

Fiji's illegitimate military government refuses to hold elections and the recent crackdown on the judiciary and the media could mark the beginning of the end of democracy.  
OLGA YOLDI reports.

# *Trouble in Paradise*

**W**hen travelling in Fiji and sailing through its many islands, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of the surroundings. You find blue lagoons, lush rainforests, white sandy beaches, perfect white orchids, unspoiled coral reefs teeming with colourful tropical fish and friendly people. You feel you cannot get any closer to paradise. But beyond the palm-tree fronds of the beach resorts, there is another Fiji, a country struggling economically and politically.

Since December 2006, Fiji has been ruled by military strongman, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, following a bloodless coup in which he ousted elected Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase and named himself interim Prime Minister. This was not the first time Fiji had experienced political turmoil of this type. Three other coups have marked two decades of political and economic instability.

However, last April the country experienced another political crisis. When the Court of Appeal ruled that the military government was illegally appointed and that democracy should be reinstated as soon as possible, President Ratu Josefa Iloilo dissolved parliament, sacked the judges, abrogated the constitution, declared a 30-day state of emergency, and reinstated Bainimarama as interim Prime Minister. Bainimarama, who insists his rule is legitimate, has said there will not be democratic elections until 2014. But five years is a long time.

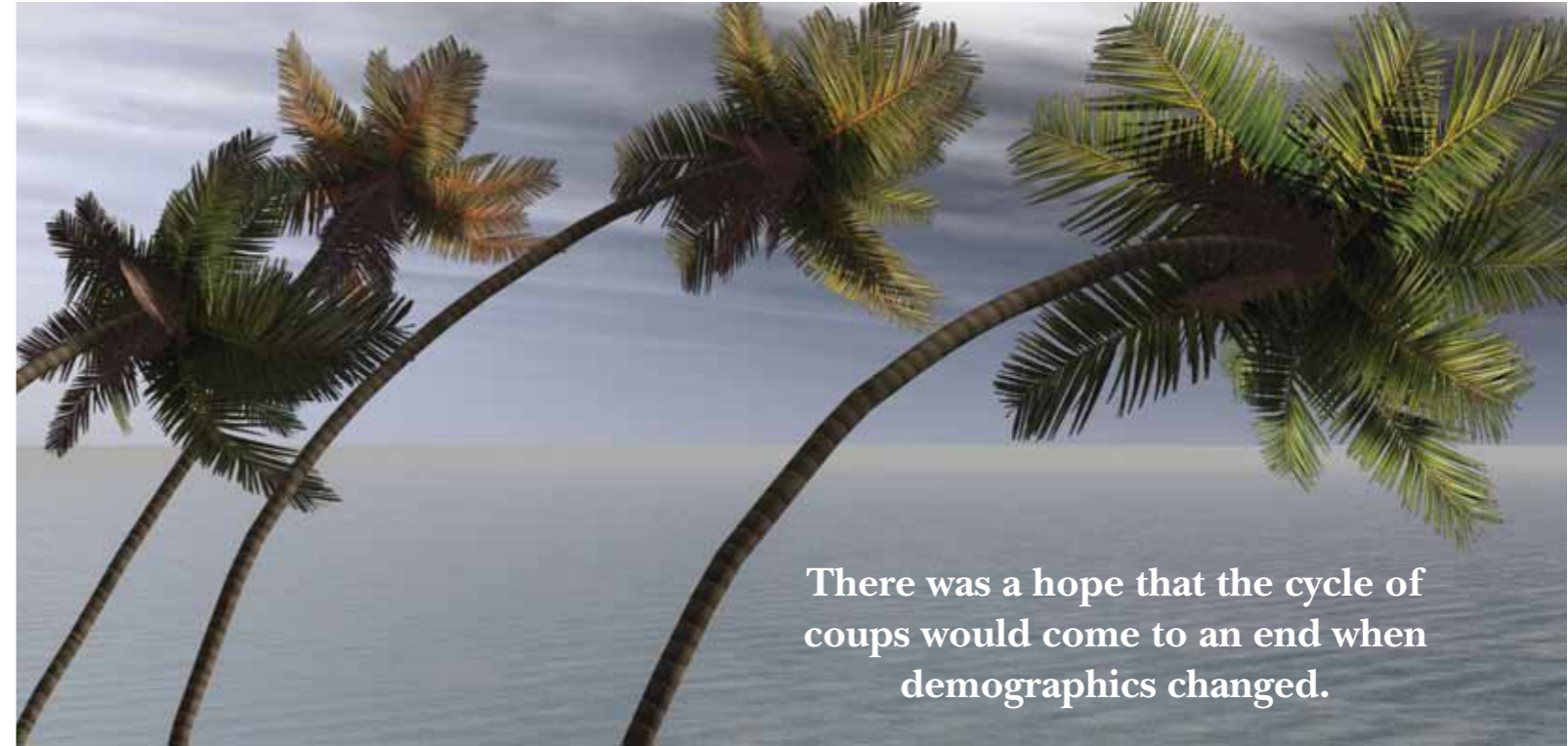
International condemnation appears to have little impact on Bainimarama. If democracy is not restored soon, he runs the risk of turning Fiji into an isolated nation, and an irrelevant, small dot in the ocean.

