

## **A New Chapter? Fiji's 2014 Election and the Bainimarama Predicament**

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After eight years of military rule, Fiji is set to stage a landmark election in September 2014 that will restore democracy to the small island nation. Recent movement towards an election has been widely applauded in the international community – particularly from Australia and New Zealand, the two major powers in the South Pacific – although questions still remain over how smooth the transition process will be from military rule back to democracy. At the centre of these concerns is Frank Bainimarama, Fiji's previous Prime Minister and the instigator of a military coup in December 2006 that ultimately abolished the constitution and placed Fiji under military rule. Bainimarama has recently stepped down from his military post and will contest the election as Leader of the "Fiji First" Party.

Can Fiji transition peacefully and fairly from military rule to democracy and keep the same leader? Its recent history suggests that such a transition will be next to impossible. After Britain granted its independence in 1970, Fiji has experienced three coups (1987, 2000 and 2006) and three constitutions, with a fourth drafted for the upcoming election. Fuelled by "ethnic schisms" between Native Fijians, Indo-Fijians and their ties to major political parties, racial tensions provided the "key catalyst" for each coup that overthrew the sitting government, instated military rule and abolished the constitution (Fraenkal, 2013). In their aftermath, no government successfully retained the leadership once a new constitution was drafted. In short, no elected Fijian Prime Minister has enjoyed a peaceful or extended time in government, let alone one who was last responsible for dissolving the Parliament.

Bainimarama, however, has shown signs recently that he is confident of winning the election. Alongside Fiji First (providing the party receives enough signatures to register), four other parties will contest the election: the Fiji Labor Party, the National Federation Party, the Social Democratic Liberal Party, and the People's Democratic Party. In the face of this competition, Bainimarama recently urged Fijians to "have confidence" in who they voted for, which is tantamount to suggesting that he is a prime candidate that will represent the Fijian people responsibly (Naleba, 2014).

He would also be encouraged by a recent International Gallup Poll, which showed that 70% of Fijians thought 2014 will be better than 2013, and that 62% thought this year will be a year of economic prosperity. 88% of Fijians also felt generally happy about their lives. The survey was universal, so it did not offer any specific conclusions about what Fijians thought about Bainimarama. Nevertheless, he would be pleased that Fijians expressed so much confidence about their country in 2014 and would hope to convert this into votes for him and his party (Hayward-Jones, 2014).

If Bainimarama loses the election, many Fijians will be sceptical that he will simply accept the result and gracefully step back from further involvement in Fijian politics. In staging the December 2006 coup, Bainimarama claimed his original impetus was to clean up corruption, not to abolish the constitution or existing legislative processes. "The RFBMF (Royal Fijian Military Forces) could have carried out unconstitutional and illegal activities but has not done so and will not do so," Bainimarama announced to the Fijian public on the evening of the coup on 5 December, "[the RFBMF] believes in the rule of law and adheres to the constitution" (Bainimarama, 2006). Yet once the Fiji Court of Appeal ruled in April 2009 that his seizure of power was unconstitutional, Bainimarama enforced a full-scale military takeover and abolished the constitution.

Further contradicting his previous claims, Bainimarama delayed movement toward an election and kept the Prime Ministership for a further three years. At a Pacific Islands Forum meeting in 2007, Bainimarama promised elections in 2009. A day later he told journalists that the scheduled

elections were unlikely. When asked if this was illegal under Fiji's constitution, he responded “we will change that part of it” (Cooney, 2014). Later, in an interview in 2010, Bainimarama complained that “reforms take time.” “[The election] is for the people of Fiji” he went on to advocate, but “I do not trust the people ... if politicians abuse the power we will have them removed” (McDonald, 2010)

These disconcerting statements suggest that Bainimarama will not relinquish power willingly, regardless of the outcome of any election. If Bainimarama is elected, he would surely fear an “inevitable backlash caused by his actions and policies” that will threaten the legitimacy of his continued leadership (Lal and Hunter, 2012). If he is not elected, he will likewise fear that his legacy will be remembered as one that drove Fiji into unsustainable debt and poverty. The economic impact of his rule is particularly staggering: Fiji's GDP growth from 2001 to 2006 averaged approximately 3% annually, yet in 2007, the economy contracted by a massive -6.6%. The Reserve Bank of Fiji suggests further decline from 2008-2010, although these statistics have not been verified officially (Lane, 2012). In either scenario, Bainimarama stands to lose either his control of Fiji or his reputation, neither of which he would be happy to concede.

