

A dictator's paradise: democracy Fades in Fiji

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The fact that tourists are still flocking to Fiji strengthens the impression of calm, and Bainimarama, four years after the coup, continues to draw support from many sectors of society. A rare opinion poll released early last year revealed that although elected government head Laisenia Qarase was the preferred prime minister for 31 percent of the population, 27 percent still preferred Bainimarama. Supporters of the strongman believe that he is genuinely trying to bridge the long-running divisions plaguing Fiji.

Although various grievances have contributed to the country's history of coups, one key cleavage – beyond the civilian government's obvious inability to control the military – is the racial division between Fiji's indigenous population and Indo-Fijians – the descendants of the indentured labor force brought in by British colonialists.

False hopes

The race issue is the most commonly cited explanation for Fiji's 'coup culture'. In keeping with the dominance of the race narrative in Fiji's politics, Bainimarama built his claim to be an 'enlightened dictator' on the promise of ending these bitter divisions. His approach and position is unique: as an indigenous Fijian, in charge of a military dominated by indigenous Fijians, he has promised to remove the barriers that have entrenched discrimination against Indo-Fijians in the past.

His 'Peoples Charter' initiative, designed to kick-start the process of racial healing, set out these lofty aims in its foreword:

The overarching objective of the Peoples Charter is to rebuild Fiji into a non-racial, culturally vibrant and united, well-governed, truly democratic nation; a nation that seeks progress and prosperity through merit-based equality of opportunity and peace.

There have been other positive initiatives that Bainimarama supporters can point to as evidence of his sincerity. He has, for example, implemented various poverty alleviation policies and moved to allow Indo-Fijians to be dual nationals (consistent with the existing rights of Indigenous Fijians.)

But there is also mounting evidence of much more portentous motives.

Broken promises

In April last year Bainimarama installed President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau and sacked the judiciary after a court ruled the regime illegal. Bainimarama also reneged on a pledge to hold elections by March 2009, pushing the date back to 2014, later raising doubts about even this commitment.

In a particularly troubling sign, he instituted draconian media censorship laws and moved to close a major independent news outlet, The Fiji Times, through new foreign ownership laws. Although a lively and critical debate is gaining shape online out of reach from state censors, these trends, Amnesty International recently argued, show that "human rights violations have been rife in Fiji" during Bainimarama's rule.

Ongoing instability has also damaged Fiji's economy, dampening employment opportunities and raising the possibility of public discontent boiling over in the case of worsening prospects. Further, Bainimarama recently engaged in a string of diplomatic expulsions, causing alarm among regional neighbors and deepening the country's international isolation.

Frustrated neighbors

Previous coups in Fiji have been relatively short lived, so there was some initial optimism that this one would follow a familiar course. Although Australia reacted strongly at first, with warships despatched to Fiji in the lead up to the coup in an ominous warning to the strongman, no troops disembarked in the end, making a regional leader look distinctly weak on this issue.

Since then, as Bainimarama has steadily entrenched himself, tough-love diplomacy has been the preferred route taken by frustrated neighboring countries. Australia and New Zealand have led the charge to stymie the dictator's international agenda, and although they succeeded in having Fiji suspended from the Commonwealth and the leading regional organization, the Pacific Islands Forum (whose Secretariat is based in Fiji), progress since has been almost non-existent.

China initially jumped in to take advantage of Fiji's growing isolation, providing Bainimarama with \$5 million in cash in the immediate wake of the coup, but has since become much more cautious, leaving Fiji more or less isolated.

Back to democracy?

Mass protests against the Bainimarama regime are highly unlikely, however, especially given the well-armed military they would likely confront.

Against this backdrop, Bainimarama's rule looks firmly entrenched. A major shock – like the collapse of the economy, or a counter coup – might jolt him, but there is no immediate prospect of this. And while elections have been promised for 2014, it would be naïve to think Bainimarama will feel compelled to keep to this self-imposed deadline.

The endgame for this coup therefore remains far from clear. Bainimarama has dropped the prefix 'interim' from his prime minister's title, and if he can maintain the support of the military and keep the economy afloat, his continued hold on power seems assured.

The approach taken by Australia and New Zealand has also reached a deadlock having failed to secure a return to democracy. Most worryingly no alternatives to the current approach to Fiji seem to be under serious consideration, and absent any drastic change in tone, regional efforts to change the status quo on the island are doomed to fail.

The leader of the last coup in Fiji, George Speight, met an unhappy fate, and Bainimarama is likely to be extremely concerned about the prospect of a similar end. He will do everything he can to cling to power, possibly by standing for election – provided he can be certain of winning.

Although we will not see mass starvation or horrific pogroms unfolding on the island, much of the progress Fiji has made on the development front will be wiped out because of continued mismanagement, deepening isolation and an increasingly constrained public space.

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