

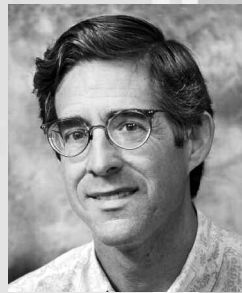
EWC Insights

One Year Into Fiji's Fourth Coup

Fiji's coup of December 5, 2006, the fourth since independence from Britain in 1970, was neither unexpected nor secretive. In fact, its highly transparent nature may have allayed fears that violence would ensue from the military takeover. Not only was the planned transition announced months in advance and generally peaceful, but it also took place after Fiji's military leader, Commodore Voreqe "Frank" Bainimarama held a series of direct if unconvincing consultations with representatives of Australia, New Zealand and the United States about the benefits of his assuming national leadership.

As a key regional center for government, education and business in the South Pacific, Fiji is seen by many as a keystone to regional stability. Indicative of the broad international effort to avert the coup, then United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan called Commodore Bainimarama in Wellington threatening that "an army takeover would not be accepted and recognized by the United Nations and that the first consequence of such an action would be Fiji being asked to withdraw from all peacekeeping operations."

Despite these concerted efforts to dissuade the commander, the military's anticipated plans to displace democratically elected officials proceeded uninterrupted. In early November 2006, troops boldly launched a raid to collect seven tons of M16 ammunition being held by police on the Suva wharf. Under increasing pressure, the indigenous Fijian prime minister, Laisenia Qarase, resorted to full-page newspaper advertisements appealing for public support. Shortly thereafter, Bainimarama, citing rampant corruption and the doctrine of necessity to justify military intervention, dismissed the government, dissolved Parliament and appointed an interim



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administration. In practical terms this simply meant soldiers visited government officials to demand that they surrender the keys to their official vehicles and cease reporting to their offices. Communications, including telephone lines and the Internet, remained open.

As the first anniversary of the military takeover approaches, a question worthy of consideration centers on whether the people of Fiji are better off today than they were last December? To what extent have the stated goals of reducing corruption, addressing ethnic fissures and spurring economic growth been achieved? Has the general abandonment of democratic processes, including the absence of checks and balances, made it easier for the military-led government to effectively deal with fundamental issues including land tenure and the global pressures associated with diminishing subsidies for agricultural goods such as sugar cane? To be sure, the interim government did not start with a clean slate. And even under the best of circumstances, significant steps toward such worthy objectives would be daunting. Shedding light on the answers to these questions requires a deeper understanding of where Fiji has been over the past two decades.

Coup Protocol

As someone who was familiar with Fiji's three previous coups, Bainimarama, an indigenous Fijian himself, knew well the routine sanctions that would ensue once he took formal control. Fiji's first coup in May 1987, called "Operation Surprise" had been led by a 38-year-old lieutenant colonel, Sitiveni Rabuka. Four months later a second coup had consolidated Rabuka's position. The goal of these first two coups was to ensure that government was controlled by indigenous Fijians, not by a coalition that included Fijians of Indian ancestry, a population that first came to Fiji in the 1870s as plantation laborers.

International condemnation and calls for a return to democracy were accompanied by measures intended to punish Fiji, including the suspension of all military assistance and a ban on travel to Australia, New Zealand and the United States by senior military staff and their families. It resulted in suspension from the Commonwealth as well. But over time these measures were quietly lifted, and by the 1990s Prime Minister Rabuka was accepted as a legitimate leader who was hosted by foreign governments and participated in international forums from Wellington to Washington. Ironically, it was Rabuka's gradual rapprochement with the Indo-Fijian political community and formation of a three-party coalition that may have resulted in his 1999 election loss, which he accepted by peacefully stepping down.

Fiji's third coup, in May 2000, once again involved the removal of Indo-Fijians from government, most notably then Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry. A group of businessmen and members of an elite military unit took over Parliament at gunpoint and held lawmakers hostage for 56 days. Release of Fiji's hostages and the arrest of numerous coup organizers both in and outside the military did not prompt the international

community to insist on the return of the deposed prime minister. Rather the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), headed by Bainimarama for just over a year, was forced temporarily into playing a dominant political role and, wishing to see a return to civilian government, installed former banker Laisenia Qarase as the new prime minister.

Not long thereafter, in November 2000, unresolved divisions within the military resulted in a bloody but ultimately unsuccessful military mutiny by coup sympathizers seeking Bainimarama's assassination. Afterwards, the commander told Fiji's *Daily Post* that there would be no more coup d'états in Fiji. "The army has never been as united as now, after the mutiny last week," he said. The commodore was hailed internationally for having played a positive role in subduing the rebels and his success in restoring stability and civilian rule after the coup. Fiji's *Sunday Post*, noting with admiration that he "never bowed to those who broke the law," named him 2000's "Man of the Year."