Concerned by Fiji's poor economic growth rates, ever-present racial tensions and widespread poverty since the 2006 coup, the international community has tried to force Bainimarama out of office and demonstrate that military rule is neither tolerable nor sustainable. Since 2000, Fiji has been suspended twice from the Commonwealth and became the first country to ever be suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum. These suspensions tended to isolate Fiji further, rather than encourage political change in Suva.

Australia and New Zealand, Fiji's most important regional partners, took stronger condemnatory action but also failed in their efforts to push Bainimarama toward staging elections. Over and above condemning his coup and urging a speedy return to parliamentary democracy, Canberra and Wellington suspended defence cooperation, froze its aid programs, rejected forum invitations, and imposed travel

bans on Bainimarama, his family and other government officials. Then Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer even went one step further and urged the Fijian people to resist Bainimarama's rule. Neatly summarising the consensus of opinion in Australia and New Zealand vis-à-vis Bainimarama, Downer told the Australian parliament,

I don't think public servants should cooperate with the commodore and the military. I don't think the police should cooperate ... Commodore Bainimarama should understand that there is an urgent need to restore the ownership of government in his country to the people ... through their democratically elected parliament and institutions (Banham, 2006; see also Firth, 2013).

Relations with Fiji went on to get progressively worse, hitting its lowest point in 2009 after both Australia and New Zealand's High Commissioners were expelled from Suva. Yet, even after isolating Fiji bilaterally and through regional organisations, Bainimarama kept the Prime Ministership.

Trans-Tasman hostility toward Fiji simmered for several years after, yet relations improved markedly once Bainimarama confirmed that the long awaited election will go ahead as planned in September 2014. High Commissioners have since been restored to Canberra, Wellington and Suva, financial assistance has been offered, and travel bans have been lifted. The new Australian government, led by Tony Abbott, will also lead an invitation to observe the election, while two Australians will work with the Fijian Elections Office as Deputy Supervisor and Director of Operations to help ensure it runs as smoothly and fairly as possible. "[We] want to normalise relations ahead of an election," Australian Foreign Minister Julia Bishop said after visiting Suva last February, "Australia should be the partner of choice in the Pacific ... there is an opportunity with our new government to start afresh" (Callick, 2014).

Alongside these positive steps toward normalising bilateral relations with Australia and New Zealand (as well as recent regional dialogue that discussed Fiji's prospects of regaining its membership in the Commonwealth and Pacific Islands Forum), Fiji's own election plans look very promising.

Voting is non-compulsory, but the Fijian Electoral Office has confirmed that over 550000 Fijians are registered on the electoral roll, so far making up an impressive 63% of the total population. For Fijians less familiar with the voting process, instructional videos have been released and electoral officers have been assigned to polling booths at over 1000 locations. Alongside the election, a new constitution has been finalised that eliminates racial based electoral rolls, seating quotas and grants sole legislative authority to a fifty seat Parliament. The constitution also outlines basic individual freedoms, in the hope that such clauses will lend a hand to a “truly enduring democracy” (Fiji Election, 2014; Government of Fiji, 2014).

With Fiji’s foreign relations improving and election plans going ahead as scheduled, there is a clear sense of excitement surrounding the nation’s future. In the end, the major obstacle to a successful election and new beginning for Fiji will be Bainimarama himself. He has been Fiji’s undisputed leader for nearly a decade, and there is no certainty that he will act responsibly in victory or graciously in defeat. Based on his past misdeeds and policy reversals, all of his promises should thereby be taken with a grain of salt. Whether he will honour all of his election promises and write a new chapter in Fiji’s history remains to be seen, but it may prove difficult to write if the author of the 2006 coup remains in power.

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