At the moment anyone that opposes the government is in trouble.

Last April three foreign TV journalists were deported. According to ABC Pacific correspondent Sean Dorney, the Ministry of Information controls media outlets to prevent the publication or broadcast of reports that have the potential to cause 'disorder'.



Fiji's military leader  
Frank Bainimarama



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Under emergency measures, the police have the power to arrest, detain or question anyone having a meeting in a public place. All this is contributing to a climate of tension and fear where Fijians cannot talk freely to anybody.

In the last two years Fiji's economy has deteriorated rapidly. The country has been affected by a series of devastating floods as well as the global impact of the economic downturn on tourism and exports. Preventing the collapse of Fiji's economy is critical, not only for Fiji but also for the stability of the region. Bainimarama says he will bring much needed change to Fiji, but this remains to be seen.

Most historians agree that colonialism has shaped the Fiji of today. The British were in Fiji from 1874 to 1970. The first Governor Sir Arthur Gordon inherited a bankrupt administration, where one quarter of its population had died of measles. To help bring the colonial administration out of bankruptcy, Sir Arthur leased large areas of land to Australian firm, Colonial Sugar Refining Company for sugar-cane growing. He forbade the sale of Fijian land to non-Fijians and preserved the native language and culture, but he limited Fijians' involvement in commerce and politics. From 1889 to 1916 the British brought around 60,000 Indians to Fiji as indentured labourers to work in the sugar plantations.

Other Indians migrated voluntarily in the 1920s and 30s. Today their descendants make up 37 percent of the population while Fijians are now a majority of 60 percent. The two communities were kept apart for a long time.

When the British left in 1970, Fiji could not escape its own racially divided past. "At the time of independence we essentially had three different communities, each with its own contrasting expectations of its place in society," says Indo-Fijian, historian and academic Brij V Lal. "You had the indigenous, who felt entitled to rule, the Indo-Fijian community which believed in the

principle of parity and equality and the European community, who, even though small in numbers, made a large contribution to the economy and wanted to preserve its privileged position in society."

"So you had all the ingredients in place on the eve of independence but no overarching sense of consciousness as a nation, as a cohesive society, and that was the fundamental problem that remained unarticulated..."

Post-colonial politics were dominated by Ratu Sir Kamises Mara, and the Alliance Party which combined the traditional Fijian chiefly system with leading elements of the Western democratic system. The main opposition, the National Federation Party represented mainly rural Indo-Fijians. For many years inter-communal relations were managed without serious confrontation and Fiji enjoyed almost two decades of relative peace.

