

Behind Fiji's coup

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On December 5, after weeks of speculation, the commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama announced that he had overthrown the government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase in Fiji's third military coup in the past 20 years. On January 4, the military restored the powers of President Ratu Josefa Iloilo, so that he could swear in an interim government with Bainimarama as PM.

While in some respect these events followed the pattern of previous Fijian coups, there are significant differences. The two coups in 1987 and 2000 overthrew multiracial governments headed by the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) and reinstated the power of the Melanesian aristocracy, while promoting chauvinism against the Indo-Fijian population to get support from non-aristocratic Melanesians.

The most recent coup, however, overthrew Qarase's right-wing Melanesian chauvinist Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua party, and the interim government includes members of the FLP, including party leader Mahendra Chaudhry, who has been given the posts of minister for national planning, public enterprises and sugar reform. Chaudhry held the same post in the government of FLP founder Timoci Bavadra, which was overthrown after a month in office in 1987 by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka. In May 1999 he became prime minister but was overthrown a year later by failed businessman and adventurer George Speight. Chaudhry was imprisoned during both coups.

The fault lines in Fijian politics can only be understood in terms of the racially segregated parody of feudalism created by the British after colonising Fiji in 1874. This involved increasing the power and privilege of hereditary clan chiefs to form an aristocracy, while commoners were not allowed to reside outside their villages. A Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) was set up to represent the new aristocracy. Clan solidarity and relatively sufficient land accessible to commoners created social stability and muted opposition to the British takeover. However, it also created a lack of cheap labour for the Australian and British sugar companies for whose benefit Fiji was colonised.

To overcome this, the British imported "indentured labourers" from India to work on the sugar plantations in conditions akin to slavery. This plantation system lasted until 1920. After this the main sugar corporation, Australia's CSR, broke up the plantations into smallholdings farmed by former indentured labourers. Other Indo-Fijian smallholders leased plots off the Melanesian aristocracy. CSR monopolised sugar processing and was therefore able to control the price smallholders received for their crops.

By 1970, when Fiji became independent, the elite consisted of Melanesian aristocrats and Indo-Fijian business owners, while the masses consisted of Melanesian subsistence farmers and Indo-Fijian smallholders. After independence the number of urban poor and workers, both Melanesian and Indo-Fijian, grew. The economy as a whole remained under the control of Australian capital.

Fiji's political system got a parliamentary veneer with independence. The GCC maintained a lot of power both directly, through the new upper house, and through their ideological influence over the Melanesian masses. Furthermore, while 83% of land was allegedly owned collectively by the clans,

the Native Lands Trust Board (NLTB) ensured that rent extracted from smallholders went to the aristocracy.

Between 1970 and 1987, the aristocracy's Alliance Party, led by Ratu Kamisese Mara, was in power. The National Federation Party, controlled by the Indo-Fijian bourgeoisie, played the role of loyal opposition. While most Fijians voted along communal lines this system remained stable. However, in the 1980s the multiracial FLP started uniting Fijians along class, rather than communal, lines. At the same time, non-elite Melanesians were becoming polarised and extremist Melanesian chauvinism (and Methodist fundamentalism) also grew.

In 1987 FLP leader Bavadra was elected prime minister, but was overthrown a month later in the coup led by Rabuka, using Melanesian chauvinist rhetoric. A new Melanesian supremacist constitution was introduced in 1990 and in 1992 Rabuka became prime minister with Mara now president. Australia tacitly supported this coup.

In 1997 a more democratic constitution was introduced and in 1999 the FLP, now led by Chaudhry, returned to power. On May 19, 2000, George Speight and a group of military-connected Melanesian chauvinist terrorists kidnapped Chaudhry and his cabinet and held them hostage for two months. The military, the elite and Australia were happy to see the FLP overthrown but had reservations about Speight.

In a confusing series of coups and counter-coups, Mara took power, only to be overthrown by the army under Bainimarama, who made Iloilo president and Qarase prime minister of an interim government. Bainimarama negotiated the release of the overthrown cabinet by promising Speight and his supporters an amnesty. He broke the promise however, and had Speight arrested for treason. In November there was an attempted coup against Bainimarama by Speight's supporters. Qarase, meanwhile, legitimised his rule with rigged elections in 2001 and 2006.

While Australian reaction to the 1987 and 2000 coups was muted, the latest one has been loudly condemned and sanctions imposed. These sanctions are harming ordinary people, not the military, and have been condemned by trade unions and NGOs. Unlike the Bavadra and Chaudhry FLP governments, the Qarase government is itself the product of a military coup. Furthermore, the dispute between Bainimarama and Qarase is over three anti-democratic laws that the latter was trying to introduce.

Two of these, the Indigenous Lands Tribunal Bill and the Qoliqoli Bill, would transfer land from state ownership to the NLTB, increasing the amount of land under the control of the NLTB from 83% to 90%. On state-owned land, Indo-Fijian smallholders have security of tenure for 30 years and rent is fixed at 6% of the land's unimproved value. NLTB land leases are only guaranteed for two years and rents can be increased. The Qoliqoli Bill would also bring marine resources under the NLTB.

The third law is the benevolent sounding Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill. This would release Speight and his supporters, possibly with the intention of bringing them into the government.

The entry of Chaudhry and other FLP leaders into Bainimarama's interim government was motivated by the latter's opposition to Qarase's reactionary agenda. However, Bainimarama's own role in 2000 raises questions as to the wisdom of this. Furthermore, the beating up of six NGO leaders on Christmas Eve by the military is a further ominous sign. While the Australian media's defence of the "legitimately elected" Qarase government is dishonest and hypocritical, there is little reason to believe that Bainimarama has any more commitment to democracy.

P.S.

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