

Escalating economic and political crisis hits Fiji

By John Braddock
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The escalating impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic in the southwest Pacific is highlighted in Fiji, the region's second largest country with a population of just under 900,000. Along with other Pacific nations, Fiji has so far avoided the worst health effects, but its economic impact has been devastating.

With tourism in total collapse, unemployment is soaring and the gross domestic product (GDP) plummeting. The tourist industry contributes nearly 40 percent to Fiji's GDP—about \$FJ2 billion (\$US900 million)—and directly or indirectly employs over 150,000 people. Fiji Airways last month sacked 775 workers—more than half its workforce—while Air Terminal Services has axed 300 jobs and souvenir company Jack's of Fiji another 500.

The Fiji Ministry of Economy reported in March that the economy is expected to contract by 4.3 percent in 2020, likely a significant underestimate. The debt-to-GDP ratio has already jumped from 48.9 percent before the pandemic to 60.9 percent, and will increase further. This is in a country where the minimum wage is just \$FJ2.32 an hour and 28 percent of people live below the poverty line.

Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, who seized power in a military coup in 2006, has used the pandemic to tighten his government's rule. A senior military officer, Brigadier-General Jone Kalouniwai, told the *Fiji Sun* that the COVID-19 emergency gave the country's leaders "good reasons to stifle criticism of their policies by curtailing freedom of speech and freedom of the press." The fight against COVID-19, he warned, was "likely to end up violating the individual rights and rule of law that are at the heart of any liberal society."

The government rests directly on the military, despite elections in 2014 and 2018 fraudulently hailed as

"democratic" by Australia and New Zealand. Successive regimes have been authoritarian and anti-working class. Harsh austerity measures have been accompanied by the intimidation of opposition parties, repressive laws and rampant violence by the police and military.

On June 9, Suva police raided the headquarters of the opposition National Federation Party (NFP) in an apparent crackdown on social media use. A video showed plain clothes officers rifling through files, papers and storage. NFP leader Biman Prasad told Radio NZ that officers spent an hour purportedly searching for documents relating to the party's social media posts, and possible payments regarding them.

The government is moving to suppress wider stirrings of social unrest. In an unfolding crisis at the University of the South Pacific (USP), police questioned two USP staff following protests over the suspension of Vice-Chancellor Pal Ahluwalia, who exposed alleged corruption and mismanagement under the USP leadership group. Through early June, hundreds of students, faculty and staff protested the professor's suspension and demanded the removal of the USP Executive Committee.

Claiming breaches of COVID-19 restrictions by protesters, police searched the offices of the *Fiji Times* for photos of the students involved, some of whom would have been from other Pacific countries. The USP Students' Association objected to the intimidating presence of police at the campus protests when there was no criminal activity to justify it.

The controversy at the region's major tertiary institution, owned by 12 Pacific nations, prompted warnings that the university's autonomy and academic freedom is under threat. While Ahluwalia was this week reinstated, Fiji's representatives want to assert

total control of the institution, according to journalist Michel Field.

In a sign of growing political disarray, Fiji's parliament is operating with only the government benches and three seats of the opposition NFP filled after the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) was suspended late last month for 60 days.

SODELPA is Fiji's main opposition party, occupying 21 seats in the 51-seat parliament. It represents the interests of a nationalist layer of the privileged chiefly Fijian elite. The party has been led since 2016 by Sitiveni Rabuka, the instigator of two military coups in 1987, then prime minister following the 1992 election and also a former chairman of the unelected Great Council of Chiefs.

The suspension came after rival party factions submitted competing lists of executives and office holders. The Registrar of Political Parties, Mohammed Saneem, declared that SODELPA had breached Fiji's 2013 constitution and could not legally function as a party. Saneem warned that SODELPA would be deregistered if its internal dispute was not resolved within the 60-day period. The Commission against Corruption is to examine claims of "missing provisions" in the party's constitution.

The High Court ruled in April that the election of the party's president and deputy at the 2019 AGM was unlawful. The action was brought by the party's Suva branch and youth wing, who argued the AGM procedures were botched and politically manipulated. The judge ruled that the plaintiffs' rights to freedom of political choice and to participate in a political party were violated when they could not participate in the AGM.

The elections were voided, along with all decisions dating back to last June. Rabuka said the suspension was "inevitable" following the factional feuding, and would not be contested. Rabuka, who now postures as a "moderate" to appeal across traditional ethnic lines, is struggling to contain right-wing conservatives behind the indigenous, anti-Indian iTaukei movement, who will not accept the appointment of Vijay Singh as the party's first ever Indo-Fijian vice-president.

The government is exploiting SODELPA's crisis. Without the presence of SODELPA parliamentarians, the parliamentary speaker Ratu Epeli Nailatikau last month blocked official questions from the NFP over

the Fiji Sugar Corporation's reduced payments to farmers for the 2019 harvest. Cane growers had allegedly been short-changed \$US550,000 after a 30 cents per tonne deduction from the year's final payout meant they received \$US5 per tonne, insufficient to make ends meet.

The speaker also decreed that parliamentary proceedings could no longer be shown on Facebook, giving the flimsy pretext that Facebook's auto-generated subtitles were "incorrect and out of context."

Fiji's police, corrections and military officers are engaged in widespread repressive practices. Five officers have been charged, and four suspended, over their alleged assault of a villager in April. NFP parliamentarian Pio Tikoduadua was arrested when he posted a video on Facebook claiming police brutality over the incident.

International human rights groups last month also called for an investigation into allegations published in the UK *Guardian* that commissioner of corrections Francis Kean, who is Bainimarama's brother-in-law, has routinely ordered the beating and mistreatment of prisoners and staff.

Neither of the two regional powers—Australia and New Zealand—has condemned the blatantly anti-democratic actions of the Bainimarama government. Canberra and Wellington are seeking to strengthen relations with Fiji, including military ties. The aim is to incorporate Fiji into the escalating US-led militarisation of the Asia-Pacific region in preparation for war against China.

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