



Satish Chand: Australia's Fiji Coup Conundrum

Australia and New Zealand must work with the regime now in place if they are to speed an orderly return to democratic rule.

It is nearly four months since the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) ousted their constitutionally elected government on December 5, 2006, the country's fourth coup in nineteen years. Aghast at the rape of democracy, the international community reacted sharply - Australia and New Zealand placed travel bans on all associated with the coup, and the European Union and the United States suspended their support to the RFMF.

But, given that military regime has now survived four months and the ousted government is slipping into obscurity, the international community faces a conundrum. The economic pain inflicted by the continued isolation of the military government hurts the poor most. And, in the post-9/11 environment, there are security considerations. The recent breakdown of law and order in the Pacific region, including in Dili, Honiara, and Nukualofa, points to the need for utmost care in cajoling Fiji back to democratic rule.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard is in an extremely awkward position. Following the coup he sent the Australian navy to Fiji, supposedly to rescue Australian citizens, but the need for such action never eventuated. Indeed, some would argue that any threat to Australians in Fiji only arose because of navy's presence in the international waters off the coast of Fiji.

This view has some legitimacy given that no Australians were harmed in the previous coups. Many in Fiji read the posturing by Australia, including the flexing of military muscle, as an attempt to convince coup leader Commodore Bainimarama to stay in his barracks. Subsequent events showed such military threats were not credible. To make matters worse, two Australian lives were lost in a tragic accident on one of the ships.

It is no secret that Howard and his ousted Fijian counterpart, Qarase, were good mates. They regularly exchanged views on pre-coup developments in Fiji, and had joined forces in pushing for a number of issues to be placed on the Pacific regional agenda. Just a month before the coup, Howard entertained Qarase at a lavish lunch in the Great Hall of the Australian Federal Parliament at which he boasted of the close relations and common agendas shared by the two nations. Not surprisingly, when he found himself surrounded by his own soldiers at his official residence during the overthrow of his government, Qarase called on his Canberra mate for help.

Exactly what form that was to take remains in dispute. Howard told the Australian media that Qarase asked for military assistance - a claim denied by the ousted Fijian leader. This is hardly surprising, since to do so without parliament's assent would have amounted to a treason. That Howard turned down the request is also unsurprising. But his decision to go public with the request after refusing it, knowing full well what the consequences could be for his erstwhile 'mate', is most puzzling.

Australia and New Zealand (ANZ) must learn to work with the regime now in place in Fiji if they are to speed an orderly return to democratic rule. There is simply no alternative. This has to include some careful thinking on what must be done to get Fiji off its cycle of coups. Ex ante, it is sensible for the international community to do everything possible to avert a coup.

But being vindictive after the fact makes little sense. Australia has reportedly campaigned against Fiji's membership of the IMF and New Zealand is understood to have worked to block the involvement of the Fijian military in United Nations missions. New Zealand, moreover, suspended Fijian access to its guest worker

Satish Chand (satish.chand@ciprd.org) is a CIPRD Senior Fellow and Associate Professor in the Crawford School of Economics and Government at the Australian National University. He is a widely published commentator on island Pacific economics and development.



Poverty continues its steady march forward: in 2002 almost one in three Fijians were unable to afford the basic needs of life, up from one in four a decade earlier.

scheme following the coup. It is time to bring such actions to an end if progress is to have a chance.

To many, the coup was anything but a surprise, and it is worth considering what more could have been done to avert it. New Zealand attempted to broker a last minute truce between Qarase and Bainimarama and is still smarting from its failure to achieve a reconciliation between the two. But the more urgent consideration is what might be done to assist Fiji back to normality without encouraging another coup. Relations between Fiji on the one hand, and Australia and New Zealand on the other, have begun to thaw, and much credit for this must go to the Melanesians, who quickly banded around Fiji to neutralise the threats from ANZ. The interim regime in Fiji has agreed to consider the recommendations of the Eminent Persons Group sent by Forum members and subsequently endorsed at a recent meeting of Forum foreign ministers.

Australia and New Zealand should, as a start, begin lifting their travel bans on those they judge to be guilty 'by association' with the coup plotters. Many families in Fiji were divided by the coup, and some remain on less than talking terms because of the role of their kin in the military's takeover. Penalizing people simply because they are related to someone linked to the coup is unjust and it is time for some maturity on this issue.

The EU's Cotonou Agreement with the African, Caribbean and Pacific states has an inbuilt mechanism to handle eventualities of the nature faced in post-coup Fiji. Of particular relevance to the Forum are those with respect to political dialogue (Article 8), good governance and the protection of human rights (Article 9), and peace building and conflict prevention and resolution (Article 11). These have been used by the EU to keep an open dialogue with Fiji, and offer lessons on ways to build a more robust regional institutional infrastructure among Forum member nations - one which will handle both political and economic crises when and if they occur in future.

Future coups must be dissuaded. Human rights abuses can never be condoned. Constitutional

rule is good, first and foremost, for Fiji - but Australia, New Zealand and the global community also benefit.

Many of the concerns raised by Bainimarama were ignored by Qarase until it was too late. Since the first coup in 1987, Fiji has been racked by some of the worst scams in its history, all undertaken with the corroboration of those in power. The National Bank of Fiji scam cost taxpayers more than FJD200 million, and what is known as the Agriculture Scam cost the public in excess of FJD20 million. The release of prisoners convicted of treasonable offences, and the grant of public assets to consolidate political support, have also taken place under post-coup regimes. In the meantime, the economy stagnates and poverty continues its steady march forward: in 2002 almost one in three Fijians were unable to afford the basic needs of life, up from one in four a decade earlier.

Howard and his New Zealand counterpart Helen Clark should have leaned on their Fijian 'mate' to end such abuses early enough to stop the coup in its tracks. Too late to prevent the last one, this must be lesson enough to prevent the next.