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Fiji deserves better

Many Pacific states take their cue from Fiji. The country's renewed authoritarian drift could thus threaten the stability of the entire region

A power struggle has been playing out in the Pacific island state of Fiji between two former coup leaders over the country's alignment. Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka clearly emerged as the winner. The major losers, by contrast, were his predecessor, long-time Prime Minister Josaia Voreqe 'Frank' Bainimarama, voted out in December 2022, and, as so often, Fijian democracy. Rabuka and his followers have used the same methods against Bainimarama that he had used for years to curb the opposition. Bainimarama is now in prison, and the parliamentary opposition has been crushed.

Rabuka is seen as a proponent of divisive ethno-nationalism, and some Fijians are worried about a relapse to the racist policies of previous decades. This involved massive discrimination and an exodus of Fijians with Indian roots, who once made up half the population but now make up only a third. As early as 1987, Rabuka carried out two military coups and overthrew the government, which wanted to advocate more strongly for the rights of non-indigenous Fijians. During his first term as elected prime minister, from 1992 to 1999, he was fairly moderate and managed a peaceful transition for his successor Mahendra Chaudhry. In his last election campaign, however, he once again called for Christianity to be declared the state religion, affronting the non-Christian population. He also reintroduced the 'Great Council of Chiefs', a symbol of the supremacy of the indigenous population.

Since the 2022 election, Fiji has been ruled by a coalition government, consisting of Rabuka's Peoples' Alliance Party, his former party SODELPA and the moderate National Federation Party. Even though Bainimarama's FijiFirst party remained the strongest faction, many people celebrated the change of government after 16 years of Bainimarama rule and the prospect of a balanced three-party coalition as a victory for democracy. But the elation was very short lived: once in power, the new government quickly began to harass the opposition in a similar way to its predecessor.

Power struggles

Within two months, Bainimarama was suspended from parliament for three years and had to step down. Shortly afterwards, he was charged with abuse of office. The trial and its timing can be seen as politically motivated, notwithstanding the fact that Bainimarama undoubtedly engaged in major misconduct during his time as PM. In May 2024, after a rather lurid court case Bainimarama was finally sentenced to a year in prison, which bars him from any further political activity under the constitution he himself enacted, a manoeuvre he has also used often enough in the past.

In the meantime, Bainimarama's FijiFirst party and parliamentary group have been completely dissolved for violations of the Political Parties Act. Nine of the 26 opposition MPs have sworn allegiance to their former arch-enemy Rabuka, while the remaining FijiFirst MPs have been permitted to retain their seats for the time being as independent members with limited rights. Rabuka is therefore no longer dependent on his previous coalition partners, even if cooperation formally continues.

After largely dispatching the opposition, Rabuka's power has been consolidated to such an extent that nothing could stand in the way of his most controversial election promise, pardoning George Speight, currently serving a life sentence. In 2000, Speight led an armed uprising of indigenous nationalists, who set fire to the homes and stores of Fijians of Indian descent. They held Prime Minister Chaudhry, his ministers and numerous MPs hostage in parliament for 56 days. At least eight people lost their lives. The events of 2000 remain a national trauma.

The pardon was issued by Fijian President Ratu Wiliame M. Katonivere, but Rabuka is likely to have been pulling the strings. He is already planning a face-to-face meeting with Speight, explicitly not as part of a national reconciliation process, but as a 'friend'. Speight's release is not only causing fear and trepidation among the Indian population, but is a further step towards undoing Bainimarama's legacy. As military chief, Bainimarama, after much hesitation, terminated Speight's uprising and in 2006 took power because the then government – which he had appointed – was planning to amnesty Speight. Bainimarama won the support of the non-indigenous population with his clear stance against ethno-nationalist politics, but implemented a number of extremely repressive measures to consolidate power. Nevertheless, in 2017, as chair of the 23rd UN Climate Change Conference, Bainimarama was celebrated in Bonn like a rock star.

International implications

These developments in Fiji may appear to have little significance from a European perspective. Their importance for the Pacific region and beyond should not be underestimated, however. Fiji plays an important role in the now entrenched Pacific power struggle between the USA and China. After its traditional partners Australia and New Zealand imposed sanctions after Bainimarama came to power, Fiji was the first country in the region to make a major strategic turn towards China. This paved the way for China's diplomatic advances into other island states. At the end of August, Rabuka made a 10-day official visit to China, where he told Chinese President Xi Jinping that Fiji would continue its close cooperation. Rabuka had been critical of China's influence in the past, but this was now forgotten. This is likely to cause a few headaches in Canberra, Wellington and Washington.

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There are also links to the conflict in the Middle East. Along with other Pacific island states, Fiji is among those countries that regularly vote with Israel on controversial issues at the United Nations. In February, Fiji was the only country besides Israel and the United States that spoke out against the standing of the International Court of Justice and the call for an advisory opinion on the Israel-Palestine conflict. This stance was based less on political than on religious motives, principally a literal interpretation of the Bible, which calls for unlimited support for 'God's chosen people'. Unlike its almost entirely Christian island neighbours in Fiji this argument inevitably provokes vociferous protests from the non-Christian population, especially the Muslim minority (around six per cent). Bainimarama criticised the fact that this stance flies in the face of Fiji's long-standing role as supplier of neutral troops for UN peace missions in the Middle East, including on the Golan Heights, as well as the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon, which has repeatedly come under Israeli fire in recent days.

In the past year, Germany has opened an embassy in Fiji as a key pillar of German rapprochement in the Pacific region. In May this year, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock visited Fiji. Only the second visit by a German foreign minister to a Pacific island state (after Baerbock's visit to

Palau in 2022), this was of the utmost importance. It expressed recognition of the region's growing importance and advanced German climate policy. But while it was still possible to dismiss certain developments in Fiji as minor hiccups in May, it has since become clear that the importance of democracy and human rights compliance will be high on the agenda of further consultations.

Fiji deserves better than repeated reruns of the coups that have plagued the country for decades. In the face of external threats, the people of the Pacific need more unity, not division, both at regional level and domestically. And because many island states take their cue from Fiji, renewed authoritarian drift might exert a symbolic influence on countries such as Kiribati or the Salomon Islands, which, for some years, have exhibited similar tendencies. The effects on the stability of the whole Pacific region could be devastating.



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