Qarase's subsequent election as prime minister in 2001 was seen as evidence that Fiji's trajectory augured well for future democratic rule. However, over the next several years Bainimarama's relations with Qarase's administration soured. Issues included military budget cuts, suggestion that the commander would not be reappointed at the end of his term, and a proposed amnesty bill for those involved in the 2000 coup and mutiny. During the same period, Fiji auditors reported "rampant abuse and mismanagement of funds by the state and within the civil service." Throughout 2005 and early 2006, tensions between Fiji's military and newly elected civilian leadership simmered.

By October, Commodore Bainimarama delivered an ultimatum to Prime Minister Qarase, reported in the *Fiji Times*:

"What matters is the fact that this Government leads the nation with justice and fairness to all citizens and not to a group of citizens [i.e., indigenous Fijians] only.... At this stage Fiji needs good governance and the military will demand for their resignation. There is nothing illegal about this."

Last-minute talks between Bainimarama and Qarase in late November 2006 to prevent a coup resulted in the government's acceding to nearly all of the military's demands. But the military's call to "clean up government" with a short-term deadline found the prime minister demeaning the commander, saying it should be "obvious to anybody" that Bainimarama is mentally ill. "We are dealing with somebody who is completely deranged and unstable so that's part of the problem," Qarase said. Only days later, as the military's grip on power in the capital of Suva tightened, Qarase retreated to his village on the island of Vanuabalavu. Ironically, one of Bainimarama's first actions as the self-proclaimed prime minister was to ensure all those involved in the latest coup received a blanket amnesty, despite the fact that one of the main reasons for the coup itself centered on an earlier amnesty bill for those who participated in the 2000 coup.

By most measures, the situation over the past twelve months has deteriorated.

Coup Reactions

Fiji Islanders generally acknowledge the complex challenges all of Fiji's post-independence leaders have faced. Legacies of colonial rule (e.g., ethnic divisions and land tenure issues) coupled with still influential chiefly forms of governance as well as the pressures of a globalizing world have weighed heavily on the shoulders of Fiji's prime ministers. With this implicit understanding, there appears to be a range of responses to the December coup.

Initial reactions were generally positive within the Indo-Fijian community, and more muted among indigenous Fijians. The prospect of reducing corruption was widely applauded, as was the possibility of seeing crime rates fall. There was hope that ethnic cleavages might be narrowed. If the public's response suggested some tentativeness about what had transpired, so too did the military's grasp of how to deal with the small number of voices that criticized their actions. After print media were threatened with censorship or being shut down, the military agreed to ease up, albeit with the implicit threat of retaliation if media criticism was too strident. Some individuals who openly criticized the coup were forcibly taken to the military barracks, with reports of beatings, gun pointing and other forms of intimidation.

The dawn of 2007 saw a semblance of normalcy emerge as a number of prominent civilians accepted appointments to be part of the new military government. These appointments highlighted deep cracks within the indigenous Fijian confederacies as previously marginalized factions, particularly those associated with the family of Fiji's first prime minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, took key positions heading the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Fijian Affairs. Support among the Indo-Fijian community was significantly broadened with the announcement that the deposed former prime minister, Mahendra Chaudhry, would join the regime by accepting the powerful minister of finance position. To offset the sanctions by Australia, New Zealand, the United States and European Union, it was announced that Fiji would be sending high-level delegations overseas for the purpose of establishing closer relations with countries such as the People's Republic of China, Korea and Malaysia.

Exit from Fiji in terms of increased emigration rates has been the choice for some individuals. Although the precise figures are difficult to obtain, it would appear a significant number of individuals possessing marketable skills overseas have as a result of the coup departed for greener pastures. While equally difficult to measure without accurate polling data, there seems among many rural village-based indigenous Fijians to be a level of forbearance, coupled with a wait-and-see approach. To what extent this influential segment of the population may be simmering, and may remain deeply unsettled about what the future holds, is largely unknown.

Some degree of popular support for the coup is still evident among several groups. Numerous non-ethnic Fijians see the significant number of Indo-Fijian

appointments to key positions as a propitious sign, and favor the regime's curtailment of aggressive affirmative action policies favoring indigenous Fijians, particularly in education. Alternatively, some indigenous Fijian young professionals who were disenchanted with Qarase's "traditional" approach to governance are impressed (although perhaps not convinced) by the regime's stated goal of cleansing the public sector of corruption while ensuring efficiency.

