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On 9th April this year the Fiji Court of Appeal ruled illegal the military's coup of 2006.

That coup had already changed Fiji. Following it, the military commander and prime minister Frank Bainimarama dismissed most heads of government departments and state-owned enterprises, gaining direct military control of the police, prisons, immigration, justice, the postal service, airports and fisheries, and establishing a Military Council which makes the key decisions. In the months that followed the new Government created an atmosphere of intimidation by arresting critics at will and taking them to the army camp in Suva, where they were reportedly threatened and sometimes assaulted. The military commander confronted both the Methodist Church and the Great Council of Chiefs, whose members were dismissed in favour of more compliant appointees. He imposed states of emergency, sought to intimidate the media, expelled the New Zealand High Commissioner and deported two Australian newspaper publishers.

But Bainimarama's response to the Court of Appeal judgement has been even more radical. On the day after the judgement, he set in train a military revolution and 'New Legal Order' that far supersedes anything done since the coup of 2006. Acting through the ailing and compliant President, he dismissed the entire judiciary, abrogated the constitution and handed the country over to himself and his military forces for the next five years. He declared a state of emergency, muzzled the media, expelled foreign journalists, blocked the FM transmission of Radio Australia, detained the highly respected Governor of the Reserve Bank, Savenaca Narube, and devalued the Fiji dollar by 20% in an effort to avert a foreign exchange crisis. Since then he has effectively dismissed hundreds of civil servants by lowering the age of retirement; extended direct government control over the legal profession and banned the annual conference of the Methodist Church, a major event for indigenous Fijians. He has released soldiers found guilty of coup-related crimes including murder. He has announced that Fiji is to get a new constitution, which will be Fiji's fourth constitution since independence. In the last week he has replaced all but one of the Board members of the Fiji National Provident Fund, the largest single source of funds in the country, with assets equal of half Fiji's annual GDP, and the fear is that he will begin to use those funds to meet regular government expenditure.

The first thing to say about the most recent events in Fiji is that they are unprecedented.

Fiji is accustomed to coups and to seeing democratically elected governments overthrown by force. In May 1987 an army colonel called Sitiveni Rabuka led a group of armed soldiers into parliament, announced he was taking over and escorted the government members to waiting army trucks. A year of agitation, unrest, arson, looting and political instability followed, but democratic elections eventually returned five years later. In May 2000 George Speight, with the assistance of 30 rebel soldiers, marched into the

Parliament and held its members hostage for 56 days before being persuaded to leave and then being arrested by the army, which had taken over Fiji in the meantime. In December 2006 Frank Bainimarama seized power from the elected government of Laisenia Qarase after years of threatening to do so.

The justifications for these coups differed: Rabuka and Speight said they acted for the sake of the indigenous Fijians and in order to save them from Indian domination; Bainimarama said he was acting only in order to undertake a clean-up campaign that would purge the country of corruption and racial bias in government. But the common thread is of ambitious men who cannot abide the compromises and contest of ideas in democratic politics, and who are willing to overthrow democratic governments by force in the service of a supposedly higher good.

What was also common to those coups of 1987, 2000 and 2006, in varying degrees, was that they did not fundamentally undermine Fiji's key institutions. The coups damaged Fiji, especially by encouraging so many of its best people to leave, but they left its institutions largely intact. Voting at elections is a vital element of successful democracy, but far from the only one. Just as important are a free media, freedom of speech, freedom of association, an independent and impartial judiciary, a legal profession that can operate independently and according to law, a public service based on meritocracy, and government appointments to the leading positions of state that owe at least something to the professional rather than the political qualifications of those appointed. And in Fiji we can add a few more institutions, whatever their shortcomings, that have historically constituted bulwarks against tyranny, and I think here of the Methodist Church and the Great Council of Chiefs, which was a direct part of Fiji's constitutional arrangements until the recent abrogation of the constitution.

To the surprise of foreign observers, Fiji succeeded in having a series of coups that did not undermine these institutions, or did so to only a limited extent. Fiji had uniquely Pacific coups, quite unlike the bloody events experienced in Africa or South Asia. In 2000, for example, the media remained free to report on developments from the time Speight entered the Parliament, people remained free to say what they thought, the Methodist Church was untouched, the legal profession continued to operate as usual and the Great Council of Chiefs was given the task of appointing the interim government. The schools closed for six weeks and then opened again. More importantly, the judiciary played a key role in solving Fiji's political problem at that time, by ruling that the 1997 constitution remained in force and paving the way for fresh elections – opening a legal space, if you like, for Fiji to right itself constitutionally. Even the more far-reaching 2006 coup left in place a free if somewhat intimidated media, an independent legal profession, and an independent judiciary, as we see from the judgement of the Court of Appeal on 9th April. That is, those things applied until the 10th April and the seizure of complete power that has occurred since. Now things are radically different and radically worse in Fiji. That is what I mean by 'unprecedented'.

So how are we to explain Fiji's descent into full-scale military dictatorship?

