

Fiji military commander publicly denounces budget cut

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Fiji's military commander Major General Jone Kalouniwai has responded to budget cuts to the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) with an extraordinary campaign in the Pacific country's newspapers and on social media. Kalouniwai took out full-page advertisements opposing the government's measures with a message entitled "Beyond the Budget—and Into the Grey Zone."

Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka's government budget, handed down on June 26, saw the military allocated \$FJ152.6 million (\$US67.75 million), down from \$FJ167.8 million the previous year. It represented a 9 percent reduction with a projected loss of another \$FJ1.1 million to follow.

The *Fiji Sun* reported that Rabuka, a former RFMF commander and military coup leader, gave "Fiji's decision to scale back its overseas peacekeeping commitments" as the reason for the cutback. Last year, hundreds of Fijian troops were withdrawn from Lebanon and Iraq due to the winding down of UN missions in both countries.

Finance Minister Esrom Immanuel revealed that the government deficit was more than \$FJ200 million higher than last year, due in part to a lower tax take. Immanuel said the government was shifting cash towards infrastructure projects and private sector development.

Kalouniwai's angry response was published on June 28 under the official emblem of the RFMF under the headline, "What the RFMF means to Fiji." The statement declared: "Fiji is not fighting a war in the conventional sense. But Fiji is absolutely in a crisis—one that is harder to see, harder to measure, and infinitely harder to win than any declared conflict. It lives in the grey. And it is growing."

Alluding to escalating social disorder, with the RFMF

increasingly involved in police crackdowns, ostensibly to combat drug trafficking and organised crime, the general framed his broadside as "a conversation" about "a threat that does not wear a uniform, does not declare itself at our borders, and does not announce its arrival with the sound of artillery."

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

Kalouniwai said critics of defence spending should consider the military's "contribution" to society, including its role in responding to natural disasters and the military training programs operating in 70 schools.

Kalouniwai portrayed the RFMF as the only force capable of dealing with drug trafficking and organised crime. He stated that the country's other "institutions are being hollowed out by corruption," including the police, border agencies and the judicial system. The military, he said, was fighting a "grey zone war" against "the systemic rot" afflicting "the very mechanisms of governance and law enforcement" which enabled the drugs trade.

This depiction of the military as the only uncorrupted institution is ominous. The RFMF has a history and ingrained culture of torture and brutality, and has carried out several coups (1987, 2000 and 2006), including first led by Rabuka.

Under the regime of coup leader Frank Bainimarama from 2006–2022, martial law, arrests, censorship and targeted beatings of critics, journalists and trade unionists became the norm. A 2016 Amnesty International report detailed repeated violations of international law by security forces who acted with impunity, their activities condoned by political and

state authorities.

This is not the first time Kalouniwai has made thinly veiled public threats. In January 2023, a month after the last elections produced a fragile coalition under Rabuka, the general openly warned the incoming government not to proceed too quickly with “sweeping changes.”

After meeting with Rabuka, Kalouniwai released an extraordinary statement declaring that the 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.” The vague charges echoed statements by defeated prime minister Bainimarama, claiming that Rabuka was behaving in defiance of the Constitution.

At the time, 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 downplayed the intervention, saying people should “relax” and he had every confidence in the leadership and members of the RFMF.

Kalouniwai eventually gave assurances that he supported the government and would not make further public statements criticising its actions. With an election due this year, the *Fiji Sun* reported on July 1 that Kalouniwai “reassured the public there would be no military involvement despite the possibility of heightened political rhetoric and instability during the campaign period.”

“We will stay where we are at the moment. There’s nothing for us to do,” he said, insisting that the military would remain “far away” from political affairs. Dismissing speculation about his own political ambitions, Kalouniwai said he had no intention of contesting the election.

However, the general’s public statements on the budget are a blunt reminder that the RFMF remains ultimately in charge. Section 131 of Bainimarama’s 2013 Constitution gives the commander unrestrained powers to ensure the “safety and security of the country.”

The threat of another coup remains. Bainimarama and ex-police commissioner Sitiveni Qiliho appeared in court earlier this year, accused of attempting to incite a

mutiny in the armed forces, which they denied.

The RFMF has increasingly inserted itself into domestic affairs. Its joint operations with police have resulted in a heightened military visibility, with RFMF officers patrolling the streets with automatic weapons. The escalating public militarisation has proved lethal.

In the most recent case, Jone Vakarisi—an alleged drug dealer—died on April 16 after being taken in by the RFMF for questioning during a “national security investigation.” Vakarisi’s sister told Radio NZ that he was heard begging for his life at the military headquarters in Suva. According to a leaked death certificate verified by police, the causes of death were asphyxia, aspiration of gastric contents, severe traumatic head injuries and blunt force trauma to head and chest.

Kalouniwai initially attributed Vakarisi’s death to “a medical emergency” and a “pre-existing condition.” But after the police classified the death as murder and initiated an investigation, the RFMF was forced to issue a “correction of record.”

Addressing a military family church service, Kalouniwai admitted that the RFMF was “at fault” for Vakarisi’s death. “We must be held accountable,” he was quoted as saying by local media, while excusing the death as an “unintentional” and “regrettable” incident. No one has yet been charged.

Rabuka did not offer any rebuke to Kalouniwai for attacking his budget cut. The government is clearly anxious to keep the military leader on side. Last week, Defence Minister Pio Tikoduadua announced that Kalouniwai will continue in the role when his current five-year term expires later this year.

Fiji is gripped by a worsening economic and social crisis: soaring prices, entrenched poverty, a drug abuse epidemic and the highest rate of HIV infection in the world. As is the case internationally, the turn towards militarism and authoritarian forms of rule reflects deep fears in the ruling class that popular anger will explode.



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