

Under Western pressure, Fiji's military moves against coup leaders

By Mike Head and Linda Tenenbaum
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The mass arrest of George Speight and his followers last week points to a deal being struck between Australia and other Western powers and Fiji's military leaders. In return for taking action against Speight and reasserting control over the country's divided armed forces and police, the military's handpicked regime will be subjected to only limited sanctions, while international demands for the restoration of the elected Chaudhry government, deposed by Speight's self-styled "civilian coup" of May 19, will be dropped.

The roundup began on the night of July 26 when Speight and several associates, including his public relations spokesman Joe Nata, were detained at an army roadblock, ostensibly for carrying military weapons. At dawn on July 27 the armed forces stormed a village school occupied by Speight's group and detained 369 people. One of Speight's followers was killed in the ensuing gun and tear gas battle and 39 were injured. Among those captured were the coup's military strategist, former Counter-Revolutionary Unit commander Ilisoni Ligairi, and 12 army defectors.

In addition to Speight, those detained include his one-time nominee for Prime Minister, Ratu Timoci Silatolu, and Fiji Intelligence Service chief Metvisela Mua.

Following the mass arrests, Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer immediately expressed their "delight" with the military's actions. While Downer claimed Canberra had no advance knowledge, he did reveal that discussions had been held with the Fijian military about the pretext for the arrests—that Speight had threatened the president's life. The charge list against Speight, now being drawn up, may include sedition and treason.

That international pressure was exerted on the military to end the 10-week political crisis was underscored in an editorial published in Rupert Murdoch's newspaper the *Australian* the day after the mass arrests. "Fiji is on the edge of anarchy," it declared. "The military must not lose its nerve. It must take firm action to avert a descent into chaos... Australia must be prepared to support a return to stability."

A week earlier, the *Wall Street Journal* had made clear that the Speight group's demands for special economic and political privileges for indigenous Fijians cut across the interests of the international financial markets and global investors. An editorial entitled "Goodbye to Fiji" denounced Speight's plans as "an ethnic gravy train", which amounted to a "blueprint for economic suicide". It condemned the military and the Great Council of Chiefs for facilitating Speight's objectives and warned that, as a result, Fiji was "going rapidly down the tubes".

Immediately upon taking office on July 28, the new Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase ruled out any rapid return to parliamentary rule. He declared that his military-appointed cabinet would remain in office for

at least three years before elections are held under a new racially-based constitution.

The social content of the new government was demonstrated within hours of Speight's arrest, when Qarase handed down a mini-budget without even waiting to be sworn in. Public service wages will be cut by 12.5 percent and government spending reduced by between 20 percent and 30 percent, hitting vital health, education and social services. These measures, to take effect today, will have a devastating impact on public sector workers and ordinary people.

Forecasting that economic output would shrink by 15 percent this financial year, Qarase admitted that the international markets had pulled the plug on the Fijian economy. Since May 19, he reported, investor confidence had collapsed, 6,000 jobs had been eliminated and tourism revenue had halved.

Qarase's cabinet is almost identical to the one approved by Speight on July 9 under the Maunikau Accord, struck between the coup leader and armed forces chief, Commander Frank Bainimarama. To provide it with a more acceptable international profile, however, four junior ministers directly implicated in Speight's coup have been excluded while two senior ministers from Chaudhry's government and one Indo-Fijian businessman have been added.

The rest are businessmen, traditional chiefs and senior government bureaucrats. Qarase himself has taken leave from his position as chief executive of the Fiji Merchant Bank. Deputy Prime Minister Ratu Epeli Nailatikau is a former Commander of the Fiji Military Forces and son-in-law of ousted President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. Apisai Tora, leader of the chauvinist Taukei movement, has been included, along with two high chiefs, the chief executive of the Fiji Employers Federation, several businessmen and numerous former heads of government departments. President Ratu Josefo Iloilo, Speight's nominee as President, remains in his post.

Both the military leaders and Qarase have emphasised that much of Speight's program will be implemented. "The wishes of the indigenous Fijians will be supreme," the military's spokesman, Colonel Tarakinikini, declared at his first press conference after the arrests.

Qarase had earlier pledged himself to an anti-Indian platform. On July 13, he presented to the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) a "Blueprint for the Protection of Fijian and Rotuman Rights and Interests and the Advancement of Their Development". It contains a detailed two-year plan to bolster the political and economic power of ethnic Fijian business and tribal leaders, including a new racist Constitution, reinforcement of the ownership of most of Fiji's land by traditional chiefs and enhanced authority for the GCC. Aspiring Fijian entrepreneurs will stand to benefit from sweeping tax concessions,

business subsidies and “affirmative action” quotas.

