

Democracy postponed: Fiji and Australian policy choices
by Anthony Bergin

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Introduction

Fiji's coup culture was already deeply entrenched, and with the latest developments it's now more so. On Saturday 11 April 2009 the Fijian President Ratu Josefa Iloilo reappointed the former coup leader and Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, Commodore Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama, to head the nation's government.

This followed a Presidential announcement on Friday 10 April that he had abolished the constitution, assumed all governing power and revoked all judicial appointments. The President said Fiji would hold elections by 2014.

The announcement came after the Fiji Court of Appeal ruling the previous day which found Commodore Bainimarama's 2006 coup, the country's fourth in twenty years, was illegal and ordered a restoration of democracy. The 2006 coup was justified by its leader as necessary to get rid of corruption and lack of accountability and aimed at removing ethnic bias from the political system.¹

Reactions to recent developments

Abrogating the constitution and overturning the Court of Appeal decision has been condemned by the United Nations, the Commonwealth and governments around the world. Prime Minister Rudd has described the developments as grave and unwelcome. There's no doubt that they will further damage an already weak Fiji economy and reduce investor confidence. Travel warnings have been reviewed and reissued by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. They state that the current political uncertainty could lead without warning to an outbreak of violence and civil unrest. This will have a negative effect on the tourist industry, particularly conference bookings, which are always the first to suffer.

Fiji now faces the real possibility of expulsion from the Pacific Islands Forum, even though it hosts the Forum Secretariat. The European Union is likely to stop any aid to Fiji, notably the F\$300 million (approx. A\$200 million) grant to the ailing sugar industry. Fiji's foreign reserves, already dangerously low, will be further depleted. Resultant job losses will heighten public anxiety about the country's future, but with the army and police in control and holding all weapons, an armed uprising is unlikely.

It's too early to be raising the prospect of large-scale civil disorder requiring military intervention to extract Australian citizens from a disintegrating Fiji.² A mutiny by elements of Fiji's military against the interim government leading to wider violent civil strife can't be entirely ruled out, but based on recent history, this scenario is unlikely.

Smart sanctions?

Australia will no doubt be looking at further toughening our so-called smart sanctions in the coming days. Fiji's interim government regards the sanctions as designed to support the deposed Qarase government, rather than aimed at restoring democracy to Fiji.

The Australian Government has, perhaps, underestimated the effect of sanctions and where the burden is falling. (The 2007 change of government in Australia did not affect sanctions policy on Fiji.) The average Fijian is suffering because of the decline in the economy, exacerbated by the January floods. But in dollar terms the biggest losers are Australian-owned businesses in Fiji, notably the banks, ANZ, Westpac and Colonial (CBA), construction companies and the majority of tourist resorts. Over 40% of Fiji's tourists are Australian.

Sanctions over the last two years, including the travel bans, weren't working. If they were, the interim government in Suva would not have moved to its current position. Smart sanctions have pushed Fiji away from its traditional friends and suppliers to others, notably China.

The travel bans are particularly harsh: they apply to government members, public servants and anyone related to a member of Fiji's military, no matter how junior. Fiji has a high reliance on Australia for education and training. Many educated Fijians have good reasons to travel regularly to Australia for family or on business. This has meant that most of the best qualified people have declined Fiji government positions. And cutting our defence links has resulted in Fiji's military replacing our training and other ties with China, India and Malaysia.

Canberra's next move

What should Australia do next? Trade Minister Simon Crean has raised the prospect of trade sanctions,³ but intensifying sanctions is hardly likely to be any more effective than the current sanctions.

Foreign Minister Stephen Smith has stated that: 'Unless there's some change, I'd be very surprised if the Pacific Islands Forum and the Commonwealth didn't move in due course to formally suspend Fiji'. Expelling Fiji from the Forum would leave the body a much weakened regional organisation. It would indirectly add more lustre to the Melanesian Spearhead Group and serve to further alienate Commodore Bainimarama by complicating any dialogue between his government and the Forum.⁴ A permanent Commonwealth suspension would have symbolic impact only: Fiji has been suspended from the Councils of the Commonwealth since the 2006 coup. Fiji was excluded from the Commonwealth for ten years after the October 1987 coup.

