

Zimbabwe, Fiji and the hypocrisy of British Commonwealth leaders

By Peter Symonds
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While the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) is not unique among international forums in displays of cant and hypocrisy, last week's gathering in Coolum, Australia of prime ministers, presidents and ministers from the countries of the former British Empire certainly provided a graphic example.

Zimbabwe was at the top of the agenda. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, backed by his Australian, New Zealand and Canadian counterparts, was intent on further isolating President Robert Mugabe for his alleged breaches of democratic rights, violence against political opponents and the takeover of white-owned farms. He wanted Zimbabwe suspended from the Commonwealth prior to the country's presidential elections last weekend and sanctions imposed to match those of the European Union and the US.

In the event, Blair and his allies were forced to compromise. Like Mugabe, African leaders face widespread discontent over poverty and unemployment. They were therefore wary about being seen to cave in to the demands of the former colonial ruler for action against the Zimbabwean president, who has demagogically promoted himself as a defender of poor Africans. Instead of suspending Zimbabwe, CHOGM established a three-person panel comprising Australian Prime Minister John Howard and two African leaders to determine "appropriate action" if Commonwealth election monitors report foul play.

The outcome provoked another round of righteous indignation. Blair contemptuously dismissed the decision, determined by the voting power of poorer African nations, as representing "the lowest common denominator" and warned that the "credibility" of the Commonwealth was at stake. New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark vented her anger, declaring: "Notwithstanding the evidence of a failure to observe the fundamental principles of the Commonwealth, a member

state [Zimbabwe] is still sitting around the table."

It is true that Mugabe is guilty of thuggery and anti-democratic practices—but the same is also the case in a number of other Commonwealth countries. The highly selective character of Blair's sanctimonious crusade against Zimbabwe is all the more apparent if one considers the silence at CHOGM on the state of political affairs in Fiji. Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, whose administration was initially installed by the Fijian military following the coup attempt by businessman George Speight, was able to rub shoulders with other Commonwealth leaders without a murmur of public criticism.

Speight and a group of elite soldiers seized the parliament building in May 2000 and held Mahendra Chaudhry—the country's first ethnic Indian prime minister—and other ministers, hostage at gunpoint for 56 days. He clearly had the sympathy, and in some cases active support, of significant figures in the country's military and state bureaucracy, who, while formally disapproving of his methods, openly embraced his racialist demands for political and economic supremacy for ethnic Fijians.

With the government held hostage, the military top brass seized power, abrogated the constitution and installed Qarase, a former banker, known for his support for Speight's views, as prime minister. The new administration, backed by the military, struck a deal with Speight to end the siege at parliament house in return for implementing his anti-Indian agenda. Only under pressure from Australia and New Zealand did the military finally arrest Speight and some of those immediately involved in the coup attempt and charge them with treason.

No one, however, including Blair, Howard, Clark or any other Commonwealth leader, suggested that the elected government headed by Chaudhry should be reinstalled. To provide a veneer of legitimacy to the

military-backed regime, fresh elections were finally called last August.

The poll was just as anti-democratic as the one just concluded in Zimbabwe. It was held under a constitution that segregates voters on a racial basis and cedes considerable powers to the Great Council of Chiefs—an unelected body of the ethnic Fijian elite. The campaign unfolded under tight military and police measures and the threat of violence by gangs of racist thugs against ethnic Indians.

Even though Speight was under detention for treason, he was allowed to form his own political party and run in the election. He, Qarase and other Fijian leaders openly appealed to racist sentiment, calling for a vote to keep Chaudhry out of office. The underlying threat to Indo-Fijians was: if Chaudhry and the Fijian Labour Party won a majority, his government would be ousted again. After all, little or no action had been taken against the leader of the previous coup—Sitiveni Rabuka in 1987.

Qarase's newly formed United Fiji Party was alleged to have made substantial bribes to key sections of the electorate but still failed to win an absolute majority. He finally formed a coalition with Speight's Conservative Alliance and prevented Chaudhry from taking back the office he had previously won.

This whole electoral farce was witnessed by Commonwealth observer teams who pronounced the result a "credible" reflection of the will of the Fijian people. The outcome of the Commonwealth monitoring was never really in doubt—it was part of the understanding that had been reached with Qarase to hold the poll in the first place. Australia and New Zealand subsequently dropped their sanctions and the Commonwealth lifted its suspension on Fiji.

Chaudhry played no small part in his own political demise by refusing to mobilise his supporters against the military-backed regime and channelling opposition into futile legal proceedings. Following the election, Chaudhry even sought to gain a post in the cabinet dominated by his political enemies and those involved in his ousting. Under the country's race-based constitution, there is provision that any party which wins 10 percent of the vote must be offered a place in the cabinet. Qarase contemptuously dismissed the Labour Party's constitutional claim to ministerial positions and defied a legal victory obtained by Chaudhry just as he did last year when a court ruled his administration illegal.

Yet Qarase was welcomed with open arms at the CHOGM gathering. Australian Prime Minister Howard

was so keen for the Fijian delegation to attend that his government paid its accommodation bill—five suites at the luxury Hyatt Regency Coolum hotel. When Chaudhry appeared at CHOGM, at the invitation of the delegations from India and Mauritius, Qarase is reported to have taken umbrage at this "unprecedented breach of protocol".

What a spectacle: the man, who, if he had any political spine, could with some legitimacy claim to be the constitutionally elected prime minister of Fiji, being told by the beneficiary of a military coup that he is out of place. And from the assembled CHOGM dignitaries, who piously agreed in their Coolum declaration to reaffirm "our commitment to democracy, the rule of law, good governance, freedom of expression and the protection of human rights"—not a word, including from the African leaders!

The difference in approach towards Zimbabwe as opposed to Fiji is anything but an accident or an oversight. Blair, Howard, Clark and the other heads of state have no concern about human rights or democracy in either country. There is a cynical consistency in their apparent inconsistency—the guiding principle being the strategic and economic interests of the major capitalist powers.

In the case of Zimbabwe, Mugabe, confronting an economic and political crisis at home, has refused to implement the IMF's economic restructuring demands and has demagogically appealed to anti-British sentiment. Blair has seized on his anti-democratic practices to directly intervene in Zimbabwean affairs as part of grander ambitions on behalf of British capital in the African continent as a whole.

In the case of Fiji, Australia and New Zealand—the major powers in the southwest Pacific—have backed the Qarase regime as the best guarantee of their interests in Fiji and the region. While subsidising and protecting ethnic Fijian business operators, the Qarase government has bent over backwards to please foreign investors, offering them reduced corporate tax rates, generous investment and depreciation allowances and outright tax exemptions for export income.

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