At the broadest level, we could point to the deep divisions in Fijian society since colonial times, above all between indigenous and immigrant communities; and to the opportunities such divisions give to politicians in search of power. Divisions create fear, and fear offers politicians the chance of to pose as a protector of one community against another. That is why the question of representation of communities – in Parliament, in the public service, in the economy – has been central to Fiji's political debate since the 1930s and remains so.

But we also need to consider the immediate cause of Fiji's descent into military dictatorship, and that is the readiness of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces to assume political authority.

Why has the RFMF been prepared to take over the country?

(i) The answer lies, first, in the growth of the military forces since Fiji's independence in 1970.

Fiji's regular military force when the British left in 1970 was 200 strong and its best days seemed far behind. But it has been transformed by 30 years' participation in UN and other peacekeeping. The force grew to 1,300 in 1978 in order to provide a light battalion of 500 to the UN. When 2FIR, the 2nd Fiji Infantry battalion, went to the Sinai in 1982 the force grew to 1,800. By 1986, following further UN requests, the force had grown to 2,200. The RFMF's involvement in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was initially intended to last no longer than a year or so but continued uninterrupted until the end of 2002. Over the 22 years of the UNIFIL deployment, south Lebanon was temporarily home to thousands of Fijian soldiers. There is still a Fiji battalion in the Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai, and over the 30 years since 1978, around 25,000 Fiji soldiers have served on overseas peace-keeping missions. In recent years the Iraq War has brought more income to Fiji from the 1,000 or so Fijians who have served as escorts, guards and drivers for companies in the business of privatised security in war zones. Fiji has 220 troops in Iraq, where they serve as guards for UN personnel and facilities in Baghdad and Erbil under the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). Fijians have served in larger numbers in regional peacekeeping missions in East Timor, Bougainville and Solomon Islands.

Peacekeeping experience has not only enlarged the size of the force but also professionalised it, and turned it into a highly disciplined instrument of coercive power.

(ii) In the second place, the RFMF has become accustomed to intervention in politics since the first coup of 1987. Obedience to the civil power has become foreign to its traditions, and Bainimarama openly opposed the democratically elected government of Fiji on numerous issues for years before he finally intervened to throw it out. The military overspent its budget in every year from 2003-2007 – in total by \$118 million over the

five year period.ⁱ Total spending reached \$100 million in 2006, well ahead of the budgeted \$76.5 million, and some of this money was used to campaign against the government. The RFMF pays its soldiers and officers extremely well, and it has become a drain on Fiji's resources.

(iii) **In the third place, there is Frank Bainimarama himself.** He is a man with close ties to the influential Mara family. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was prime minister of Fiji for most of the first 22 years of Fiji's independence, and subsequently became President. The Maras have benefited from having Bainimarama in charge since 2006. Ratu Epeli Nailatikau was sworn in as Fiji's Vice President, for example, on 17 April. He is also a man whom rebel soldiers tried to kill in an army mutiny in November 2000, and someone with a grudge against the politicians who were close to those rebels. And, like many dictators, he is a military man who is impatient with criticism and debate, and thinks he has the answer. Speaking before the United Nations in September 2007, Bainimarama called it his intervention a coup to end all coups, insisting that measures to 'clean up' the country and eradicate racism would set Fiji firmly on a new trajectory and end forever the bitter cycle of ethno-nationalist coups. The coup was in the name of 'good governance', anti-corruption and anti-racism. In a decisive stroke from above, Bainimarama would remove bad politics and bad politicians; he would dispel bad inclinations such as greed and prejudice; and he would comprehensively remake Fiji so that it could eventually be returned to democracy in virtuous shape.

What, then, are the immediate and longer-term prospects for this South Pacific dictatorship?

The economy is in serious difficulties. "The country's recovery in the wake of the -6.6% fall in GDP in 2007 has been modest." Economists now predict a further decline in the growth of the economy, following a fall of 6.6% in 2007 and a minor recovery last year. Standard & Poors recently downgraded Fiji's long term sovereign credit rating to negative from stable. The country faces a liquidity crisis, with a collapse of investor confidence and banks unwilling to lend to businesses. Fiji's sugar farmers will be particularly hard hit by the scheduled fall in sugar prices paid by the EU by 21.7%. A crunch point may be reached in September 2011, when Fiji is due to repay a loan of \$260 million raised in Singapore after the 2006 coup.

Chinese aid is in infrastructure built by Chinese workers brought to Fiji, and not in investments that might help Fiji to meet its balance of payments at a time of declining exports. "A Chinese delegation consisting of 50 businessmen and 10 government officials visited Fiji in June, following on the heels of a visit by Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping in February. Bereft of support from traditional donor partners, Fiji has sought assistance in the form of F\$260m in soft loans from Beijing for infrastructure projects that entail also contracts with Chinese companies. The China Railway First Company is engaged in building low cost housing in the Tacirua, Rawai and Raiwaqa suburbs of the capital, Suva. Local trades unions have expressed concerns about the arrival of 300 Chinese workers tasked with building a hydroelectric dam in remote Nadarivatu on the island of

Viti Levu. Chinese assistance, however, does not provide urgently needed relief for balance of payments difficulties since the vast bulk of payments are made overseas.”