Working with the governments of Fiji's major neighbours, we need to acknowledge that the interim government's People's Charter for Change and Progress, while contentious, sets out a path to a fairer system: one person, one vote, and the elimination of race-based voting.⁵

Canberra should condemn the recent decisions that have set back democracy, and speak out against any serious human rights abuses in Fiji. However, we should keep this in proportion; Fiji isn't Zimbabwe. Australia should announce that it doesn't want Fiji to fail and would stand ready to support selected parts of the People's Charter as a basis for returning Fiji to parliamentary democracy, provided they obtain wide political support in Fiji. If stakeholder support is achieved for parts of the Charter, it would be in Australia's interest to help shape them. This could be by way of technical assistance and the provision of a senior mediator (not an Australian). We could signal that provided there's a credible roadmap for elections Australia intends to lift a substantial specified part of the travel bans, perhaps limiting them to senior military officers, not their family, friends and civil servants. This would encourage more capable people to assist in moving Fiji along.

We should emphasise the rewards we will give when real progress is evident.⁶ This could include sending a signal that we would invite Fiji to participate in our new Pacific seasonal worker pilot scheme being trialled over the next three years. We might indicate that \$500 million in aid would become available over 3–5 years once Fiji returns to democratic rule. These funds could be publicly targeted to be of interest to the main political constituencies of all key stakeholders needed for a solution in Fiji. Perhaps they could be provided as temporary tax relief for the poorest.

We could send a message that in the case of a political solution in Fiji, Australia will work with the UN in order to create more possibilities for Fiji's armed forces to take up UN peacekeeping jobs.

The history over the last two years doesn't make dialogue between Suva and Canberra easy. While we shouldn't exaggerate our potential influence, we must work closely with forces in Fiji to get the country moving towards an elected government in the near future and so capitalise on Fiji's place as the natural hub of the South Pacific.

We should try and facilitate a positive and early outcome of the political dialogue in Fiji, and ensure that a post-election Fiji will want close cooperation with Australia.

At the same time we must be realistic about our ability to influence developments within Fiji: we learnt to live with a military dominated government in Indonesia for thirty years. Thailand, with its history of coups, is one of our closest regional partners. The road back to democracy will not be easy. The military in Fiji will remain highly influential even after it returns to barracks.

Endnotes

- 1 Bainimarama believed that the Qarase government had been far too lenient to those involved in the 2000 coup and that Qarase was advancing the ultra-nationalist agenda of the 2000 coup plotters. For a comprehensive discussion see Jon Fraenkel, Stewart Firth and Brij V. Lal, eds, *The 2006 military takeover in Fiji: A coup to end all coups?* ANU E Press, 2009; see also Richard Herr, 'External influences and the 2006 Fiji military coup', *Harvard Asia Pacific Review*, Vol 9, No 1 (Winter 2007).
- 2 HMAS *Kanimbla*, HMAS *Newcastle* and HMAS *Success* were sent to waters near Fiji by the Australian government in early November 2006, a month before the 2006 coup, in order to evacuate Australian citizens if the need arose. Fiji's military viewed this deployment as 'gunboat diplomacy'.
- 3 See <http://www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,21985,25319972-663,00.html>
- 4 Last year the Melanesian Spearhead Group appointed its first Director General. The position is funded for the next three years by China, which also provided the money to build the MSG secretariat building in Port Vila. See Anthony Bergin, 'MSG the key to workable Pacific policy', *Australian Financial Review*, 6 June 2008
- 5 See <http://www.fiji.gov.fj/publish/charter.shtml>
- 6 Parts of the argument here were outlined in the author's article 'Offer carrots, not censure', *The Australian*, 20 December 2008.

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