Fiji regime summarily deports Pacific university head

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Acting on the orders of Fiji's Prime Minister and former military coup leader, Frank Bainimarama, authorities carried out a midnight raid at the Suva home of the vice-chancellor of the University of the South Pacific (USP) on February 3, and summarily deported him.

Up to 15 immigration, police and military officials forced their way into the home of Professor Pal Ahluwalia, a Canadian national, revoked his work permit and escorted the vice-chancellor and his wife, Sandra Price, to Nadi international airport. They were forced under military guard onto a flight to Brisbane the next day.

The couple, who have Australian citizenship, were presented with a letter stating they had been declared "prohibited immigrants" by Bainimarama in his capacity as Fiji's minister for immigration, who had ordered their deportation with immediate effect.

Price said police and immigration officials threatened to break down doors surrounding the house from the front and rear. "I was instructed to get dressed and they confiscated all electronic devices, including our phones, iPads, laptops, watches and passports. I was not left alone to change or even use the washroom. Where were my moral and human rights? There were at least 15 people in our house after curfew," she told the *Guardian* .

Ahluwalia told Australia's ABC he was in "extreme shock" after being "roughed up" during the process. "This is a classic case of beating the whistleblower up," he said. Ahluwalia's exposure of allegations of corruption and financial mismanagement under previous university administrations had earned the ire of the Fijian government.

According to the deportation notice, Ahluwalia's conduct was deemed "prejudicial to peace, defence, public safety, public order, public morality, public health, security, or good government of the Fiji islands." The couple was deported for unspecified "repeated breaches" of the immigration act and their visa conditions. No details were given.

A police presence is being maintained at the USP's Laucala campus, in order to intimidate and pre-empt any protests. The university management has called on staff and students to remain calm "for the safety and wellbeing of the university community."

Ahluwalia's expulsion was denounced in an open letter by USP students, staff and alumni as a "coup," and likened it to "gestapo tactics." Fiji's Law Society joined the condemnation, while civil society group Civicus said the move would create a "chilling effect for whistle-blowers and those who want to speak up and expose violations by officials in Fiji."

The trade unions have mounted no campaign. The USP Staff Union (USPSU) mildly criticised the move, accusing the government of "un-Pasifika behaviour" and "violation of human rights and due process." A meeting of the USPSU and the Association of USP Staff (AUSPS) held a prayer in "solidarity" with the deported academic. The unions are currently seeking a legal opinion over Ahluwalia's employment status. Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum bluntly declared that the professor's contract ended when his work permit was cancelled.

The USP is a major regional institution, owned by 12 Pacific states with funding from Australia and New Zealand. Tensions between Ahluwalia and the government have existed since his appointment in 2019. Last year, he was suspended from his post by the university council for "material misconduct," after exposing alleged corruption and mismanagement under the USP leadership group, with millions of dollars missing.

Last June hundreds of students and staff protested the professor's suspension and demanded the removal of the USP Executive Committee. Police searched the offices of the *Fiji Times* for photos of the students involved,

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including those from other Pacific countries. The USP Students' Association objected to the intimidating presence of police at the campus protests.

The controversy prompted warnings that the university's autonomy and academic freedom was under threat. Ahluwalia was finally reinstated in September and cleared of the bogus allegations. After he submitted a report to the council, Auckland accountancy consultancy BDO was hired to investigate the allegations. When the damning report reached the council, it was suppressed and details kept from the public.

The government meanwhile froze a $A28 million university grant, again prompting widespread condemnation. The BDO report was leaked, naming 25 senior USP staff accused of manipulating allowances to pay themselves hundreds of thousands of dollars they were not entitled to.

BDO suggested Ahluwalia's appointment was against the wishes of the government and of USP pro-chancellor Winston Thompson, citing evidence that efforts began, before the professor arrived, to frustrate his work. Thompson and the previous vice chancellor, Rajesh Chandra, were both regarded as very close to the regime. The government flatly refused to accept the BDO's findings, claiming its own Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) found no corruption.

In response, Nauru President and USP Chancellor Lionel Aingimea accused a "small group" of Fiji officials of "hijacking" the regional institution. Samoa's prime minister, Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi, declared he would seek to "rehouse" the university in his country. He said the deportation was only the latest in a series of issues at the USP which "came as no surprise," adding that "many big organisations have actually left Fiji in a similar fashion."

Aingimea last week condemned the ongoing standoff. He said the USP Council was not informed of his deportation by the Fijian authorities and had not revoked his employment contract. The USP was not a "political institution," he said, and should not be treated as such. Aingimea also expressed concern that donors would be deterred from "investing" in the institution.

New Zealand journalist Michael Field wrote on *Pacific Newsroom* that the attacks on the vice chancellor were directed by Thompson, a former ambassador to the United States, with close links to Bainimarama's FijiFirst party. Field noted: "BDO's report made it clear Thompson was acting for FijiFirst, not USP or its students."

Ahluwalia and Field both suggested that their expulsion was bound up with the existence of more evidence over corrupt practices involving government agencies. Ahluwalia claimed that the highly-connected Thompson "has presided over several interesting, very interesting, downfalls of public institutions."

The *AsiaPacific Report NZ* noted that with the USP's future in jeopardy, there has been a "deafening silence" from Australia and New Zealand. Statements by the two local powers merely expressed "concern" about USP, while failing to condemn the treatment of the vice chancellor—doubtless to protect their diplomatic relations with Bainimarama, who is being cultivated as an ally to counter China's influence in the region.

Ahluwalia's case again highlights the pattern of repression by the Bainimarama regime, which still rests directly on the military despite elections in 2014 and 2018 fraudulently hailed as "democratic" by Canberra and Wellington. Harsh austerity measures are accompanied by intimidation of opposition parties and the working class, and rampant violence by the police and military.

Sedition provisions in the Crimes Act and the Public Order Act have been used to target journalists, activists and government critics. The Media Act has been used to attack press freedom and prosecute journalists. Assemblies, protests and strikes are routinely banned. All these anti-democratic measures have been intensified under the cover of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fiji's parliamentary speaker has now disallowed any debate on the deportation and crisis at USP. Ratu Epeli Nailatikau ruled that a written question from the opposition National Federation Party, and an Adjournment Motion from SODELPA, did not qualify as an urgent matter of public importance.

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