

China's support of Fiji is doing little to help ordinary Fijians

Fergus Hanson

The Age

22 August 2008

P. 13

Fiji's interim government is on the nose more than ever these days. The coup in December 2006 resulted in Western sanctions and travel bans, but the hope was that the coup leader's commitment to holding elections by March 2009 would be met and we could all move on. Not any more, it would seem. Commodore Frank Bainimarama has reneged on his promise of elections and boycotted the Pacific's most important summit currently taking place in Niue. While other countries have united to stymie Fiji's interim regime, one has conspicuously offered a helping hand.

A recent Lowy Institute report on China's estimated aid program in the Pacific revealed that its pledged aid to Fiji had skyrocketed since the December 2006 coup. In 2005, it pledged \$US1 million in aid and about \$US23 million in 2006. But after the coup, pledges jumped to more than \$US160 million in 2007.

The governments of Fiji and China have both shown themselves to be remarkably sensitive to public revelations over China's aid pledges. The permanent secretary of the Prime Minister's Office in Fiji, Parmesh Chand, said the figures on pledged aid "are all wrong". During a recent press conference, a spokesman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing, Qin Gang, called the report "totally pointless and unacceptable". Publication of the actual figures would obviously help clear up any misunderstanding, but both governments have so far refused to do this.

All of which suggests a disturbing level of Chinese assistance to Fiji, right at a time when responsible governments around the world should be sending the strongest possible signals that the regime's backpedalling is not on. It also suggests a double standard: how can Beijing complain about other countries interfering in its internal affairs when it intervenes so dramatically to prop up a dictatorship?

Bainimarama clearly thinks he can ride out Western sanctions by relying on other funding sources. In a statement he released to this week's Pacific Islands Forum, he wrote: "We will decide what is in our national interest at this juncture in our history . . . If we have to, we will seek assistance from outside the Pacific Forum and the Commonwealth."

So which countries might he have in mind? The United States? Japan? Unlikely. The same country that pledged more than \$US160 million in aid to Fiji in 2007 would seem a more likely bet.

This is not to say that Chinese aid is the only reason Fiji is stalling on its return to democracy, but it clearly isn't helping. It also does nothing to support China's claim it is promoting a "harmonious world" or its image as a responsible emerging power.

So why would China choose to associate itself with such an insignificant pariah regime and expend diplomatic capital on a country of less than a million people with not much to offer by way of resources or strategic significance?

As is so often the case in the Pacific, the primary motivation behind China's aid program to Fiji seems to be a fear that the interim regime might switch to recognising Taiwan. Fiji is one of the few countries in the region that gets away with housing a Taiwanese trade office at the same time it pledges its undying fealty to the one-China policy and there are reports of high-level contacts between Fiji and Taiwanese officials. So as Western donors tightened the screws on Fiji in the wake of the coup, China must have been painfully aware that Taiwan would be the commodore's next port of call, if it failed to cough up some serious aid money.

China may have a motive for pledging large amounts of aid to Fiji, but that can hardly excuse its behaviour. If China is serious about promoting a harmonious world and being a responsible international actor, it cannot rely on everyone else to do all the heavy lifting.

It would be easy for all regional donors to curry favour with the interim regime in Fiji, but that would have serious negative consequences for the region and its stability, let alone Fiji. For the outgoing Pacific Islands Forum chairman, Tongan Prime Minister Feleti Sevele, Fiji's boycott of the summit was so serious it tested the very "strength and relevance of the forum".

As the Beijing Olympics have demonstrated, China clearly takes its national image seriously. There need to be more countries prepared to call on China to give responsibly in the Pacific (and elsewhere). Australia - as the region's main donor and security underwriter - needs to take a lead role in getting China delivering aid according to accepted international standards.

And China - even if it has to maintain some aid to stymie Taiwan's efforts to get Fiji to switch its recognition from one China to the other - needs to ensure as little aid money gets through to the regime as possible.

In a speech he gave in Fiji in 2006, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said: "China has proved and will continue to prove itself to be a sincere, trustworthy and reliable friend and partner of the Pacific." Unfortunately, China is proving itself a poor friend to the people of Fiji in their struggle to win back democracy.

Fergus Hanson is a research associate at the Lowy Institute and author of two reports on Chinese aid to the Pacific.