

Fiji government prepares for another anti-democratic election

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The Fiji government, led by prime minister and 2006 coup leader Frank Bainimarama, this month pushed through a controversial bill to ramp up powers of the Supervisor of Elections. The Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2022 was passed as parliament sat for its final session before general elections later this year.

Introducing the bill, Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, who is also the elections minister, claimed the changes to the Electoral Act were simply made “to reflect practical ways of implementing existing provisions of the Act.”

In fact, with Bainimarama facing his most serious challenge since elections were reinstituted in 2014, powerful sections of the ruling elite are clearly concerned about the possible outcome. The new law places extraordinary, sweeping and intrusive powers in the hands of the Supervisor of Elections (SoE) to intervene in the event of any disputes.

The amendments have three main parts. The first, and most contentious, gives the SoE the “power to direct a person, by notice in writing, to furnish any relevant information or document.” Existing laws relating to privacy are being overridden. Targeted individuals must comply with demands for information “notwithstanding the provisions of any other written law on confidentiality, privilege or secrecy.” Sayed-Khaiyum claims this power is required to allow for any inquiries into “allegations of breaches of campaign provisions.”

The second part entrenches the current opaque and complicated polling system, which uses numbers on ballot papers to replace candidates’ names. Each party may nominate up to 55 candidates, meaning with 10 parties there can be up to 550 numbers on the ballot. The amendment makes it possible for the number used by a candidate to be retained in future elections.

Finally, a new section empowers the Electoral Commission to adopt and publish “guidelines” on opinion

polls, surveys and research. The pro-government *Fiji Sun*, which has previously been criticized by the Commission for its polling methods, immediately announced it would discontinue its monthly public opinion surveys due to the “onerous” new requirements.

Opposition parties voted against the amendment and the Fiji Law Society (FLS), Law Council of Australia and Citizens’ Constitutional Forum earlier all called for the bill to be withdrawn. Most criticism centred on the first amendment with the FLS declaring the SoE could compel any person to provide him with all or any information or documents on “virtually any pretext.”

FLS president Wylie Clarke claimed that the bill “unnecessarily attacks citizens’ rights to privacy, including the legal professional privilege.” People will not be able to appeal any decision except to the Electoral Commission whose ruling is final and cannot be appealed to or reviewed by any court.

Reacting to the widespread condemnation, on September 12 Bainimarama told the *Fiji Sun* the elections would be “free and fair.” “Rumours of unfair elections,” he said, “serve only to scare the general public and cause societal disruptions. I assure every Fijian that we will have elections before the cut-off date of January 2023.”

Bainimarama’s FijiFirst Party (FFP) currently rules with an extremely narrow majority, having been installed in 2018 with just over 50 percent the vote. The new law follows polls in recent months showing the FFP in some trouble, with support oscillating between 20 and 30-odd percent—roughly the same as the main opposition People’s Alliance.

Significantly, a majority of the nearly 690,000 registered voters are for the first time aged under 40, with a large cohort in the 21-30 age range.

Elections in Fiji are “democratic” in name only. Eight years of direct military rule followed Bainimarama’s 2006 coup before formal elections in 2014, won by the

FFP and again in 2018. The US and its local allies, Australia and New Zealand, legitimised Bainimarama's governments. They have supported coups in Fiji as long as the resulting regime lined up with their imperialist interests.

Fiji's administrations, resting directly on the military, have all been 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, media restrictions and rampant violence by the police and military.

Opposition by workers is ruthlessly suppressed. In March 2019 a stoppage by 33 air traffic controllers at Fiji Airports was declared unlawful. Shortly afterwards, the government banned two May Day protests and arrested over 30 workers and trade union officials, accusing them of breaches of “public order.” They included protesting workers who had been sacked and locked out by the Fiji Water Authority.

The deepening economic and social crisis of the past two years has undermined Bainimarama's support. A COVID outbreak that began in April 2021 quickly spread, rising to 3,306 active cases in just eight weeks. For a considerable period, the country's vaccination program proved inadequate and the health system faced collapse. Bainimarama repeatedly refused to implement a nationwide lockdown to control the escalating numbers, saying it would “destroy” the economy.

The pandemic sharply exacerbated the country's social disaster. Fiji's unemployment rate, which hovered around 6 percent before COVID hit, increased to 35 percent. The tourism industry, the main foreign exchange earner, collapsed with the loss of 100,000 jobs. Half the country's 880,000 population experienced extreme financial hardship and food shortages.

According to the Economy Ministry's *Pre-election Economic and Fiscal Update*, the COVID pandemic and a series of natural disasters had “devastating impacts” on the economy, jobs, public finance and social conditions. Fiji recorded its largest-ever economic contraction of 17.2 percent in 2020 with a further 4.1 percent contraction for 2021. Total debt is 88.6 percent of GDP. In line with global trends, Fiji now faces escalating inflation, forecast to hit 5 percent by the end of the year.

Bainimarama seized on the crisis to tighten his rule. Amid emerging protests, nine opposition MPs were arrested after criticizing a government land bill, while the

foreign-born vice-chancellor of the University of the South Pacific was summarily deported for exposing corruption in the university's FFP-linked administration.

The coming election is again shaping as a contest between two former coup leaders and military strong men. In 2018, Bainimarama's main challenger was SODELPA, led by Sitiveni Rabuka, the instigator of two military coups in 1987, and prime minister following the 1992 election. Rabuka now leads a new party, the People's Alliance (PA).

Rabuka is a former chair of the Great Council of Chiefs—which Bainimarama has since dissolved—and advocates for the traditional privileges of indigenous Fijian landholders. This has involved stirring up chauvinist politics aimed at the minority Indian population.

Under the proportional electoral system, it is possible that no party will get 50 percent of the vote. Bainimarama could well refuse to quit. The anti-democratic 2013 constitution, which empowers the military forces “to ensure at all times the security, defence, and well-being of Fiji and all Fijians,” could even be triggered, initiating yet another military intervention.

Washington and Canberra are not beyond playing a role. Fiji is pivotal in the escalating US-led geo-strategic confrontations in the Pacific against China. As chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, Bainimarama was instrumental in arranging a presentation by US Vice President Kamala Harris to the organisation's summit in July, from which China had been excluded.

Harris used the speech to announce an expansion of US diplomatic and financial presence in the Pacific, including three new embassies. With Bainimarama emerging as a key ally, signing military agreements with both Australia and New Zealand and supporting the US over the Ukraine, Washington has earmarked Fiji as one of the main “hubs” of its upgraded engagement in the region.



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