Domestic opposition to the regime has been silenced, except on the blogs, but Fijians are complaining about the government around the grog bowls in Fiji villages, and the government does not have the universal support of the Fiji Indian community either, especially since Mahendra Chaudhry withdrew from the government and denounced it as dictatorial. The RFMF is having no trouble attracting hundreds of new recruits each year, mainly because they are paid so well. The Methodist Church, however, is a focus of indigenous Fijian opposition to the government, and is more outspoken than it was immediately after the coup even though the government has arrested and detained some of its leaders. At the same time a disjunction has emerged between the stated aims of Bainimarama – to make Fiji tolerant and multicultural – and the reality of his expanding patronage of indigenous Fijians, and his acceptance of ideologically pro-Fijian initiatives. The logic of retaining power in Fiji is certainly for Bainimarama to drive a wedge between chiefs and commoners in the majority Fijian community, and there is evidence he is attempting to do so. While Bainimarama proclaims multiculturalism, for example, his police chief Esala Teleni is imposing Christian observance on Indian members of the force as if the ideology at the top were to make Fiji a Christian state.

Finally, how has the international community reacted to the 2006 coup and the recent abrogation of the constitution? And how should it react?

These days, the leader of a coup in a small developing country faces international pressure to hold an election and return to democracy as soon as his troops have intervened. US law requires American Presidents to suspend aid to countries where coups have occurred. The EU imposes democratic conditionality on its aid and trade dealings with the 79 member states of the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific group to which Fiji belongs, and has enshrined them in the Cotonou Convention. The European Union, main buyer of Fiji sugar, extracted a promise of a 2009 election from the interim government in April 2007, and was actively engaged in pressuring the government from then on. The EU will no longer pay the sugar transition funds promised to Fiji.

Successive coups in Fiji have presented Australia with a perplexing foreign policy challenge, and the most recent crackdown is no different. Fiji matters to Australia not only for itself, but because of its regional importance. Fiji is the location of numerous regional organizations that serve the South Pacific as a whole – such as the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the University of the South Pacific – and forms a natural hub for smaller Pacific countries. What happens in Fiji influences the entire region.

Australia has not accepted Bainimarama’s argument that this coup is justified by the nobility and far-sightedness of its alleged objectives. Australia’s response to the coup has been the same as in the case of Fiji’s earlier coups, and consists of condemnation, smart sanctions and diplomacy aimed at restoring the democratic system in Fiji as soon as possible. Australia has placed travel restrictions on Bainimarama, his supporters and their families, as well as members of the interim government and their families. Australia has

also suspended defence cooperation and withdrawn aid from particular sectors, especially police and prisons. Australia has also opposed the use of Fijians in UN peacekeeping operations, but the UN has not so far stopped using them. Australia, New Zealand, the United Nations, Commonwealth and European Union have all condemned Bainimarama's abrogation of the constitution, and the repressions that have followed.

Bainimarama has responded defiantly. He expelled two Australian newspaper owners, Russell Hunter of the *Fiji Sun* and Evan Hannah of the *Fiji Times*. He refused to permit Australia to provide more security for the Australian high commissioner in Suva, James Batley, following a series of death threats. He broke the promise given to the Pacific Islands Forum and the EU that Fiji would hold elections in 2009. And in the end he abrogated the constitution and silenced the free media.

Fiji is isolated in the Pacific Islands as well. Bainimarama's appeals to Pacific solidarity against Australia do not convince Island leaders, especially as Kevin Rudd has given them what they most want from Australia and have requested for years – access to the Australian labour market. Australia's Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme will be trialled over the next three years, recruiting from three countries that already participate in New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme – Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu – and one with close historic links to Australia, PNG. Somare is particularly pleased by the inclusion of PNG. Pointedly, the Australian government has excluded Fiji and will presumably continue to do so until satisfied that democracy has been restored there.

The Australian government is fully aware that the situation in Fiji is serious, both for the people of Fiji and for the Islands region. But intervention is out of the question for very good reasons, and Australia, in my view, must persist with its present policy of isolating the regime, condemning its repression, and upholding the principles of the Biketawa Declaration of 2000, in which Island leaders undertook “to uphold democratic processes and institutions, including the peaceful transfer of power, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary and to the individual's inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic political process in framing the society in which he or she lives.”

China will not constitute a significant alternative source of international legitimacy for the Fiji military regime.

A final observation: the Bainimarama regime has tightened its grip on Fiji recently not because it is strong and enjoys widespread legitimacy among the population, but because it is weak and increasingly threatened by dissent.

ⁱ Auditor-Generals figures, reported in ‘\$118m extra – army overspends in last five budgets’, *Fiji Times*, 27 November, 2008