

Former Fiji PM Bainimarama arrested on charges of inciting mutiny

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Fiji's former Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama and ex-police commissioner Sitiveni Qiliho appeared in the Suva Magistrates Court on February 20, charged with inciting mutiny.

The two men were arrested the previous day and spent the night in prison. A judge granted them bail under strict conditions, including an order preventing them from leaving the country. The prosecution has requested time to provide full disclosures to the defence, and the matter was adjourned until March 5.

Bainimarama and Qiliho are charged with urging senior officers of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), during discussions in 2023, to seize control of the military leadership by removing the top commander Major General Jone Kalouniwai. The charges arise from a reported meeting and kava-fuelled drinking session at Bainimarama's Suva residence with high-ranking officers.

Bainimarama also faces a second charge relating to text messages he allegedly sent between January and July 2023 to Brigadier General Manoa Gadai, urging him to take over command of the RFMF at the army's first major parade of 2023.

The arrests are the latest stage in a protracted crisis of bourgeois rule in Fiji, with a population of 930,000, as well as the wider Pacific, rooted in decades of coups, imperialist pressure and intensifying class tensions.

Soaring living costs and a severe social crisis—including a sweeping HIV epidemic and one in three children living in poverty—have impelled a growing number of strikes and nervousness in ruling circles about how to deal with the working class. Shortly before Bainimarama's arrest, the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations Agni Deo Singh banned a strike by Energy Fiji Limited workers scheduled for February 15, saying it “would likely jeopardise the livelihood of the nation, public safety and economic stability.”

The spectre of a coup has hung over the present government for the past three years. In January 2023, a month after elections produced a fragile new Fiji government, Kalouniwai openly warned incoming Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka not to proceed too quickly with “sweeping changes.”

The election resulted in a hung parliament and the defeat of Bainimarama, who had ruled the island country since his 2006 military coup. Rabuka—a leader of two military coups in 1987 and prime minister from 1992-1999—took office as head of a three-party coalition. It included his People's Alliance Party (PAP), the National Federation Party (NFP) and the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA).

The hung parliament and coalition government 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. Indicating growing popular alienation from the political set-up, out of 692,000 registered voters the turnout was just 68.28 percent, down from 71.92 percent at the 2018 election.

While Kalouniwai promised during the election that he would “respect” the process and outcome, his statement was a blunt assertion that the RFMF was still in charge. His implicit threat rested on Section 131 of Bainimarama's 2013 Constitution, which gives the RFMF commander unrestrained powers to ensure the “safety and security of the country.” Kalouniwai's statement provoked widespread alarm, raising fears of yet another coup.

Rabuka immediately reinstated the Great Council of Chiefs which had been disbanded by Bainimarama, who accused it of promoting ethnic divisions. The ethnic Fijian nationalist wing of the ruling class, which Rabuka represents, seeks to maintain political and economic privileges for the traditional chiefs and was bitterly

opposed to aspects of Bainimarama's rule, particularly his policies on land use, which weakened the control of indigenous elites over land development and leases.

At the opening of the new parliament, Bainimarama was suspended by a vote of MPs for three years for sedition and insulting the president. In a belligerent speech, he criticised President Ratu Wiliame Katonivere 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.

After grudgingly conceding the election defeat, Bainimarama insisted that his successors remained bound by the 2013 constitution, particularly Section 131. He provocatively refused to move out of his official residence and called on his supporters in state offices, including former coup plotter Qiliho, to reject the new government's call for their resignations.

While evidence is yet to be presented in court, it is entirely feasible that Bainimarama and Qiliho, frustrated by Kalouniwai's failure to move against Rabuka, engaged in plots to have him removed. The RFMF top brass, with its own competing factions, regards itself as the ultimate guardian and arbiter of the state—and it is an institution that continually produces coup leaders and normalises the use of force in politics and society.

Bainimarama ruled Fiji through blunt military force after his 2006 coup, and later as an "elected" prime minister and leader of his own FijiFirst Party. Repressive laws were passed, emergency powers enacted, rallies and strikes by workers outlawed and tight media controls introduced to muzzle opposition and intimidate critics.

Abuses of office were regular methods of Bainimarama's authoritarian regime. In 2024, he spent six months in prison for perverting the course of justice by interfering in a 2020 police investigation into alleged financial mismanagement at the University of the South Pacific. In 2025, Bainimarama received a 12-month suspended sentence after being convicted of "making an unwarranted demand with menace" when, as prime minister, he pressured the then acting police commissioner to sack two officers.

Opposition leader Inia Seruiratu from the "rebranded" FijiFirst party, now called People First, said the timing of the fresh arrest suggested it was politically motivated. With elections due later this year, Rabuka's opponents, including Bainimarama and his former "minister for everything," ex-Attorney General and Finance Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, "are a big threat" to the current

government, Seruiratu claimed. "They still have support, they still have sympathisers," he declared.

Rabuka is no less authoritarian than Bainimarama. The renewed legal offensive against Bainimarama is an expression of intensifying factional struggles amid the growing social crisis. Both factions defend Fijian and international capital while using constitutional and legal mechanisms as weapons in internecine power struggles. The ruling class as a whole fears social unrest and is preparing the legal and coercive tools to suppress it. The methods used against Bainimarama's supporters within the ruling elite will inevitably be used with greater force against workers and youth.

While Rabuka has postured as cleaning up the state and asserting the "rule of law," his government presides over deepening inequality, low wages, the erosion of public services and a disintegrating health system, aggravated by the economic impact of the US Trump administration's tariffs and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Four decades of coups, authoritarian rule and "constitutional" manoeuvres have failed to provide stability or improvements for the working class and rural poor.

The current government is collaborating in the US-led wars in the Middle East and Europe and mounting US confrontation against China. As the second largest island country in the Pacific behind Papua New Guinea, Fiji is of strategic importance. Bainimarama operated as an open ally of US imperialism, supporting the NATO-backed war in Ukraine against Russia and signing military agreements with Australia and New Zealand. This pro-US agenda is being further advanced by Rabuka, exemplified by his cementing relations with the Israeli Zionist regime and its genocide in Gaza, including the recent opening of an embassy in Jerusalem.



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