

Fiji: The Cruel Hoax

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On 9 April, the Fiji Court of Appeal, the country's second highest court, ruled that the December 2006 military coup against Laisenia Qarase's democratically elected government was illegal, as was the installation soon afterwards of Commodore Bainimarama's interim administration by President Josefa Iloilo. The President's supposed sovereign powers were found to be non-existent. The President had no powers except those specified in the 1997 Constitution. He was required to work within the provisions of the Constitution, not outside it. The court recommended that the President appoint a distinguished Fiji citizen, other than Laisenia Qarase or Bainimarama, to head a caretaker government and prepare the country for fresh parliamentary elections.

Later that evening, Commodore Bainimarama, appearing relaxed and informal, told the nation that he had resigned as Prime Minister and was returning to the barracks. Many in Fiji applauded him thinking that the rule of law might now finally prevail. But the optimism was short lived.

Bainimarama's words were a cruel hoax played on an unsuspecting nation.

The next day, shortly after midday, President Iloilo addressed the nation. In the course of his speech, he praised Bainimarama's interim administration for creating 'opportunities for new ideas,' and for adhering to the President's controversial mandate. Then, in a statement full of strange irony, he said that to 'facilitate the holding of true democratic and parliamentary elections,' he was abrogating the 1997 constitution (for which he had voted as a then Senator), appointing himself the Head of State, and revoking the appointment of all judicial officers.

By Saturday morning, President Iloilo reappointed Commodore Bainimarama as the interim Prime Minister. All of the same members of the previous interim cabinet were sworn in later in the day.

The old regime was back in office, back in business, in a new set of clothes.

The regime's supporters argued that the Appeal Court's decision left President Iloilo with no option but to abrogate the constitution. This is simply not true. Exercising Emergency Powers, the President could properly have appointed an interim cabinet to take the country to the next parliamentary elections.

But returning the country to parliamentary democracy was the last thing on his mind, or on the minds of his minders. The President was not the free, impartial head of state the world imagined him to be. Visibly in ill-health, painfully struggling through a speech written for him, he was, in truth, an instrument in the hands of the military to do whatever they wanted done.

The military wanted the constitution abrogated, and they used a pliant President to do the deed for them, to give the treasonous action a semblance of legitimacy. A titular head of state, akin to the Governor General in Australia, was expected to protect the honour and integrity of the constitution; instead, he trashed it at the behest of the military. In effect, he carried out the country's fifth coup in two decades.

Fiji is currently under a hastily decreed Emergency Regulations. Freedom of movement and speech are severely curtailed, and military and police are stationed in the country's media offices to monitor the publication of news. The media had already been under attack, with Land Forces Commander Pita Driti threatening to shut down the Fiji Times. The home of the newspaper's editor, Netani Rika, had been the target of a fire bomb a week ago. Other prominent pro-democracy leaders were similarly attacked. Intimidation is working. Self-censorship is the order of the day in Fiji.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the country is effectively run by a shadowy Military Council. Commodore Bainimarama has publicly admitted heeding their advice.

So what does the military want? They said, when they took over government in December 2006, that wanted to clean the country of corruption. But the 'clean up' campaign has lost all credibility. No one has been prosecuted so far.

The military says they want Fiji to have a new electoral system, the Proportional Representation Open List System, not the Alternative Vote system currently in place. There is emerging consensus that Fiji needs to move away from its present race-based, quasi-consociational (power sharing) system.

Whatever electoral system is in place, unless there is basic respect for the rule of law, nothing will work.

The real cause of political instability in Fiji is not its electoral system, but a large standing army in an unruly environment characterized by a blatant disregard for the verdict of the ballot box. Unless the military is reined in or its size substantially reduced, Fiji's political stability will remain at risk. But the military sees for itself not a reduced but an enhanced role in the public life of Fiji. Any new constitution that is drawn up will shore up the military's power.

The military wants to introduce the principles of good governance through a so-called Peoples' Charter. Full of motherhood statements about how to run a happy and harmonious society (Sociology 101, in truth), the Charter is a mantra chanted ad nauseam by the military. The Charter is a harmless enough planning document, but the military sees no irony in introducing good governance principles at the point of a gun, and against the wishes of most indigenous Fijians, if the stand of the Methodist Church, the Fijian Teachers Association and the former ruling SDL Party is anything to go by.

Commodore Bainimarama and his Military Council are determined to have their way. So far, they have ignored the advice of Fiji's regional neighbours, represented by the Pacific

Forum Leaders. The Commonwealth Secretariat's plea for dialogue and peaceful resolution of the current impasse has similarly fallen on deaf ears. The European Union's funds for the restructure of the country's ailing sugar industry are on hold.

The immediate future of the Fijian economy looks grim. In these times of galloping global financial crisis, no one will invest capital in an environment characterized by systemic political instability. Two weeks ago, Commodore Bainimarama instructed his Permanent Secretaries to cut the current operating budgets of their departments by fifty per cent.

And the Reserve Bank has placed strict financial control on capital outflow. These, more than anything else, give the truest picture of dire situation facing Fiji. As the impasse remains unresolved and the political dialogue process stalls, as the military entrenches its position and as the international condemnations continue, Fiji does not have much room for optimism as it looks to its immediate future.

In 1985 Fiji was described by Pope John Paul II as 'The Way The World Should Be.' That period has now vanished beyond recall. After several coups in the last two decades, Fiji is, sadly, on the way to becoming 'The Burma of the Pacific.'