But all that came to an end in 1987, when Lieutenant-Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka's gunmen stormed the Fijian Parliament ousting Prime Minister Dr Timoci Bavadra and his Labour Party. Bavadra, who had brought a change of government for the first time since independence, had a majority Indo-Fijian support. But fears by right-wing elements, who were worried about the possible erosion of Fijian rights, were behind the coup, which Rabuka ran under the slogan "Fiji for Fijians".

After the coup, Governor General Ratu Sir Pania Gailau dissolved parliament, dismissed the ministry, and continued governing under a State of Emergency. After a month of deadlocked negotiations, a settlement was finally reached. Rabuka was unhappy with it, so he staged a second coup, overthrowing his own illegally appointed interim government.

He proclaimed Fiji a republic, appointed himself as head of state and changed the 1970 constitution, cementing indigenous political domination. Indo-Fijians were on edge. More than 12,000 left the country, and the economy deteriorated rapidly.

Fiji was expelled from the Commonwealth but was readmitted in 1997 when Rabuka resigned as head of state and a new and more balanced constitution was enacted, in which both indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians were allocated seats in parliament, proportional to the numbers of the population at the time.

Rabuka and President Mara supported the constitutional amendments, but indigenous Fijian parties opposed it. According to Brij V Lal, many Fijians felt that Rabuka had let them down by compromising too much to give Fiji a balanced, truly multiracial constitution.

Elections in 1999 saw the Labour Party's leader Mahendra Chaudhry become the first Indo-Fijian prime minister. At the time, journalist Anita Purcell Sojlund wrote: "His term was not going to be easy. His abrasive and confrontational leadership style would not help." Chaudhry promised to address social inequalities by introducing land leases. Land tenure is a contentious issue in Fiji, where Indigenous Fijians own 87 percent of land and Indo-Fijians have to lease it for sugar cane farming instead of buying it.

In March 2000, ten thousand indigenous Fijians marched through the streets of Suva demanding Chaudhry stop making decisions regarding the mahogany forests and the renewal of land leases. Chaudhry didn't have a chance to make reforms. A few months later Fijian nationalist George Speight seized government at gun point and held the prime minister and his Cabinet hostage for 56 days. Speight was supported by members of Fiji's special forces, the Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit that Rabuka had established in 1987.

The military, led by its Chief Bainimarama intervened and arrested Speight who was convicted of treason. Most political commentators at the time said that economic interests were behind this coup.

Speight, who was the chairman of the Fiji Pine Company, before being sacked by Chaudhry, was negotiating for an

American real estate developer who had put in a bid to log the forests. But when Chaudhry awarded the logging to another bidder, Speight used nationalist ideals to push his own economic agenda.

In November of that year, there was a mutiny in the military. Eight soldiers died and there was an attempt to assassinate Bainimarama by the coup instigators.

After the coup, Bainimarama didn't put Chaudhry back into office, instead he appointed former banker, Laisenia Qarase as interim Prime Minister. At the August 2001 elections he won a majority.

But tensions between Qarase and Bainimarama soon started to surface. Arguments revolved around Qarase's plans to downsize the military forces and over the reconciliation act to pardon the instigators of the 2000 coup.

Qarase sacked Bainimarama while he was in the Middle East in October 2006. Talks in Wellington, New Zealand, to heal the rift between the two resulted in Qarase accepting Bainimarama's demands. But when they arrived back in Fiji, Bainimarama accused Qarase of lying about the talks and staged his coup. He accused the government of being involved in patronage, corruption and nepotism and that this was inappropriate in a democratic country.

However Bainimarama was accused of behaving more like a dictator than a defender of democracy.

Four coups and a mutiny in the space of two decades have damaged Fiji's social fabric as well as confidence in the political system. One has to ask if Fiji is a case where democracy is failing.

