

# Fiji election produces unstable coalition government

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Last week's general election in the strategic South Pacific island country of Fiji has produced an acute political crisis. The result marks the possible end of 16 years of political dominance by coup leader and prime minister Frank Bainimarama, who lost his parliamentary majority. But it remains unclear whether the fragile opposition coalition, led by another coup leader and ex-prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka, will take office.

Because neither Bainimarama's Fiji First Party (FFP) or the Rabuka-led coalition won a majority of seats in the 55-member parliament, the "king-maker" became the unpopular Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), which secured just three seats. After three days of backroom horse-trading, it announced on Tuesday that it will partner with Rabuka's Peoples Alliance Party (PAP) and the National Federation Party (NFP) to form a new coalition government.

In an extraordinarily close vote to decide which side to join in government, SODELPA's 30-member management board reportedly voted 16 for the Rabuka-led PAP-NFP alliance and 14 for Bainimarama's FFP. However, less than 24 hours later SODELPA's general secretary Lenaitasi Duru tendered his resignation citing "anomalies" in the voting process. He declared that the result was "null and void." Claims of bribery are being aired.

Wednesday's parliament sitting, due to formally elect the prime minister, was then deferred because President Wiliame Katonivere had not yet issued a proclamation.

Bainimarama lost his parliamentary majority when the election count was declared on Sunday, producing a hung parliament. To form government, 28 seats are needed in the 55-seat house. The FFP took 26 seats and 42.5 percent of the vote. Bainimarama lost 18.42 percent of his personal vote from the 2018 poll and the FFP fell by 11.8 percent overall.

The PAP, led by the 74-year-old Rabuka, received 36 percent and 21 seats. The PAP's electoral ally, the NFP, took 9 percent and 5 seats. The two therefore control 26 seats. SODELPA, the main opposition party in the last parliament, gained just 5.2 percent of the vote and three

seats, giving it the parliamentary balance of power.

Bainimarama has not yet formally conceded defeat. He earlier told an Australian reporter he would "respect" the election outcome but has been evasive over whether he would surrender office. While army commander Major General Ro Jone Kalouniwai has declared the military will not interfere, fears of another coup are never far from the surface.

Five other parties—Unity Fiji, Fiji Labour Party, We Unite Fiji Party, All People's Party, New Generation Party—as well as two independents each failed to reach the required 5 percent threshold to enter parliament.

From 692,000 registered voters the final turnout was just 68.28 percent, higher than initially feared but lower than the 71.92 percent at the 2018 election. This is an indication of growing popular alienation with the entire political set-up.

The election was highly contentious, with the credibility of the counting process questioned after the official election app crashed. Rabuka declared he had no confidence in the count and at one point invited the army commander to become involved, raising the spectre of yet another coup.

The hung parliament was the product of another sham election between two parties led by former military strongmen, carried out under conditions of tight media censorship, heavy political restrictions and accusations of government intimidation.

With Fiji's ruling elite sharply divided, any coalition government will be unstable. SODELPA will shift the already autocratic regime even further to the right, using its position to advance the interests of the iTaukei indigenous Fijian chiefly elite, at the expense of ordinary ethnic Fijians and Indo-Fijian members of the population.

According to the *Pacific Newsroom*, SODELPA entered the coalition talks with a series of "non-negotiable" demands, including the re-establishment of the Great Council of Chiefs. That body was shut down by Bainimarama in 2012 for exacerbating racial divisions which he claimed were "to the detriment of Fiji's pursuit of a common and equal citizenry."

SODELPA also demanded the deputy prime ministership and other ministerial posts, including the minister for iTuakei affairs and key board chairs and memberships. It called for the 2013 Constitution to be reviewed and the country to be formally declared a Christian state, with an embassy to be established in Jerusalem.

Details of the coalition deal with Rabuka have not been released. Another reported SODELPA demand was to repeal 32 laws deemed “discriminatory” to traditional Fijian landowners, including the “surfing decree.” This 2010 measure sought to boost the tourism industry by allowing public admission to world-class surfing areas previously only accessible through the patronage of private resorts.

Rabuka was prime minister from 1992 to 1999 after initiating two coups in 1987. Ideologically and politically, SODELPA and his PAP share the same orientation regarding indigenous Fijian issues. Rabuka was also chair of the Great Council of Chiefs for a period. He formed the PAP in a split from SODELPA two years ago after losing a bitter leadership spill against current leader Viliame Gavoka.

Rabuka has since distanced himself, at least publicly, from his previous communalist positions. He apologised for his 1987 coups, which were carried out to boost the position of ethnic Fijians and declared during the election campaign that Indo-Fijians would be treated fairly by the PAP.

Rabuka’s electoral ally, the NFP, represents the interests of the Indian business elite. While professing concerns about the cost of living and promising to restore the rights of trade unions, the NFP election manifesto targeted government spending and “wastage,” and promised an extensive “audit” of the economy within the first 100 days.

While SODELPA’s inner-party vote was sharply divided, its turn to the PAP has a history. The party’s founding leader and later prime minister Laiseni Qarase was deposed, arrested and jailed on corruption charges following Bainimarama’s 2006 coup. Qarase led Fiji in the wake of a 2000 coup by George Speight, implementing a program of economic liberalisation.

Radio New Zealand reported that the SODELPA Youth Council had expressed its “distaste” to the party’s board for even considering Fiji First as a partner. The youth arm declared that the decision showed the “desperation and compromised approach” the party was willing to take to form a government and called on it to put an end to “16 years of dictatorial leadership” under Bainimarama.

In fact, successive regimes, including Rabuka’s, have all rested on the military and have been authoritarian and anti-working class. Harsh austerity measures that have heightened social inequality and misery have been accompanied by repressive laws and violence by the police and military. Struggles by workers, including strikes, have

been harshly suppressed.

Any new regime, like capitalist governments around the world, will embark on an authoritarian program to impose the dictates of international finance capital, with even greater austerity measures against the working class at home.

Fiji’s workers are suffering a skyrocketing cost of living, thousands of lost jobs, and fractured supply chains for food, energy and basic goods. The social catastrophe has been exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The poverty rate was nearly 30 percent in 2020, but half the population is struggling to put food on the table. The Economy Ministry has predicted a recovery with GDP growth of 11.3 percent for 2022. However, this follows three years of economic decline and in line with global trends, Fiji faces escalating inflation, currently 5.2 percent.

As far as Washington and its local imperialist allies Australia and New Zealand are concerned, Fiji will be required to maintain its pivotal role in the southwestern Pacific in the build-up to war against China that was consolidated under Bainimarama. Rabuka and SODELPA have sought to reassure these powers.

Viliame Gavoka, the pre-election SODELPA leader, has declared that foreign affairs will be aligned closely to “traditional partners,” Australia, New Zealand, and the members of the Pacific Islands Forum, not China. “Our relationship with China will be guided by the Australian, [and] the New Zealand governments,” he said.

In an interview in August with Australia’s Special Broadcasting Service, Rabuka ruled out a security pact with China if he won government, saying it was time his country returned to its “comfortable niche” with Australia, while maintaining “cordial” relations with China.



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