

New Zealand moves to restore relations with Fijian regime

By John Braddock
4 November 2016

Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama made a three-day state visit to New Zealand last month, the first since his 2006 military coup. Bainimarama was invited by Prime Minister John Key, reciprocating Key's trip to Fiji in June, also the first in ten years by a New Zealand prime minister.

The invitation would have been prepared in close consultation with Washington and Canberra. The local US allies, Australia and New Zealand, regard Fiji, the largest South Pacific island state, as critical to their own hegemony over the region and are increasingly concerned about China's growing diplomatic and economic presence.

The visit coincided with deepening turmoil in the Asia-Pacific, highlighted by the crisis surrounding the Obama administration's anti-China "pivot." US strategy is facing serious setbacks following threats by Philippines President Duterte to "separate" from Washington. The Trans-Pacific Partnership, the pivot's central economic initiative, which was signed in Auckland last February, is also in doubt in the face of opposition from US presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.

Bainimarama told reporters he wanted a stronger engagement with New Zealand. "I am very pleased the prime minister has worked with me to take our relationship to another level; a relationship in which we let bygones be bygones," he said. The two leaders declared they were "looking forward, rather than reflecting on the past."

Relations had soured with the imposition of sanctions by Australia and New Zealand following the 2006 coup. The regional powers were driven by concerns that the regime could destabilise the region and open the way for Beijing. The sanctions backfired, however. Bainimarama countered with a "Look North" policy,

receiving economic, diplomatic and military aid from China, Russia and elsewhere. He also encouraged other Pacific island states to take a more "independent" path.

Bainimarama's installation as prime minister followed the victory of his Fiji First Party in the 2014 elections, held under conditions of press censorship, military provocations and severe restrictions on opposition political parties. The authoritarian regime, which rests on the military, rules largely through fear and intimidation. Although sanctions were lifted after the elections, relations deteriorated as geostrategic tensions in the Pacific generated by Washington's aggressive "pivot to Asia" intensified.

Key's June trip to Suva, Fiji's capital, was almost derailed when Bainimarama publicly aired his grievances over the attitude of the local powers toward his government. Last month, he hit out at "interference" in Fiji's domestic affairs after comments by Key over the arrest of six leading Fijian opposition figures at a political forum. Key had declared he was keeping a "watch" on the situation and warned the Fiji government against doing anything "silly."

Bainimarama began last month's trip to New Zealand by issuing effusive thanks for the aid given by New Zealand and Australia in the wake of Cyclone Winston, which struck Fiji in March, causing 44 deaths and widespread destruction.

Canberra and Wellington, in fact, exploited the cyclone devastation to send warships, aircraft and hundreds of military personnel to Fiji. While this was characterised as a "humanitarian and disaster aid" mission, the intervention followed a gift of weapons to the Fijian military by Russia and dovetailed with the intensifying militarisation of the Pacific.

Bainimarama also announced during last month's

trip that he would rescind an eight-year ban on three New Zealand journalists seen as critical of his government. He said lifting the ban was part of the “diplomatic process.”

Topics discussed included development and aid, the PACER Plus regional free trade agreement, defence links and regional sport. Key had previously indicated he wants to keep Fiji in the PACER Plus talks. According to Bainimarama, PACER is too one-sided in its present form and would burden Pacific island nations. Fiji would not sign, he said, “until there are better terms” on infant industries, a “most favoured nation” clause and labour mobility. Key said he would seek to “accommodate the demands.”

Key told the media that human rights in Fiji were still an area where “discussion and engagement” was needed. “I have always said the restoration of democracy in Fiji was a good and important step, but it does evolve over time,” he declared.

Democratic rights in Fiji have never been a concern of the local powers. In June, Key dismissed the 2006 military coup as “ancient history.” Last month Key declared, echoing Bainimarama, that he was keen to “look forward now and not necessarily look back, that’ll be good for both Fiji and New Zealand.”

Fiji is regarded in Australia and NZ as spearheading a thrust by Beijing into the South West Pacific. According to the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, China has overtaken Australia as the biggest source of aid to Fiji, and will soon surpass Canberra’s aid to Samoa and Tonga. Trade between China and the Pacific doubled last year to \$US7.5 billion. Strategic analyst Paul Buchanan falsely claimed on Radio NZ last month that unless China is pushed back, the South Pacific is “going to become like a Chinese lake,” supposedly “like the South China Sea.”

New Zealand continues to pursue a precarious balancing act over relations with China, its second most important trading partner. Late last month, Deputy Prime Minister Bill English cancelled a planned meeting with two Hong Kong “democracy” activists, Martin Lee and Anson Chan, following advice from New Zealand foreign affairs officials that the meeting could be “diplomatically sensitive.”

Behind the diplomatic manoeuvring lies the ever-growing threat of war. The US “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific is forcing all the states in the region, no

matter how small, to take sides. Key recently gave clearance for the destroyer USS Sampson to visit Auckland during this month’s celebrations for the Royal New Zealand Navy’s 75th anniversary. The visit marks the end of a 30-year-old military stalemate between the countries that was triggered when the Lange Labour government banned nuclear warships.

Successive Labour and National administrations since 2001 have worked to restore defence ties. Key declared last week that the relationship with the US “is truly in the best shape it’s been since the anti-nuclear legislation was passed.”

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