Academic Dr Tupeni Baba says that Fiji may have developed a coup culture, which began with Rabuka. "Fiji will continue to have coups in the future because such a concept is ingrained in the country's political culture and as such has become naturalised."

New Zealand academic Roderick Alley, writes that: "Once tasted, the coup experience can regenerate and mutate



providing local operational knowledge (how to do it), or arousing expectations that once disappointed, inspire fresh recourse to violence. This compounds risk and uncertainty.”

There was hope that the cycle of coups would come to an end when demographics changed. For much of the past 50 years indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians were each 50 per cent of the population and the electorate. As a result, it was possible for either of the two groups to win elections and form governments. So one side was always in opposition and the other always in government.

Academic Jon Fraenkel recently told ABC radio, that as the Fijians over the last 20 years or so had moved into being a clear majority, it was reasonable to hope that the source of coups was likely to be less intense. “However, the 2006 coup blows that theory out of the water because now it is clear that there is more than one source of coups, and that the military itself is a source of coups. And it is extremely difficult to know how Fiji can ever remove the military from its political life,” Fraenkel said.

Some believe the current leadership model is not suitable for Fiji because it is based on western democratic values, but also incorporates some elements of traditional leadership through the Great Council of Chiefs.

Under the constitution, the Great Council of Chiefs has a number of roles. The most important is to decide who should be President and Vice President. It has been argued that traditional and modern systems of government are not compatible and that combining the two has been problematic.

Peter Larmour’s Political Status Report in the Pacific to the Commonwealth Secretariat indicated that constitutional and liberal democracies promoted concepts such as liberty, equality

and fraternity, while more traditional indigenous concepts have to do with mutual recognition, continuity and consent.

“Traditional authority is based on the customary traditions of a community, embodied in the people’s way of life, transmitted through cultural traditions, and helped by principles of consensus of mutual recognition and consent. This is opposed to the values of democracy,” Larmour writes. He says that traditional leaders, who are part of the government system, are expected to unite and lead cultural diversity, while in a customary and traditional system they would only govern a smaller and closely knit community or clan.

Tereisa Teaiwa, head of the Pacific Studies Faculty at New Zealand’s Victoria University, has called on the Pacific’s indigenous peoples to engage in the creation of alternative models of leadership more akin to their cultures. “Many multi-ethnic nations have inherited an ‘authority vacuum’ which needs to be filled with a new-style of Pacific leadership,” she said. However, she has not described what a new-style Pacific leadership solution would look like.

Listening to Bainimarama, one might think that he wants a new leadership style, a new system that ensures equality and moves forward from the political model established by the British colonists.

Stewart Firth, from the Australian National University, wrote that the 2006 coup was a modernist orientation. “Bainimarama sees his coup as a ‘good governance’ coup that will sweep away Fiji’s endless preoccupation with race and replace it with nation-building modernity, in which race is no longer relevant ... he seeks to remove ethnic politics and bad politicians, dispel bad inclinations such as greed and prejudice and comprehensively

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remake Fiji so that it can eventually be returned to multiracial democracy in virtuous shape ...”

The way to achieve this equality, Bainimarama has indicated, is through electoral reforms that remove racial discrimination against the Indo-Fijian minority and by eliminating corruption through the Independent Commission Against Corruption.

However, since taking power, he has neutralised his opponents, crippled Fiji’s democratic institutions and abolished the Great Council of Chiefs. Bainimarama must be concerned about the possibility of an Indigenous Fijian revolt. After all he ousted Qarase who had won 89 percent of the indigenous vote.

ABC correspondent Sean Dorney says “If there were an election now no matter what system you introduce the Indigenous Fijians would win because they are a majority. Qarase would win. Bainimarama doesn’t want him.”

The armed forces (90 percent are Indigenous Fijians) appear to support him. This may be the case because anyone who has been disloyal to him has been removed. According to most political commentators he has looked after the army well. Soldiers are paid well, have secure employment and many families depend on these salaries.

