

Another Pacific intervention:

Australia, New Zealand dispatch troops to Tonga

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The Australian and New Zealand governments dispatched more than 150 soldiers and police to the south Pacific nation of Tonga on Saturday. Contrary to the claims of the two governments and media outlets, the military intervention has nothing to do with helping the Tongan people. Rather, it is aimed at advancing Canberra and Wellington's strategic and economic interests in the region and preventing the country's political and social crisis from spiralling out of their control.

Riots erupted last Thursday in the capital, Nuku'alofa, leaving six people dead and destroying 80 percent of the central business district. The unrest came amid deepening hostility towards the country's absolute monarchy from both ordinary Tongans and dissatisfied sections of the business and political elite. The royal family has repeatedly stymied moves to reform the autocratic regime, and its lucrative land and business interests have provoked immense resentment within the impoverished population.

Hundreds of youth looted and burned sections of the capital after hearing reports that the government had rejected proposals to allow parliamentary seats previously reserved for hereditary nobles to be democratically elected. State buildings, including the parliament house, magistrate's court, and finance ministry, were targeted, as were businesses owned or connected to the royal family and the appointed government. Six people reportedly died when they were trapped inside a building they were trying to burn.

King George Tupou V imposed martial law the day after the rioting and deployed armed Tongan soldiers on Nuku'alofa's streets. In an effort to placate opposition, the government announced that elections due in 2008 will now elect 21 members of the parliament, with the other 9 seats reserved for nobles. Under the previous system only 9 parliamentarians were elected.

After receiving a formal request to intervene from Tonga's prime minister Feleti Sevele, New Zealand dispatched 60 soldiers and 10 police officers and Australia 50 soldiers and 35 police. The forces have initially focussed on securing Tonga's airport and evacuating foreign nationals, although discussions have already commenced on expanding their security role

throughout the capital.

With the Australian government's support, the New Zealand Labour government of Helen Clark is playing the lead political and logistic role in the military intervention. Tonga is part of the Polynesian island chain that the New Zealand ruling elite has long considered its sphere of influence in the south Pacific, and Wellington has made clear that the Tongan operation is centrally aimed at shoring up its interests.

Clark adamantly rejected suggestions by several members of the "pro-democracy" movement that the foreign intervention force would prop up the royal family's rule. "We'll push for as much democracy as can be gained in Tonga," she declared. "Tonga has been a feudal monarchy, and there is no place for that in the 21st century."

Clark's hostility to monarchical rule is not motivated by concerns for democratic rights. The so-called pro-democracy movement is led by parliamentarians, business people, and other middle-class elements who resent the monarchy for monopolising the country's wealth and political power, but have no fundamental differences with the regime's right-wing economic and social agenda. These layers have won Australian and New Zealand support by promising to protect foreign interests in Tonga and implement sweeping pro-business reforms.

Clark and Australian Prime Minister Howard view the monarchy as an impediment to economic reform. While the royal family has implemented a series of free market and pro-trade measures in the past decade—leading to unprecedented social inequality and mass poverty and unemployment—as far as Australia, New Zealand, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are concerned, not enough has been done to open up Tonga's markets and resources.

Around three-quarters of Tongan land is owned by the royal family and the nobility, and foreign investors are barred from buying land. Privatisations of a number of state-owned industries have amounted to little more than looting operations by the royal family and its cronies, leading to widespread demands for re-nationalisation and regulation that are anathema to international markets.

The most urgent shortcoming of the royal government is its inability to suppress the wages and conditions of the working class, particularly those in the public sector. Wage increases of up to 80 percent were conceded last year in order to help union bureaucrats and “pro-democracy” leaders suppress a six-week strike that had taken on an insurrectionary, anti-monarchy character. In a report issued last June, the IMF condemned the wage increase and warned that the Tongan economy could collapse unless a “substantial downsizing of the civil service” was achieved. The report noted that the government considered this impossible because of the threat of another strike and “further social unrest”.

As well as providing the “pro-democracy” movement with political and material support, the Clark government has moved to sideline the monarchy by exerting direct control over aspects of the Tongan state apparatus. A foreign affairs select committee report on New Zealand’s relations with Tonga proposed that New Zealand judges be inserted on the country’s Supreme Court, and noted an earlier recommendation to establish a “police mutual assistance program” which would likely involve deploying New Zealand police in Nuku’alofa.

These measures indicate the Clark government’s preparedness to launch a neo-colonial takeover of the Tongan state, similar to that led by Canberra in the Solomon Islands. In fact, the military and police operation currently underway may well develop into such an operation. New Zealand foreign minister Winston Peters declared that the violence in Tonga placed the country “not too far from the Solomon Islands”.

For his part, Howard has questioned Tonga’s viability. “I think one of the problems you have is that you have a lot of countries that have political independence without being able really to sustain the governance and other infrastructure that’s needed,” he declared. “Clearly one of the problems in the Pacific is that many of these countries are too small to be sustainable on their own and that’s just a brutal reality.”

The Tongan crisis has demonstrated that while the Clark government occasionally distances itself from Canberra’s aggressive methods in the region, it has no differences with the underlying strategy of advancing the geo-strategic and economic interests of its ruling elite by trampling on the sovereignty of the tiny Pacific nations.

The Pacific states have become nothing but pawns in an increasingly fierce rivalry between the world’s powers in the region. An important factor in the Tongan intervention is New Zealand and Australia’s determination to prevent China from encroaching into “their” region. New Zealand’s foreign affairs select committee last year warned of China’s rising influence in Tonga and throughout the Pacific. Foreign Minister Winston Peters declared last Friday that any “vacuum will be quickly filled by nations less benevolent, less honest in their intentions”.

Chinese-owned businesses were among those looted and torched in last week’s rioting, and about 150 people took

refuge in the Chinese embassy in Nuku’alofa. Ron Crocombe, an academic at the University of South Pacific, yesterday warned that it was only a matter of time before Beijing used the threat to Chinese nationals as a pretext for its own intervention in the region. Ethnic Chinese were affected by riots in the Solomon Islands last April, and Crocombe warned that Chinese communities in Fiji and Vanuatu were also vulnerable.

Any Chinese intervention would represent an unprecedented challenge to Australian and New Zealand domination of the region and would also be a major concern for the US. Washington has backed both Canberra and Wellington’s operations in the south Pacific as a quid pro quo for the two countries’ support for US military interventions. While the Clark government has not publicly identified itself with the Bush administration to the extent that the Howard government has, New Zealand has nevertheless provided support for the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Clark’s complicity with Washington’s war crimes was on display last Friday at the APEC summit in Vietnam, where her foreign minister met with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and proposed that a summit be held next year for leaders of the Pacific states and the US. “I think 2007 will be a year of closer cooperation and understanding between the United States and New Zealand,” Peters declared.

According to the *New Zealand Herald*, discussion centred on developments in the Pacific. “Until recently, the rather pre-occupied US has been largely absent in the battle for influence in the Pacific compared to the regular overtures to its leaders made by China, Taiwan, Japan, the European Union and France,” the newspaper noted. “In that competitive environment the US increasingly values New Zealand for its close association with the Pacific.”



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