

Prime Minister Bainimarama under challenge in contentious Fijian election

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Incumbent Fijian Prime Minister and former military coup leader Frank Bainimarama is fighting off a strong challenge in the South Pacific island country's general election, which concluded on Wednesday. Final results are not due to be announced until Sunday, and official figures are only slowly being publicly released.

On Saturday morning, the Peoples Alliance Party (PAP) of another former coup leader and ex-prime minister, Sitiveni Rabuka, was running a close second to Bainimarama's Fiji First Party (FFP). With votes from 717 of 2,071 polling stations officially validated, Fiji First was sitting on 40.2 percent of votes with the PAP at 36.9 percent.

Rabuka may be well placed for any horse-trading to form a coalition government. The PAP has campaigned throughout with the National Federation Party (NFP), currently third on 8.1 percent. They are followed by the FFP-aligned Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) on 5.9 percent. Meanwhile, the Fiji Labour Party, which governed twice in 1987 and 1999, is below the 5 percent threshold required to win a seat, along with six other parties.

The credibility of the counting process has been seriously questioned after the official election app crashed on Wednesday night, only to reappear later with the figures reversed in favour of Fiji First.

Rabuka declared he had no confidence in the count and along with other opposition parties called for it to be halted. Rabuka said he would complain to the Supervisor of Elections, the Army Commander and Office of the President. He said his PAP would do "everything according to the law" and people should "remain calm."

Nevertheless, involving the army commander raises the possibility of military intervention. The 2013 Constitution gives the commander a broad mandate to ensure the "safety and security of the country." Commander Major General Ro Jone Kalouniwai told Radio New Zealand on

Friday that he had rejected Rabuka's request and the military would "respect" the electoral process. Rabuka was later taken in by the police and questioned over his comments.

Fears of anti-democratic manoeuvres, including another coup, have been near the surface throughout the campaign. Rabuka earlier claimed Bainimarama would try to use the courts to hang on to power if he lost. Bainimarama told an Australian Special Broadcasting Service journalist that "of course" he would respect the outcome, but he has previously been evasive over whether he would surrender office.

Fiji elections are "democratic" in name only. Fiji, an archipelago of more than 330 islands with a population of just over 900,000, has had four coups since formal independence in 1970. That is largely a legacy of British colonial policies that restricted the economic activities of indigenous Fijians while bringing thousands of indentured laborers from India. As in the 2018 poll, the election has been a contest between two parties run by former coup leaders and military strongmen. Rabuka led two coups in 1987, while Bainimarama seized power in 2006 before "legitimising" his rule with a bogus election in 2014.

Successive regimes, resting on the military, have been authoritarian and anti-working class. Harsh austerity measures that have heightened social inequality and misery have been accompanied by repressive laws, media censorship and violence by the police and military.

The final weeks of the campaign were dominated by accusations the government was taking extraordinary measures to intimidate opposition parties. Prominent Indo-Fijian lawyer Richard Naidu was found guilty of contempt of court, following a charge brought by Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, for pointing out a spelling mistake in a court document. Naidu now faces the possibility of jail.

Days out from polling, two PAP deputy leaders, Daniel

Lobendahn and Lynda Tabuya, were arrested on charges by the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption over allegations of vote buying. The pair strenuously denied the allegations, which were purportedly connected with soliciting funds during a “Rock the Vote” campaign earlier this year. Rabuka denounced the arrests as an attempt to derail the PAP’s election campaign and “muzzle candidates.”

The election was marked by widespread voter abstention, indicating significant alienation from the official political set-up. From 692,000 registered voters, a turnout rate of just 51 percent was reported an hour before the polls closed on Wednesday, a sharp decline from 73.3 percent in 2018. Many young people aged under 40, who for the first time made up the majority of possible voters, stayed away.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported that cost of living issues were “front and centre” for many voters. Two Fijian seasonal workers in Australia told an interviewer: “Our family back home have been complaining about the high food prices. Everything has been skyrocketing.” They added: “There is no money, no work. The unemployment rate is very high and everything is going up.”

Such sentiments were suppressed by the major parties. The FFP ran a fraudulent campaign, claiming an eight-year record of “growth and prosperity” and featuring vague plans for the economy, education, agriculture, health care and infrastructure. The PAP manifesto promised amendments to the Constitution, wiping out tertiary education debts for students, reinstating the privileged Great Council of Chiefs, and repealing “all decrees that suppress basic human rights.”

Fiji First warned that Indo-Fijians could face renewed persecution if Rabuka was victorious, saying he wanted to introduce discriminatory laws favouring ethnic Fijians. Rabuka has publicly apologised for his coups and declared Indo-Fijians will be treated fairly by the PAP. Rabuka quit SODELPA two years ago to form the PAP and is also in electoral alliance with the NFP, which represents the interests of the ethnic Indian business elite.

Among the working class and rural poor, a social catastrophe has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The poverty rate was nearly 30 percent in 2020, but half the population is now estimated to be struggling to put food on the table. Youth unemployment has increased since 2002, escalating from 15.6 percent in 2019 to 18.06 in 2021.

The overall 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 population experienced financial hardship and food shortages.

For a considerable period during the COVID outbreak the country’s vaccination program proved inadequate and the health system faced collapse. Bainimarama refused to implement a nationwide lockdown to control the escalating numbers, saying it would “destroy” the economy. With another COVID surge emerging, the country has recorded 68,553 COVID cases and 878 deaths.

The Economy Ministry has predicted a recovery with GDP growth of 11.3 percent for 2022. However, this follows three years of economic decline, including the largest contraction of 17.2 percent in 2020. Total debt is 88.6 percent of GDP. In line with global trends, Fiji faces escalating inflation, currently 5.2 percent.

The regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, along with Washington, are watching the situation closely. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute warned in the *Strategist* on December 7 that Australia “must be prepared for an undemocratic outcome in Fiji’s election.” Canberra, however, has never been concerned about “democracy” in Fiji but with its own geo-strategic interests

Fiji is pivotal in the escalating US-led geo-strategic confrontations in the Southwest Pacific against China. Over the past year, Bainimarama has played a key role in orienting Fiji and other Pacific countries to line up with the US. As chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, he was instrumental in arranging a presentation by US Vice President Kamala Harris to the organisation’s summit in July, from which China was excluded.

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. Should Rabuka take office, he will come under immense pressure to fully comply.



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