

Fiji wins presidency of UN Human Rights Council

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28 January 2021

Fiji has won the recent diplomatic contest to become the first Pacific island nation to take the presidency of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). The body this month elected Fiji's chief diplomat in Geneva, Nazhat Shameem Khan, as its 2021 leader with 29 of the 47 member nations voting for her.

The UNHRC was formed in 2006, purportedly to promote and preserve human rights around the world, as well as to investigate possible violations by UN member states. Its members are elected every three years by the UN General Assembly. It has become another arena for nation-state rivalries, with participating countries seeking to cover up their own abuses while denouncing their rivals over "human rights" at the same time.

US President Trump, as part of his "America First" program, quit the organisation in 2018—denouncing it as "a protector of human rights abusers, and a cesspool of political bias." The move came after outgoing UNHRC head Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, a Jordanian diplomat, warned against the rise of "chauvinistic nationalism," sharply condemned Trump's immigration policy, and voiced concern over the US-backed Saudi Arabian war against Yemen.

US Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, had flagged the withdrawal a year earlier, justifying it in the name of defending Israel and the failure of the UNHRC to bow to Washington's demands that it serve as an instrument of US diplomatic aggression. Chief among the "reforms" Haley demanded of the council was the abolition of Agenda Item 7, which makes the "human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied territories" a permanent part of the UNHRC's agenda.

In reality, the world's chief source of abuses and atrocities is US imperialism, which over the last quarter century of uninterrupted wars has killed and maimed

millions and laid waste to entire societies, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay remain symbols of torture and abuse. At home, Washington's brutal anti-immigrant policies have resulted in the torment of thousands of children and their families.

Khan assumes the UNHRC presidency amid intensifying global conflicts, driven in particular by the aggressive US confrontation against Beijing. China and Russia are returning to the body this year for three-year terms, just as the US is promising to renew its global offensive under President Joe Biden, who is determined to escalate Washington's anti-China campaign.

Khan's election followed a secret ballot after a diplomatic stand-off blocked, for the first time in the UNHRC's 15-year history, the usual consensus decision. The presidency rotates each year between the five geographic regions represented on the council, and the candidate is typically agreed upon by consensus within each regional group.

This year the Asia-Pacific group, due to take over the leadership, failed to agree on a candidate, or even on holding a vote within the 13-member group—which includes China and several countries closely aligned with Washington including Japan, Indonesia and India. As a result, the council began the year with no president and was forced to hold the unprecedented vote among all 47 members.

Khan faced last-minute challenges from Bahrain's ambassador, Yusuf Abdulkarim Bucheeri, and his Uzbekistan counterpart, Ulugbek Lapasov. The two were reportedly backed by China, Russia and Saudi Arabia. As against Khan's 29-vote majority, Bahrain's envoy received 14 votes and Uzbekistan's four. There were no abstentions.

According to the *Guardian*, unnamed sources "close

to deliberations” said China, Russia and Saudi Arabia balked at Khan’s expected appointment, and orchestrated the opposing candidacies. These countries, it was claimed, “appeared to be trying to install a friendly candidate country as president to avoid having their own human rights records scrutinised.”

The *Economist*, in a December article headed “Proxy War,” explained that the so-called “democratic” members of the UNHRC, hoping Biden would “soon send America to join them,” regarded the diplomatic battle as an important contest and supported Fiji.

Australia, whose term on the UNHRC expired at the end of 2020, would likely have strongly supported Fiji. Australia and New Zealand, Washington’s main allies in the Pacific, are determined to ensure their continued dominance in what they regard as their neo-colonial backyard.

While Canberra has not commented on the election, New Zealand’s Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta tweeted: “Congratulations on Fiji’s election as President of the UN Human Rights Council. This is the first time a Pacific Island country has held this role and will see Pacific voices represented in this important global forum #HRC.”

Following the election, the *New York Times*, the unofficial mouthpiece of the Democratic Party, portrayed Fiji’s win as a victory for human rights. “The result puts the small, remote island nation, which has a record of support for human rights initiatives, into a leadership position at a time of intensifying competition between states over holding rights abusers to account,” the NYT declared.

The paper praised Fiji for having backed investigations into reported abuses in Venezuela, the Belarus, Syria and Yemen, countries targeted by US imperialism, and suggested that with Fiji in the presidency it will be easier for the US to use the UNHRC to pass resolutions critical of China.

In fact, Fiji, far from being a champion or arbiter of “human rights,” has an extensive list of breaches of media freedoms, police brutality and oppressive legislation, such as the sedition provisions in its Crimes Act. Khan, a former chief prosecutor and high court judge, is closely allied to the Bainimarama regime, which seized power in a military coup in 2006.

The government rests on the military, despite elections in 2014 and 2018 fraudulently hailed as

“democratic” by Australia and New Zealand. Harsh austerity measures are accompanied by intimidation of opposition parties and the working class and rampant violence by the police and military. The *Guardian* has revealed 400 charges of serious violence were laid against police officers in Fiji between 2015 and 2020, including for murder, manslaughter, rape, and aiding prisoners to escape.

Bainimarama has used the COVID-19 pandemic to tighten his rule. A senior military officer, Brigadier-General Jone Kalouniwai, told the *Fiji Sun* last July that the emergency gave the country’s leaders “good reasons to stifle criticism of their policies by curtailing freedom of speech and freedom of the press.” The fight against COVID-19, he warned, was “likely to end up violating the individual rights and rule of law that are at the heart of any liberal society.”



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