

Nauru government bans ABC journalists ahead of Pacific summit

By Patrick O'Connor
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The Nauru government announced last week that it was banning Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) journalists from entering the country to cover the Pacific Islands Forum summit being held in September.

Over the last five years, Nauru President Baron Waqa has established a virtual dictatorship. Backed by the Australian government, which uses the tiny Pacific state as one of its illegal offshore refugee concentration camps, the Waqa administration has deported and imprisoned opposition politicians, disciplined the police and judiciary, shut down social media web sites, and criminalised political dissent.

On July 2, the government announced that an ABC cameraman, who was part of a three-person pool of journalists selected by the Canberra press gallery, would not be issued a visa. A government statement accused the ABC of “blatant interference in Nauru’s domestic politics prior to the 2016 election, harassment of and lack of respect towards our President in Australia, false and defamatory allegations against members of our Government, and continued biased and false reporting about our country.”

A follow up statement issued the following day condemned the ABC’s response to the ban as “arrogant, disrespectful and a further example of the sense of entitlement shown by this activist media organisation.”

The ABC and other journalists condemned the Waqa administration for attacking press freedom. Several outlets announced a boycott of the Pacific Islands Forum to protest the ABC’s exclusion, though it appears that Murdoch’s News Corporation outlets have rejected this. There is a definite element of cynicism in the outcry, given the Australian media’s silence over the persecution of WikiLeaks’ editor Julian Assange, which represents a far greater threat to press freedom than the travel bans of a tiny Pacific state.

Nauru is nevertheless proceeding with the full backing

of the Australian government. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull declared that he “regretted” that the ABC would not be covering the Pacific Islands Forum, but “it is a matter for Nauru, Nauru is entitled to decide who comes into Nauru ... we have to remember and respect Nauru’s sovereignty.” In other circumstances, Australian governments have used inflated media reports, particularly by the ABC to justify military/police interventions as in East Timor in 2006.

Canberra’s support for the increasingly repressive Waqa administration is driven by its concern to maintain geo-strategic dominance across the South Pacific and lock out rival powers, above all China. The upcoming Pacific Islands Forum in Nauru will be dominated by the Australian government’s efforts to impose a new “security agreement” that boosts the Australian and New Zealand military’s presence in the region, and discourages Pacific countries from collaborating with Chinese military activity (see “Australia pushes Pacific Pact to combat China”).

Nauru functions as an Australian semi-colony, with its population of just 11,000 people living on an isolated island that is smaller in land mass than a major international airport. It is nevertheless located in a strategically important point, near the equator south of the US-controlled Marshall Islands, which serves as an important American army missile testing ground.

Nauru is also one of just 18 states internationally that has diplomatic relations with Taiwan, not the People’s Republic of China. The rejection of the “one China policy” by Nauru and several other Pacific states, such as Solomon Islands, now serves as one mechanism through which Australia checks Beijing’s regional influence.

The Waqa administration’s complaints stem from a series of broadcasts and news reports in 2015 and 2016. In June 2015, ABC’s “7.30” current affairs program publicised leaked email correspondence between

President Waqa and other government members and an Australian-based phosphate company, Getax. The ABC alleged: “The emails reveal a plot to overthrow the Nauru government in 2010.”

Current Nauruan Justice Minister David Adeang emailed Getax in 2009, when he was in opposition, suggesting that the company could take over the country’s entire phosphate industry if he and his allies came to power. Getax director Ashok Gupta replied: “We give you full authority to mobilise or lubricate the MPs to secure the vote and win the battle.” According to the ABC, the company funnelled more than a half a million dollars in kickbacks to Adeang, Waqa, and other figures who came to power in 2013. A follow up story on the ABC later showed bank statements detailing the alleged bribes.

The ABC’s reporting reflects concerns about the Waqa administration from a section of the Australian foreign policy establishment that it might not be toeing Canberra’s line closely enough.

In 2005, the Australian government launched the Pacific Regional Assistance for Nauru program (PRAN). Modelled on Canberra’s flagship neo-colonial intervention the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), PRAN saw Australian officials take over key elements of the state apparatus, including the finance ministry, police, and judiciary. This formed part of Australian imperialism’s efforts to maintain control over the South Pacific and shut out rival powers, above all China.

In 2013, however, several important Australian officials were sacked or deported after Waqa became president. The list included Nauru police commissioner and Australian Federal Police agent Richard Britten, magistrate and Supreme Court registrar Peter Law, chief justice Geoffrey Eames, solicitor-general Steven Bliim, Parliamentary Counsel Katy Le Roy, and former government media adviser Rod Henshaw.

These moves coincided with a broader shift towards authoritarian rule. New laws introduced in 2015 threatened seven-year jail terms for anyone who stated or published anything that “stirred up political hatred,” “caused emotional distress to a person,” or was “likely to threaten national defence, public safety, public order, public morality or public health.”

Law Societies in New Zealand and Australia agitated for a response, and in September 2015, the New Zealand government announced the suspension of all aid financing Nauru’s judiciary. There is no question that Waqa’s

moves against Australian officials would have triggered concerns within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Australian Federal Police. Comparable developments in other Pacific states have previously triggered determined regime-change operations, most notably in Solomon Islands 2006–2007.

The Australian government, however, has maintained its steadfast support for Waqa. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has repeatedly insisted that the Nauruan administration’s moves were “domestic matters” that she discussed “confidentially” with the president.

In addition to geo-strategic calculations, the Australian government relies on the Waqa administration to continue to assist its illegal refugee trafficking program. More than 1,000 men, women, and children who attempted to claim asylum in Australia after arriving by sea now reside on Nauru after being deported by Australian Border Force officials.

Most of the refugees and asylum seekers live in the general community, with around 400 remaining in the Australian-operated detention centre. The refugees suffer horrific mental health problems, with self-harm and suicide rife, lack of access to basic facilities, and are largely cut off from the outside world. Only vetted and favoured journalists have been allowed in to the country since 2014.

The Australian government’s sponsorship of the repressive and corrupt Waqa regime in Nauru further exposes the fraud that it promotes “democracy” and “humanitarianism” in the South Pacific. Amid mounting concern over China’s rising diplomatic and economic influence in the region, the predatory and ruthless nature of Australian imperialism is growing ever more transparent.

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