The army has grown to a force of 3,500 soldiers, very large for a population of 880,000, particularly since there is no threat from neighbouring countries. It grew rapidly after 1978 because of the opportunities and demand for international peacekeeping.

Fijian soldiers have served in south Lebanon, East Timor, Solomon Islands, Bougainville and in the British Army, where more than 2000 Fijian soldiers are now serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. Others are now employed as guards and escorts for private security firms in Iraq.

The role of the army in ending the rule of law in Fiji may make them inappropriate to engage in the maintenance of law and order in the international community. According to *The Australian* newspaper, the Australian and New Zealand governments told the UN they want a halt on any new hiring of Fijian soldiers to serve as peacekeepers on international missions.

Apart from banning Bainimarama from the Pacific Islands Forum, the international community is not willing to intervene to restore democracy. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said “Australia condemns unequivocally this action by the military ruler of Fiji to turn this great country into virtually a military dictatorship, with the suspension of freedom of the press and actions which undermine the prosperity for the ordinary people.”

Foreign Minister Stephen Smith appears to be opposed to sanctions. “One of the very serious adverse consequences of the move to a military regime in Fiji has been a serious decline in the economic and social circumstances of the Fijian people. We don’t want to add to that. On the contrary, we want to see not just a return to democracy but an economic and social recovery for the people of Fiji.”

Economic recovery might prove difficult, as the global recession has had an impact on an economy already hurt by the

coups. According to professor Biman Prasad, from the University of the South Pacific, Fiji has had a crisis of confidence in the last 20 years. “When investors are not certain about the rule of law, and governments are not consistent with their economic policies ... we lose. We lose on tourists, we lose on remittances and we lose on more targeted aid from donor countries,” he said. “And all this combined puts together a formula which is quite destructive ...”

Indeed, Fiji has been hampered by trade and budget deficits, making it one of the world’s largest per-capita recipients of aid. For many years, sugar and textile exports drove Fiji’s economy. However, neither industry is competing effectively in globalised markets. To make matters worse the European Union (EU) has cut a US\$350 million subsidy to assist the sugar industry. It has announced that money will not be forthcoming until Fiji cleans up its human rights situation and moves back to democracy.

China, on the other hand, is willing to support Fiji without any strings attached. A recent Lowy Institute report on China’s estimated aid program in the Pacific, revealed an increase in aid, from US\$26 million in 2006, to a staggering \$160 million in 2007. Australia only provided A\$26.9 million. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the Fiji Electricity Authority and the Chinese Development Bank signed a US\$70 million loan agreement to commence construction of the Naarivatu Hydropower project. Chinese loans are also helping to fund other infrastructure projects in Fiji. This is worrying Australia. The possibility of Fiji turning to China could undermine Australia’s competing influence in the region.

Removing the military from political life won’t be easy. The question is, should Australia simply wait the five years before the President’s scheduled elections in 2014? Or should it intervene before Fiji becomes another failed state in the Pacific? Failed states tend to attract transnational crime, illegal trade and terrorism.

In 2003 Australian troops landed in the Solomon Islands to rescue what had become a failed state. Australia justified its intervention as necessary in the age of terrorism. They waited three years before sending troops, after having refused entreaties from the then Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa’alu, who was ousted in a coup in June 2000. Many thought it was too late.

Most political commentators believe an intervention would be unwise. Former Fijian Land Forces Commander, Jone Baledrokadroka says: “Australian troops would face operational problems on the streets of Suva and, as in the Solomon Islands, Canberra would encounter major difficulties in the rebuilding of the state when the crisis has passed.”

There are other options, sanctions being one of them, but while they would help undermine the military, they could also damage the economy further. Baledrokadroka says that the primary force in ending this slide towards a failing state must come from within Fiji. But that won’t happen until Fiji’s fundamental problem –who should rule and for whom, is resolved. ■