Fiji in Perspective

In assessing Fiji's current situation it is useful to look more broadly at the experience of coup-inspired regimes. There are around the globe today more than a dozen such coup leaders in power. The promises made by those executing coups routinely include ridding government of corruption, writing a new constitution and returning the nation to "true" democracy. Some coups also embrace broader objectives associated with launching a "social revolution" to fundamentally and beneficially transform society. With laudable goals in mind, the ends justify the means. Yet the record suggests that seizing control of state power is considerably easier than governing in a manner which actually achieves these ends. Pakistan, Burma (Myanmar) and Thailand, for example, offer strong evidence that military regimes, even when holding monopoly control of state instruments and institutions, are generally unable to make good on their promises to broadly advance citizens' well-being.

Fiji's post-coup "honeymoon" period has some striking parallels with another authoritarian regime, the early days of martial law in the Philippines. In September 1972 Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, in close collaboration with military officers he had appointed, declared that martial law was being imposed to protect that nation from communist insurgents, eradicate widespread corruption, overhaul a stalled political process and reform the land tenure system. Initial international reactions were negative, but within a year favorable commentaries remarked about the newly imposed public discipline, recruitment of Western trained technocrats to manage the public sector and an increased sense of pride associated with the regime's nationalist rhetoric.

Yet it was the cooptation of the judiciary that was the most critical element in incrementally allowing the Marcos regime to use its unchecked power for enormous personal gain. Over more than a decade any of the possible positive early gains made under martial law gave way to rampant graft and corruption on an unparalleled scale. As the nation's people became poorer, officials and well-connected business interests plundered government institutions of billions of dollars that set the Philippines back by decades or more.

To be sure, there is no indication that Frank Bainimarama or his family wish to enrich themselves in the style of the Marcoses. By almost all accounts the commodore lives modestly, works hard, and wants to see a future where all the people of Fiji enjoy a satisfying standard of living in which their children have bountiful opportunities. Speaking before the United Nations

General Assembly in late September, Fiji's leader earnestly requested the international communities' understanding "to help us rebuild our nation within the true spirit of internationally acceptable precepts of good governance and a democracy that can be made to work and be sustained in Fiji."

Fiji today stands in a far more favorable light than many countries which simply because they hold elections claim to be highly democratic. One may reasonably argue that, at least in the short term, Fiji is managing better than some other Pacific island nations where elections are held on a regular basis but fail to produce governments capable of advancing the quality of life. But the record of military rule in Fiji thus far indicates there are legitimate reasons for growing concern. By most measures the situation over the past twelve months has deteriorated. Fiji's economy is stagnant or even declining. Human rights abuses continue to be a serious issue, with ongoing reports of beatings.

Equally troubling, the entire judicial branch of government has fallen into disorder with lawyers and judges finding themselves in limbo. Recent reports of police officials directing threats toward the office of Public Prosecution and the Pacific Judicial Conference's call for an investigation into Fiji's judiciary has all but removed any notion of the regime being subject to independent review and restraint. Not only has the military indicated that they will ignore judicial decisions not to their liking, but there are reports of extra-judicial actions by military personnel who have assumed judicial powers. It remains to be seen whether the ongoing court case filed by former Prime Minister Qarase will be more than a debating exercise. Without a vibrant and vigorous system of institutional checks and balances, there is little optimism that the regime will achieve the honest and effective government it desires.

A window of opportunity

As Fiji nears the one-year anniversary of "interim government" rule, day-to-day issues have consumed the regime's energies, leaving insufficient time for attention to the major outstanding long-term structural issues such as land tenure. However, there remains a small window of opportunity for Bainimarama and his colleagues to find a path that will lead Fiji toward a brighter future. Unlike many of the world's dictators who see themselves as saviors with lifetime appointments, the commodore has articulated his dislike for the Office of Prime Minister proclaiming not long ago, "I hate this job."

The recent promise of national elections by March 2009 is a hopeful sign, but much can happen before then. Waiting another 15 months poses a distinct danger that the absence of effective checks and balances could well result in a burgeoning of the types of corruption and economic decline the coup leaders decry.

Alternatively, there is much that can be done to advance national unity, increase accountability and address major issues such as the future of the sugar industry. With hard work, bold decisions and the right forms of assistance from the international community, the question becomes: Can Bainimarama restore genuine democratic rule and possibly once again become the *Fiji Post's* "Man of the Year?"

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