

Fiji deaths in custody reignite allegations of state brutality

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Two deaths in custody in recent months have reignited allegations of torture, sexual abuse and fatal violence by Fiji's police and military forces. Similar reports involving patterns of brutality by the Pacific Island country's security forces have recurred repeatedly over many years.

In the latest case, the Fiji Police Force has acknowledged that 12 officers, including members of the Royal Fiji Military Force (RFMF) were present during the arrest of 32 year-old Sakiasi Ose Radravu, whose family claims he was severely beaten, resulting in his death.

The family alleges that on the night of April 23, Radravu was tortured during a raid at his home in Kinoya, near the capital Suva, by police and military officers, and beaten within an inch of his life. He died on June 4.

Police claim that the autopsy report shows the cause of death was "a pre-existing medical condition." According to *Fijivillage*, they later claimed he was under the influence of a substance when he was taken into custody and his behaviour was "marked by distress, including screaming."

Radravu's aunt, Elizabeth Kabuyawa, told Radio NZ (RNZ) that the family is seeking a second autopsy due to concerns about a cover-up. The death certificate lists the main cause of death as sepsis and complications from pneumonia.

The family says the period from the arrest to death was sudden, unexplained, and difficult to accept. Kabuyawa declared: "I think they're [police] trying to masquerade it. They're not even considering that there was an underlying issue that he'd had from these beatings. My nephew was sodomised, his head was stomped on, he was beaten almost to his death."

Radravu's cousin Buna said the raid was prompted by an accusation that he had stolen a laptop. After being roused, family members arrived at Radravu's nearby house to find it surrounded. "We could hear that our cousin was actually screaming and yelling for his life,"

Buna said.

Radravu's girlfriend was reportedly in the room as he was being beaten, "[She] came crying home and came to inform the family of what had happened. After they had beaten him up, they had taken him up to the [police] station," Buna said. The family alleges that his detention was never recorded, and that police had not issued a warrant for the raid.

Police have since admitted that the raid involving 12 officers did take place. A June 7 police statement described the officers' conduct as "failure to adhere to processes and procedures," causing a situation which "continues to exacerbate complaints against police." Police continue to dispute the family's accusations.

Amnesty International said such police and military brutality is "consistent with historic patterns." Despite Radravu's autopsy, "there are serious concerns that his injuries contributed or substantially contributed to his death," researcher Kate Schuetze told RNZ. She called for the officers to be suspended while an independent investigation is conducted.

Schuetze explained that the "pattern of allegations that we're seeing in this case does align with what we've seen in the past. Sometimes a person can be so severely beaten that it could take weeks for them to die from those injuries." A 2016 Amnesty report detailed repeated violations of international law by the security forces who acted with impunity, their activities condoned by political and state authorities.

Radravu's death was the second in custody in as many months. Jone Vakarisid—described by local media as a criminal drug lord—died on April 16 after being taken in by the RFMF for questioning during a "national security investigation." Military officers have been patrolling the streets with automatic weapons, ostensibly as part of a joint operation with police to crack down on drugs.

According to RNZ, Vakarisid was reportedly linked to a

group who attempted to “undermine security at the RFMF installations” by trying to access military assets. The military initially attributed his death to “a medical emergency” and “pre-existing condition.” But the Fiji Police later confirmed that after Vakarisi’s death had been classified as murder, and an investigation initiated, the RFMF was forced to issue a “correction of record.”

Vakarisi’s sister told RNZ that he was heard begging for his life at the military headquarters in Suva prior to his death. One of the men taken in by the RFMF, Kelepi Komaisavou, told the *Fiji Times* they were stripped and forced to crawl along hot tarmac while being assaulted. He claimed he was made to drink out of a pothole with a soldier’s boot on his neck.

A leaked death certificate, which first appeared on Fijian social media, has since been verified by Police commissioner Rusiate Tudravu. According to the document, the causes of death were asphyxia, aspiration of gastric contents, severe traumatic head injuries and blunt force trauma to head and chest.

Beatings and deaths are not “excesses” by rogue soldiers. They are the product of a state built on successive military coups, rooted in the ongoing crises of Fijian capitalism. Sitiveni Rabuka, the current prime minister, led two coups in 1987. In 2000, an attempted coup and hostage crisis unfolded, led by George Speight with military backing. Frank Bainimarama came to power in a coup in 2006 and ruled the country until 2022.

Section 131 of Bainimarama’s 2013 Constitution—which has not been altered—gives the RFMF commander unrestrained powers to ensure the “safety and security of the country,” a blunt assertion that the military ultimately remains in charge. RFMF officers routinely operate alongside the police and are often appointed as heads of corrections, police and other senior government roles.

The *Guardian* reported in November 2020 that figures from Fiji’s director of public prosecutions showed 400 charges of serious violence were laid against police officers since 2015. These included 16 charges of rape, two charges of murder and nine of manslaughter, and more than 110 assault charges. Other charges include perjury, abduction, conspiracy, and aiding prisoners to escape.

The main target of police and military repression is the working class. Successive regimes have imposed draconian anti-union laws, suppressed May Day protests, arrested locked-out and striking workers and trade union officials.

There remains the real threat of another coup. Bainimarama and ex-police commissioner Sitiveni Qiliho appeared in court earlier this month, accused of attempting to incite a mutiny in the armed forces, which they have denied.

The latest police-military crackdowns however prove that nothing fundamental has changed under Rabuka, despite his posturing as a liberal opponent of Bainimarama and claiming to undo aspects of his unpopular dictatorial regime. Whatever their differences, all factions of the ruling elite fear the rising anger in the working class over skyrocketing inflation and a social crisis that has worsened since the illegal US-Israeli war against Iran.

About a third of the population lives in poverty. According to the Fijian Broadcasting Corporation, 34 percent of children aged between five and 11 are engaged in child labour. Nearly one percent of the population—9000 people—are HIV positive, a crisis fuelled by out-of-control drug use.

Fiji’s military-backed regimes have been protected by Australia and New Zealand, who have accommodated themselves to every illegitimate government. New Zealand’s announcement in 2019 of an “enhanced partnership” between the NZ and Fiji police forces was aimed at bolstering the repressive apparatus. Australia last month signed an upgraded security treaty with Fiji, aimed at integrating it into US-led war plans against China.

The principal concern of the two local imperialist powers is not democracy and “human rights,” but stability for investment and the exclusion of rival powers from the region, particularly China.



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