This agenda is well known to the major powers. Their concerns are not with Speight's chauvinist program but with securing the authority of the state and ensuring their economic demands are met. If Qarase commits himself to their agenda, Australia, New Zealand and the other western powers will work with him, just as they worked with the 1987 military coup leader, Sitiveni Rabuka, during the 1990s.

Speight's coup enjoyed support in the highest echelons of the armed forces, leading to a paralysing split in the military's ranks. For two and a half months, the military command had parleyed and negotiated with the racist thug and his group, which included both active and retired senior military and intelligence officers.

Despite declaring martial law 10 days after Speight seized the parliamentary complex, the military did nothing as mobs looted and burned Indo-Fijian farms, villages and small businesses, seized military barracks and police stations, and cut off electricity to the capital, Suva.

Even after releasing Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and the other parliamentary hostages under the Maunikau Accord two weeks ago, Speight continued to press new demands. The military's failure to move against him only highlighted how divided it was. No longer could it offer as an excuse for inaction its concern for the hostages' lives.

The divisions wracking the armed forces reflected the internecine conflicts within Fijian ruling circles that lay behind Speight's coup. These conflicts arose as a response to the 1997 Constitution, put in place by Rabuka and Mara.

Rabuka's military coups in 1987 entrenched a raft of anti-Indian measures, benefiting a small layer of Fijian chiefs and businessmen. The culture of crony capitalism that ensued was typified by the appointment of Speight, the son of a nationalist MP, to head the state-run timber corporation, which offered lucrative contracts for the harvesting and export of mahogany.

But this regime conflicted with the interests of finance capital and, by the mid-1990s, the economy began to rapidly decline as foreign investment dried up. Rabuka and Mara turned to the Western powers for support, promising, in exchange, to dismantle the system of corruption and privileges. The 1997 Constitution was part of the deal. While numbers of parliamentary seats remained earmarked for ethnic Fijians, the barriers to non-indigenous political figures, such as Chaudhry, holding high office were removed.

As a result of this shift, denounced by chauvinist politicians as a betrayal, Rabuka was swept from office in the May 1999 elections, allowing Chaudhry's “Peoples Coalition”, comprised of the Labour Party and Fijian nationalist groupings, to form government. Chaudhry proceeded to implement some of the economic restructuring prescriptions handed down by the International Monetary Fund, including opening the economy to international capital flows and reforming the land tenure system, under which more than 80 percent of the land had remained under chiefly control.

Having been dismissed from his timber company post for corrupt dealings, Speight became a mouthpiece for all those businessmen, tribal chiefs and displaced executives resentful of the turn of events. Highlighting their hostility towards the previous government, one of the last acts of Speight's thugs last week was to burn down Mara's sugar plantation on the northern island of Vanua Levu.

In the aftermath of Speight's capture, many of his erstwhile supporters have cut their losses and lined up behind the new regime. Many of their demands—including the replacement of the 1997

constitution with an even more racist document—have largely been met.

Throughout the crisis, the Fijian working class has remained politically sidelined. And Qarase and the military are counting on the Fiji Trade Union Congress (FTUC) and Labour Party leaders to prevent any unified response from all sections—Fijian and Indo-Fijian alike. In his mini-budget speech, Qarase appealed to the trade union officials to work with him, and the FTUC leaders have already obliged. Planned “marches for democracy” on August 2 have been called off, replaced by a request from the FTUC and key private employers that workers stay at home for a “day of peace”.

Beyond that, the trade union bureaucrats have formed an alliance with the Fiji Chamber of Commerce and church leaders to call on the police and military to restore “law and order” and reinstate the 1997 Constitution. Since May 19 the FTUC's sole preoccupation, in tandem with the employers, has been to re-establish favorable conditions for business.

As for Chaudhry and the rest of his ministers, they have backed away from their recent suggestions of forming a breakaway government-in-exile in the west of the main island. Chaudhry's Deputy Prime Minister, Tupeni Baba, last week congratulated the military for its actions, and appealed to President Iloilo to include more members of the ousted cabinet in a National Unity Government.

Chaudhry, in Australia this week as a guest of the Howard government, has been told, in no uncertain terms, that he is now regarded as yesterday's man. In response to Chaudhry's call for an intervention by UN troops into Fiji, the Prime Minister declared yesterday that Australia did not “inject” itself into the affairs of another country without being invited. So far, he said, neither the Fijian government nor the UN had made such a request.

While partial sanctions still remain, these are likely to be lifted soon. Australia, along with the other Western powers, is preparing to collaborate with the new military-backed regime to impose the dictates of the global markets on the backs of the Fijian masses. Qarase's mini-budget will prove to be only the first instalment of their agenda.

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