

Fiji's military head threatens newly installed government

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Just over a month after general elections produced a fragile new government in Fiji, the head of the Pacific country's military has openly warned Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka not to proceed too quickly with "sweeping changes."

On January 17, Major General Jone Kalouniwai visited Rabuka and released an extraordinary media statement declaring that the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) had "quietly observed with growing concern... the ambition and speed of the government... the RFMF believes that trying and failing to democratise in adverse circumstances has the potential to bring about fateful, long-term national security consequences."

Kalouniwai's statement underlined Section 131 of the 2013 Constitution which gives the RFMF commander unrestrained powers to ensure the "safety and security of the country." The constitution was drawn up under the regime of former coup leader and prime minister Frank Bainimarama.

While Kalouniwai had promised during the elections that he would "respect" the process and outcome, the statement was a blunt assertion that the RFMF is still in charge.

The commander claimed that the government is implementing far-reaching changes by "creating shortcuts that circumvent the relevant processes and protections that protect the integrity of the law and the Constitution." The vague charges echoed a barrage of recent statements by defeated prime minister Bainimarama, now opposition leader, claiming that Rabuka was behaving in defiance of the Constitution.

December's election resulted in a hung parliament and the removal of Bainimarama who had ruled the island country with a population of 930,000 since his 2006 coup. Rabuka, another former coup leader and ex-prime minister, took office as head of a three-party coalition including his People's Alliance Party (PAP), the National Federation Party (NFP) and the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), a minority party holding the balance of power with just three MPs.

Kalouniwai's media release prompted widespread alarm,

raising fears of yet another coup. The *Fiji Times* reported that a "wave of concern and emotions swept through the nation." Rabuka quickly downplayed the extraordinary intervention, saying people should "relax" and he had every confidence in the leadership of the RFMF, "the command and the members of the Force." "[People] should not be worried," he declared.

Kalouniwai was summoned to meet with Home Affairs Minister Pio Tikoduadua. Going into the meeting, the commander said "no" when journalists asked if he had any plans to seize power.

Asked what had triggered the dispute, Tikoduadua said Kalouniwai was concerned that the government's plan to ensure sacked Fiji Airways and Air Terminal Services staff can return to work might undermine court orders. He also suggested the commander was worried by the government's plan to reshuffle the top echelons of the diplomatic corps.

Tikoduadua said he had raised "concerns" with the commander about his statement, but the two had reached an understanding. Tikoduadua also said the commander had given him assurances that he supported the government and would not make any further public statements criticising its actions. "We have agreed on a new beginning, and I would like to reassure people in Fiji and the region that our relationship is good," he told journalists.

Immediately on taking office Tikoduadua had said his main priority was to bring back the "people's confidence" in Fiji's defence institutions. Listing the RFMF, Police Force, Fiji Corrections Service and Immigration Department, he declared: "Confidence building and trust by the people in these institutions that are established for them—that is very important."

The confrontation may have been sparked by a comment to the *Fiji Sun* by Attorney General Siromi Turaga who said the government would change the constitution by "going around" the requirements set down in the document. Changing the constitution is virtually impossible as any amendment requires 75 percent support of MPs and 75 percent of registered voters in a referendum.

The episode highlights the fact that the possibility of a coup remains. Fiji's ruling elite is sharply divided. The hung parliament and unstable coalition government 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.

Rabuka has already reversed some of Bainimarama's key measures and replaced personnel in the civil service seen as his political appointees. His first measure was to reinstate the former head of the University of the South Pacific, Professor Pal Ahluwalia, who had been summarily expelled from the country after exposing corruption at the institution involving backers of Bainimarama's FijiFirst Party.

Among several swirling scandals, Bainimarama's former attorney general and FijiFirst general secretary, Aiyaz Sayed-Khan, was called in for questioning by police on Monday. He flew out of the country on Christmas Day and soon after his departure the Criminal Investigations Department issued a border alert identifying him as a "person of interest" for allegedly "inciting communal antagonism."

The new government appears to be reviving contentious communalist politics, aimed at cementing the position of the ethnic iTaukei Fijian elite at the expense of Indo-Fijians. High on the list is the re-establishment of the privileged Great Council of Chiefs. That body was shut down in 2012 by Bainimarama, who accused it of exacerbating racial divisions "to the detriment of Fiji's pursuit of a common and equal citizenry."

There is also the foreshadowed release of George Speight, who led a coup in 2000, and some of his co-conspirators who remain behind bars. That coup saw the Labour-led government of Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry held at gunpoint for nearly two months. Speight spewed racist denunciations of Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic Indian prime minister, and of ethnic Indians, who comprise nearly half of the country's population.

Bainimarama, who has pointedly refused to move out of the prime minister's official residence, remains an ominous figure. After grudgingly conceding defeat, he insisted that his successors remained bound by his 2013 constitution, including observing Section 131. He has since called on office-holders, including police commissioner and ex-coup plotter Sitiveni Qiliho, to reject the government's call for their resignations.

Amid the escalating tensions, the Rabuka government, like those internationally, faces the task of imposing the dictates of international finance capital, with even greater austerity measures against the working class and rural poor. Deputy Prime Minister Manoa Kamikamica has already announced an "independent audit" of the government's books, with

"good discipline" required "to make sure we don't waste money."

The persistent threats of military intervention, dictatorship and racist attacks are bound up with the ruling elite's fear of growing anger in the working class. Fiji's workers are suffering skyrocketing inflation, the destruction of thousands of 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. After three years of economic decline, total debt is 88.6 percent of GDP.

Anticipating the emergence of social struggles, Rabuka has moved to bring the trade unions back into the fold after years of anti-democratic suppression under Bainimarama. Rabuka declared last week that people are now free to protest "if they are organised into unions or associations provided they go through the proper process."

The trade unions have responded accordingly. Speaking at a welcome ceremony for Rabuka at the Fiji Federation of Teachers headquarters on January 20, teacher union president Muniappa Goundar said the coalition government was a "symbol of unity for our country," with a leader who "is committed and will engage with us." "I can assure you of our allegiance," said Goundar.

The Rabuka administration is counting on the unions to act as a police force against any eruption of the working class against the austerity policies of the government and the entire political establishment. Should this strategy fail to contain widespread popular anger, the army stands waiting in the wings.



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