in the Indo-Fijian community, received the second lowest number of votes at 0.66 percent. For the second time it failed to meet the 5 percent threshold to get into parliament. Labour had previously been elected to office in 1987 and 1999. On both occasions, the resulting government was rapidly overthrown by a coup.

The Fiji government rests directly on the military. Successive regimes have all been thoroughly authoritarian and anti-working class. The imposition of inequality and social misery—28 percent of the population lives below the poverty line—has been accompanied by harsh austerity measures, along with intimidation of opposition parties, repressive laws and rampant violence by the police and military.

Fears of another coup have not subsided. Wellington university lecturer Jon Fraenkel told Radio New Zealand on November 5 that any possibility of an opposition party succeeding would quickly "destabilise things." Labour Party leader Aman Ravindra-Singh said the majority of the population "remains very scared." Most people were not prepared to engage in discussion, he said, but were constantly "looking behind their backs" and "speaking in whispers."

Two thousand police were deployed and the military placed on stand-by for polling day. Police Commissioner Sitiveni Qiliho claimed, without substantiation, that rumours were circulating about "rogue groups" seeking to disrupt the polls. He warned that any attempts to do so would not be "taken lightly." Several people were reportedly detained for "questioning."

Six parties with a total of 233 candidates were vying for 51 seats. In an attempt to eliminate the largely ethnically-based voting that prevailed prior to the coup, in which ethnic Fijians often vied with Indo-Fijians, there are no longer constituency seats. Parties compete in a single national constituency.

The elections were conducted under stringent legal and political constraints. It is virtually impossible for independent candidates to stand. Registered parties produce lists, in which candidates are identified by numbers. Names and party identification are not allowed on ballot papers. A 48-hour media blackout applies prior to the polls closing, with all signage and campaign activities banned.

A multinational observer group reported there were only “minor glitches” in the electoral process. However, discrepancies were claimed in the electoral roll, with some 50,000 more voters than the latest census data. Opposition parties alleged widespread vote-buying in the guise of government grants.

Campaigning was characterised by the total suppression by all the parties of the social crisis. The FFP and SODELPA campaigned on their purported competing economic records. Bainimarama trumpeted nine years of “straight growth,” absurdly declaring that Fijians “now have more opportunities, more jobs, more income and more luxuries of life” under the FFP. Rabuka claimed even more impressive growth figures during SODELPA’s term in office.

Fiji’s economic outlook has in fact weakened, partly as a result of the damage and lost production from Cyclone Winston, which hit in February 2016, leaving tens of thousands homeless and causing losses equivalent to over 30 percent of GDP.

According to the Asia Development Bank, Fiji, which has a population of just over 914,000, is the third most impoverished country in the Pacific, behind Timor-Leste and Micronesia, with the fourth highest unemployment rate at 6.2 percent. Health indicators are appalling. Of every 1,000 babies born, 22 die before they turn five. Fiji has the highest rate of deaths from diabetes in the world. One in three adults has diabetes and three diabetes-related limb amputations are performed in hospitals every day.

Bainimarama contends that inequality has been reduced. While reliable figures are hard to find, the IMF reported in 2016 that in 2013–14 the poorest 10th of households received 3.2 percent of total income, whereas the proportion going to the richest 10th was 31 percent.

Bainimarama has imposed a raft of repressive measures to suppress any nascent opposition. These include anti-democratic restrictions on the media and

bans on foreign journalists. Almost no criticism of the government is published or broadcast under the draconian 2010 Media Industry Development Decree. Violations are punishable by up to two years in prison. The editor, publisher and manager of the *Fiji Times* faced trumped-up sedition charges earlier this year after publishing an anti-Muslim letter in the Fijian language paper *Nai Lalakai*.

According to an Amnesty International report last December, Fiji’s police, corrections and military officers regularly torture people in custody. The report detailed repeated violations of international law by the security forces, including beatings, rape, sexual violence and even murder.

In September 2017, six leading opposition figures were arrested for criticising the country’s 2013 constitution at a political forum. The Public Order Amendment Decree, under which they 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.”

Resistance within the working class, however, is growing. In January, thousands of Fijians turned out to demonstrate their support for 200 airport workers locked-out for a month in an industrial dispute. Over 8,000 people rallied in Nadi in the biggest recent protest witnessed in Fiji.

There has been little international media commentary on this week’s election, and thus far no official response from Canberra or Wellington. The local powers, however, will be paying close attention to the result. Considerable diplomatic, financial and commercial efforts will be made to maintain a close engagement with Bainimarama in order to push back against Beijing.



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