

Fiji's ex-PM Bainimarama suspended from parliament for sedition

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Amid an escalating political crisis in Fiji, the South Pacific country's former coup leader, ex-prime minister and now opposition leader, Frank Bainimarama, has been suspended from parliament for three years for sedition and insulting the president.

A parliamentary vote on Friday authorised Bainimarama's suspension after he had launched a verbal attack on the president, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere. The suspension motion, which provides for a standard two-year stand-down for even minor breaches of privilege, was based on a measure previously enacted by Bainimarama's own authoritarian government.

In a belligerent speech on the opening day of parliament on February 13, Bainimarama criticised Katonivere—who is also the former president of Bainimarama's party, FijiFirst—for supporting the new government, saying he had “failed the Fijian people.” “He will go down in history as the person who aided and abetted the most incompetent and divisive government,” Bainimarama declared.

Bainimarama also accused recently installed Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka and his coalition government of “setting out to destroy constitutional democracy.” “In all of this,” he said, “the President who we looked up to because we believed that he genuinely believed in the values and principles of the Constitution has done an about turn.”

The narrow vote, which followed a recommendation by the Privileges Committee, saw 27 MPs in favour, 24 opposed while four abstained. Bainimarama was not present. According to the sanctions, Bainimarama is barred from entering the parliamentary precincts and is required to apologise to both the public and Katonivere.

The FijiFirst opposition made it clear that Bainimarama will not apologise, declaring he had done “nothing wrong.” The party flatly denied that their leader had incited rebellion and pointed to his base of support, which drew 29 percent of all votes in the December election.

The election itself was another sham contest 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, Bainimarama will not simply disappear and indeed, will continue plotting.

The election resulted in a hung parliament and the removal of Bainimarama who had ruled the country with a population of 930,000 since his 2006 coup. Rabuka, another former military coup leader and ex-prime minister, took office as head of a fragile 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.

The installation of the new government has resulted in an ongoing power struggle between the two former coup leaders and the contesting factions of the ruling elite that back them. The possibility of yet another coup remains acute. In January, the head of the military, Major General Jone Kalouniwai, released an extraordinary media statement warning Rabuka not to proceed too quickly with “sweeping changes.”

Bainimarama made his own pitch to the military, which he once commanded, in his parliamentary speech. Directly addressing the “rank and file” of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), he demagogically declared that “all the philosophical commitment and years of hard work of the RFMF is now being undermined and disregarded by this government.”

Bainimarama called on the RFMF to “maintain their credibility and their calling and not forsake their constitutional role,” which he said was “being bashed on a daily basis” by the Rabuka government. He absurdly claimed that Fijians who want “socio-economic stability,” all “look up to the RFMF to guarantee these if and when it is under threat.”

Kalouniwai's media release had prompted widespread alarm, with the *Fiji Times* reporting that a “wave of concern and emotions swept through the nation.” Section 131 of the 2013 Constitution, drawn up under Bainimarama, gives the RFMF commander unrestrained powers to ensure the “safety

and security of the country.” While Kalouniwai promised during the elections that he would “respect” the process and outcome, his statement was a blunt assertion that the RFMF is still in charge.

Prior to the parliamentary session, Bainimarama and his former Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed Khaiyum were called in for police questioning over allegations of abuse of office. According to police, the pair were interrogated for several hours “with regards to a separate report lodged earlier.” This appeared to relate to a complaint against Sayed-Khaiyum in December for allegedly inciting racial hatred and violence at a media conference before the coalition government had been formed.

The election and its aftermath have seen a sharp revival and promotion of communalist racial politics. The government is already cementing the position of the ethnic Fijian iTaukei elite at the expense of Indo-Fijians. Rabuka has re-established 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.”

The government is also moving to repeal as many as 32 laws deemed “discriminatory” to traditional Fijian landowners. High on the list is 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 controlled by foreign owners.

Rabuka has also quickly moved to replace key personnel in the civil service seen as Bainimarama’s political appointees. Police commissioner Sitiveni Qiliho and corrections services boss Francis Kean have been suspended. Former elections supervisor Mohammed Saneem has resigned and is under investigation by the anti-corruption agency while the Broadcasting Corporation board has sacked CEO Riyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, who is also under a corruption cloud.

Successive regimes, including Rabuka’s term as prime minister from 1992-1999, 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. The renewed turn to racist politics will be used as a battering ram against any emerging struggles of the working class.

Like governments around the world, the government will impose the dictates of international finance capital, with even greater austerity measures against workers and the rural poor. A national Economic Summit is to be held in April, ostensibly to “rebuild the country’s economic fortunes

through consultation and collaboration.” In every country where such events have been held, they have heralded sweeping attacks on the working class.

Fiji’s workers are still suffering a skyrocketing cost of living and thousands of lost jobs. 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.

Governments in Australia, New Zealand and the US are closely watching developments. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken promptly declared that Washington “looks forward to deepening our relationship for the benefit of the people of Fiji, the US, and the broader Indo-Pacific.”

The imperialist powers, who regard the Pacific as their own “backyard,” are chiefly concerned 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.

As chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, Bainimarama has since played a key role orienting Pacific Island leaders towards Washington. Fiji’s new government is also falling into line. Rabuka recently cancelled a police training and exchange agreement with China before tweeting: “Australia and NZ remain key strategic partners. We will continue to strengthen our relationship with the @USEmbassySuva, while continuing cooperation with China.”



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