New Zealand PM Ardern boosts relations on Fiji visit

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New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern spent three days in Fiji from February 24–27, the first visit by a NZ leader since 2016, and only the second since the 2006 military coup that installed Frank Bainimarama, Fiji's current prime minister.

Amid deepening geostrategic tensions in the Pacific, Ardern's Labour Party-led government is seeking to strengthen its relationship with Fiji after years of diplomatic strains. New Zealand and Australia are determined to ensure their continued dominance in what they regard as their semi-colonial "back yard." Fiji plays a critical strategic role in the US-led drive to counter growing Chinese influence and prepare for war.

Ardern had earlier hosted a rare state visit to Wellington by Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister James Marape, the first by a PNG leader since 2013. Marape said he would discuss "shared regional interests" and wanted help with PNG's state-owned enterprises. It was another opportunity for Ardern to pursue her government's "Pacific Re-set" policy, aimed at boosting NZ's presence across the Pacific.

Radio NZ reported from Fiji that "all the stops" were pulled out for Ardern's visit. A red carpet greeted Ardern on her arrival, Suva's traffic was cleared, her face "beamed down" from billboards around the city, and locals lined the streets. The *Fiji Sun* featured Ardern on its front page and dedicated several pages profiling her.

The atmosphere was vastly different from 2016 when Bainimarama used a state dinner to lash out at then-NZ Prime Minister John Key, bluntly airing his grievances over the policies of the region's two imperialist powers.

Following the 2006 coup, concerned it could destabilise the region and open the way for Chinese influence, Canberra and Wellington imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions. The sanctions backfired, with Bainimarama adopting 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.

During Key's visit, Bainimarama refused to rescind a ban on New Zealand journalists identified as being critical of the regime. He also declined a request to return to meetings of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), from which Fiji was earlier suspended, while encouraging other Pacific nations to take a more "independent" stance.

New Zealand has since gone to considerable lengths to restore relations. In March last year, Foreign Affairs Minister Winston Peters, leader of the right-wing NZ First Party in the coalition government, visited Fiji and announced measures to take the relationship "to a new level." Peters pledged to bolster Fiji's military with a package of support for "peacekeeping," leadership development and border security.

At the end of Ardern's visit, she and Bainimarama committed to a new Fiji-New Zealand Statement of Partnership. They acknowledged the success of the bilateral defence program and agreed to expand their "security partnership" into policing co-operation. This will purportedly include addressing "existential threats" facing the region and lift the capability of Fiji's police to address "transnational organised crime."

These initiatives will further strengthen Fiji's authoritarian and anti-working class regime. Canberra and Wellington hailed bogus elections in 2014 and 2018 as "democratic," but the Fiji government still rests directly on the military. The imposition of

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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.

According to a 2018 Amnesty International report 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, sexual violence and even murder.

Ardern ignored pro-forma requests from the NZ Labour Party-affiliated Council of Trade Unions to "take action" over the arrest last year of several Fijian union officials, including Felix Anthony, the Secretary General of the Fijian Trade Union Congress, following a ban on May Day protests and the mass arrest of more than 30 locked-out Fiji Water Authority workers. The NZ unions made no criticism of Ardern's silence or her embrace of the Bainimarama regime.

Bainimarama used Ardern's visit to boost his credentials as the Pacific's principal climate-change spokesman, calling for New Zealand's backing to push Australia to commit more to climate action. He told the media following their meeting: "I know I can count on Prime Minister Ardern to not only do the right thing but to join Fiji in demanding the right thing from the rest of the world."

Addressing the COP21 summit in Paris in 2015, Bainimarama issued an "SOS call to the world" and told global leaders to visit the Pacific to experience the "reality of climate change." Fiji has begun relocating more than 45 coastal communities and identified another 830 that are at risk. It is also dealing with the re-emergence of climate-influenced diseases such as typhoid, dengue fever, leptospirosis and diarrhoeal illnesses.

Australia and New Zealand have flatly rejected urgent measures demanded by Pacific nations to restrict global warming to under 1.5C above pre-industrial levels. Last year's PIF summit in Tuvalu was riven by a bitter dispute over the Australian government's refusal to agree to limit coal production in order to address climate change.

After attending the PIF meeting, his first in a decade, Bainimarama told the *Guardian* that Morrison had only gone there "to make sure that the Australian policies were upheld by the Pacific island nations." He slammed Morrison for "alienating" Pacific leaders and warned that this would push them closer to China.

While in Fiji, Ardern announced a token $NZ2 million for a fund launched by Fiji to go towards the relocation of communities displaced by climate change. During a visit to Australia on February 28 for a meeting with Morrison, Ardern refused to publicly criticise Australia's position. Ardern blandly told a media conference in Sydney that she had relayed some of her conversations with Pacific Island leaders to Morrison.

Australia's intransigence on climate change will again be highly contentious at the next PIF summit in Vanuatu in August. Vanuatu's Foreign Minister Ralph Regenvanu told the *Guardian* last year: "Vanuatu has a message for Australia—we ask that Australia prepares well ahead of the next forum meeting in 2020 and comes to the table ready to make real, tangible commitments on climate change." If not, he added, Canberra needs to decide if it wants "a seat at the [PIF] table or not."

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