

Fragile Fiji coalition government installed amid ongoing turmoil

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In a hastily-arranged closed session the day before Christmas, Fiji's parliament voted by a narrow 28-27 margin to install a three-way coalition government led by the People's Alliance Party (PAP) of former coup leader and ex-Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka.

A previous session on December 21 was deferred when President Wiliame Katonivere failed to issue a proclamation following a crisis inside the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), the minority party that was effectively determining the outcome of the contentious election.

In Saturday's parliamentary vote, one SODELPA MP did not side with the PAP-National Federation Party (NFP) coalition. A single vote thus installed Rabuka as prime minister and ended ex-coup leader Frank Bainimarama's 16-year hold on power.

Earlier, an initial coalition deal had almost immediately collapsed. Following a 16-14 vote by SODELPA's management board for the Rabuka-led PAP-NFP coalition, the party's general secretary Lenaitasi Duru resigned, declaring that two attendees were not members in good standing and therefore the meeting was unconstitutional.

SODELPA's governing body held a second meeting on Friday which reconfirmed its initial decision, this time by a 13-12 margin, after leaders of the PAP and NFP and Bainimarama's ruling Fiji First Party (FFP) were invited to resubmit their coalition proposals.

In the December 14 general election, SODELPA gained just 5.2 percent of the vote but secured the balance of power with three seats in the hung parliament. The FFP won 26 seats with the PAP on 21 seats, while the PAP's coalition partner, the NFP obtained 5.

Parliament's recall took place after days of turmoil, with the threat of another coup in the air. Refusing to concede defeat, Bainimarama had convened a meeting with Policing Minister Inia Seruiratu, Military Commander Major General Jone Kalouniwai and Police Commissioner Sitiveni Qiliho, and mobilised the military to assist police with "the maintenance of security and stability."

Qiliho, a former army officer who runs a notoriously brutal

police force, has a murky past with links to previous coups. The army's involvement came despite Kalouniwai earlier promising the military would "respect" the electoral process. Amid escalating tensions, Assistant Police Commissioner Abdul Khan resigned for "personal reasons" the next day.

The pretext for the military operation were unverified reports of stonings targeting the homes and businesses of Fijians of Indian descent. NFP leader Biman Prasad, whose party represents the Indo-Fijian business elite, accused the government of holding the country to "ransom," while Rabuka said Bainimarama was "sowing fear and chaos" and "trying to set the nation alight along racial lines."

The description could equally be applied to Rabuka. The 74-year-old ruled as prime minister from 1992 to 1999 after leading two military coups in 1987 to boost the position of ethnic Fijians against Indo-Fijians, many of whom fled the country.

Speaking outside parliament after Saturday's vote, Bainimarama addressed the media and appeared to accept defeat, saying he "hoped" to be the leader of the opposition. He declared "this is democracy" and, referring to his 2013 constitution, boasted "this is my legacy."

Rabuka announced he would give the former government time for "a comfortable move-out." He proclaimed that his Christmas message to people was "democracy works."

In fact, following Rabuka's earlier coups, Bainimarama ruled the country with an iron fist after seizing power in 2006. He "legitimised" his rule with bogus elections in 2014, which were falsely declared "democratic" by the regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand. His authoritarian constitution entrenched the role of the military as responsible for the "safety and security of the country," giving it broad anti-democratic powers.

The installation of a new government does nothing to resolve the ongoing crisis. The hung parliament was the product of a 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. The credibility of

the counting process was questioned after the official election app crashed.

With Fiji's ruling elite sharply divided, the coalition government, propped up by an unpopular minor party which is sharply factionalised, will be highly unstable. In the event of a crisis, another coup cannot be ruled out. State and security officials, promoted and trained under previous rulers, would be ready to respond to any demand to do away again with the fig-leaf of democracy.

No details of the PAP-NFP-SODELPA coalition agreement have yet been released. SODELPA vice-president Anare Jale said work on the document would take place during the holidays and "hopefully" something would be signed this Wednesday.

Whatever emerges, SODELPA will seek to shift the already autocratic regime even further to the right, using its position to advance the interests of the iTaukei Fijian chiefly elite, at the expense of ordinary ethnic Fijians and Indo-Fijian members of the population.

SODELPA and the PAP share the same history regarding indigenous issues. Rabuka formed the PAP in a split from SODELPA two years ago after losing a bitter leadership spill against current leader Viliame Gavoka. He has since publicly moderated his stance, apologising for his 1987 coups and declaring that Indo-Fijians would be treated fairly by the PAP.

In the election none of the parties campaigned with policies to address the burning questions facing the working class and rural poor—a deepening social crisis with massive job losses, escalating poverty and widespread hunger.

SODELPA campaigned on "uplifting socio-economic development" for the narrow iTaukei layer, while the PAP manifesto promised amendments to the constitution, wiping out student debt, reinstating the Fijian elite's Great Council of Chiefs, and repealing "all decrees that suppress basic human rights."

The NFP, formed in 1963 out of the cane farmers' associations, represents Indo-Fijian business interests. 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 "audit" of the troubled economy within the first 100 days.

Inauspiciously for ordinary people, the new Attorney-General Siromi Turaga, as a magistrate, ruled that Bainimarama did not have powers to make COVID-related orders under the Public Health Act early on during the pandemic. COVID infections are currently rising again. Over the past three years, there have been 68,702 cases and 881 deaths from the disease among a population of just 900,000.

The incoming parties will embark on an authoritarian

program to impose the dictates of international finance capital, with even greater austerity measures against the working class. As internationally, the revival and promotion of racial ethnic politics will be used as a battering ram against the emerging struggles of the working class.

Governments in Australia, New Zealand and the US have been closely watching developments. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken tweeted his congratulations to Rabuka, declaring that the US "looks forward to deepening our relationship for the benefit of the people of Fiji, the US, and the broader Indo-Pacific."

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese welcomed Fiji's "democratic process" and said he was "ready to work" with whoever formed government. His New Zealand counterpart Jacinda Ardern acknowledged Bainimarama's "important legacy for Fiji" and as a "regional leader."

New Zealand Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta said her government had been "encouraging all parties to allow the constitutional process to play out."

The imperialist powers, who regard the Pacific as their own "backyard," are concerned solely with their geostrategic interests against Beijing. After the 2006 coup Canberra and Wellington initially imposed trade and diplomatic sanctions. These backfired with Bainimarama's "Look North" policy toward China prompting Washington to demand a new strategy aimed at bringing the dictator into the fold.

Fiji's new government is falling into line. In August, Rabuka ruled out signing a bilateral security pact with Beijing if elected. SODELPA leader Gavoka confirmed last week that foreign affairs will be aligned closely to "traditional partners," Australia, New Zealand and the members of the Pacific Islands Forum, not China.



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