

TOUGH LOVE WON'T CHANGE REGIME'S HEART

JENNY HAYWARD-JONES

10 May 2011

The Australian, p8

Rudd's Mid-East policy should apply to Fiji if we want to see democracy restored.

TWO statements by Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd this year highlight both the shortcomings and the potential of Australian foreign policy.

In a television interview in New Zealand on March 27, Rudd denied the need for a new approach to bring about democracy in Fiji. He argued there was “a tendency in parts of the region for the question to be put in terms of what should Australian and New Zealand diplomacy be doing”, buying into a “Bainimarama assumption that the problem lies with the rest of us rather than with the Bainimarama regime”.

In a speech to the Press Club on February 22 about Australia's interests in the Middle East, Rudd said: “A creative middle power recognises that we have to work in partnerships and coalitions to achieve change, including with non-traditional partners to establish better understanding of the issue at hand and to come up with better informed solutions . . . Australia always stands ready to propose new partnerships to tackle new problems, to tackle old problems in new ways”.

On Fiji, Rudd is right that the problem lies with the Bainimarama regime. Fiji's economic problems, lack of freedom of speech and uncertainty about its future are down to Frank Bainimarama's illegitimate government, not Canberra. But in promoting Australia's credentials as a creative middle power on the world stage in the context of the Arab awakening, Rudd has inadvertently drawn more attention to Australia's diplomatic failings in Fiji.

Canberra's tough-love policy has failed in its central aim — to persuade the Fijian government to restore democracy.

Fiji has instead developed new allegiances and partnerships, which undermine Australia's influence and leadership. Australia's allies have begun to quietly question whether isolating Fiji is the best way to restore democracy there.

A Foreign Minister who so enthusiastically backed the wannabe democrats in North Africa can hardly back away from holding the line on Australia's interests in seeing a return to democracy in Fiji, nor should he. But with the current approach to Fiji manifestly not working, is there room for Australia to be the kind of “creative middle power” Rudd envisages?

While Bainimarama has strongly resisted external pressure and rejected previous offers of assistance from Australia and the Pacific Islands Forum for holding early elections, he has also been courting other countries, including most recently Indonesia.

In a new Lowy Institute policy brief, “Policy Overboard: Australia's increasingly costly Fiji drift”, I argue Australia should redefine its relationship with Fiji with a sharper focus on its

longer-term interests rather than on increasingly hollow calls for early elections. It can do this without abandoning strong support for democracy.

Australia should build and lead a new coalition with traditional partners (New Zealand, Japan, the US and EU) and non-traditional partners (such as Indonesia, India, Malaysia, South Korea and Papua New Guinea) to work with Fiji on a package of assistance for electoral and constitutional reform consistent with Fiji's 2014 election timetable.

Bainimarama can snub Australia but may think twice about rejecting overtures from a coalition that includes key Asian democracies he has been keen to impress.

An approach like this is complex and needs to be developed carefully.

The Australian government would need to build confidence in Fiji first to clear the way for a more effective approach to persuade the regime to restore democracy. A level of trust and goodwill sufficient to get Australia's voice heard again in Fiji could be established through more contacts between Australian and Fiji diplomats and through amending travel restrictions to apply only to key members of the military-led regime.

Canberra would also need to convince new partners that there are benefits to forming a coalition to help Fiji and ensure that they were prepared to advocate for democratic reform there.

If Fiji proves open to accepting an offer of assistance from a new coalition, Australia could reward it by implementing other measures to enhance the capacity of leaders across all sectors in Fiji.

These could include the establishment of an Australia-Melanesia-Indonesia leadership dialogue, public sector twinning arrangements and the inclusion of Fiji in the region's PACER Plus trade negotiations.

If the Australian government does not take action now to rebuild its relationship with Fiji, it will lose any opportunity to influence Fiji's transition to a sustainable democracy and could be a mere observer to the entrenchment of the Bainimarama regime.

Fiji could reject a new creative overture but if it does, the Fiji government's efforts to blame Australia for Fiji's problems will be less credible. The onus will be more explicitly on Bainimarama to prove to the international community and, importantly, to the people of Fiji that he has credible plans to restore democracy.

Rudd believes Australian foreign policy should make a difference. If Australia wants to maintain its credibility as the dominant power in the Pacific region and be a creative middle power on the world stage, it should start by making a difference in Fiji.

*Jenny Hayward-Jones is the Myer Foundation Melanesia program director at the **Lowy Institute**. The full paper, *Policy Overboard: Australia's increasingly costly Fiji drift*, is at www.lowyinstitute.org. An earlier version of this article [appeared](#) on the Institute's blog, [The Interpreter](#).*