

Former Fijian PM Bainimarama jailed for 12 months

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15 May 2024

Fiji's former long-serving prime minister and coup leader, 69-year-old Frank Bainimarama, has been sentenced to a year in prison for perverting the course of justice. He was spared jail during sentencing last month, but an appeal lodged by the country's director for public prosecutions was upheld last week by Fiji's high court.

Bainimarama and former police commissioner Sitiveni Qiliho both pleaded not guilty in March 2023 to charges of abusing the authority of their respective offices by terminating an active police investigation.

Bainimarama was found guilty by the high court on May 9 of attempting to pervert the course of justice while prime minister by instructing Qiliho not to investigate allegations of graft at the region's University of South Pacific (USP). Qiliho was sentenced to two years in prison for his abuse of office.

A former military chief, Bainimarama seized power in a coup in 2006 and later won sham elections in 2014 and 2018 falsely hailed as "democratic" by the regional powers Australia and New Zealand. He led the Pacific Island nation for 16 years until narrowly losing the 2022 election to a three-party coalition led by previous coup leader and now prime minister, Sitiveni Rabuka.

Bainimarama continued to lead his FijiFirst Party but in February 2023 was suspended from parliament for three years over seditious remarks, subsequently resigning as an MP. He delivered a belligerent speech on the opening day of parliament accusing the incoming government and Fiji's president of "setting out to destroy constitutional democracy" and appealed to the military, which he once commanded, to act. Qiliho meanwhile is a former army officer who ran a notoriously brutal police force and has a murky past with links to previous coups.

The convictions of both men centre on allegations concerning misuse of money at the USP in 2019. The regional university, headquartered in Suva, is owned by 12 Pacific states with part funding from Australia and

New Zealand.

USP vice-chancellor Pal Ahluwalia was witch-hunted and suspended in 2020 by the university council for "material misconduct," after exposing alleged corruption under the leadership group, with millions of dollars missing. Hundreds of students and staff protested the professor's suspension and demanded the removal of the USP Executive Committee.

Ahluwalia's removal prompted warnings that the university's autonomy and academic freedom were under threat. Ahluwalia was later reinstated and cleared of the bogus allegations. After he submitted a report to the council, Auckland accounting consultancy BDO was hired to investigate.

When the damning BDO report reached the council, it was suppressed and the government froze a \$A28 million university grant. The BDO report was leaked, naming 25 senior staff accused of manipulating allowances to pay themselves hundreds of thousands of dollars. The government flatly refused to accept the findings. The attacks on Ahluwalia were reportedly directed by pro-chancellor Winston Thompson, a former Fijian ambassador to the United States with close links to the Bainimarama regime.

With further investigation blocked, in February 2021 officials raided the home of Ahluwalia, who is a Canadian national, and his wife, summarily deporting them. The pair were declared "prohibited immigrants" by Bainimarama for unspecified "repeated breaches" of the Immigration Act and their visa conditions.

Bainimarama's imprisonment over an abuse of office is bound up with tactical disagreements and ongoing turmoil within the country's ruling elites which confront a worsening economic and social crisis.

Among Rabuka's first moves on taking office was to bring Ahluwalia back from exile and reinstate him. Rabuka delivered an effusive public apology at the USP,

saying: “It doesn’t matter who did it. As far as the world is concerned, Fiji did it to you.” He promised to pay the first installment of \$10 million in grants owed to USP.

Significantly, Rabuka also reinstated the Great Council of Chiefs which had been disbanded by Bainimarama, who accused it of promoting ethnic divisions. The ethnic Fijian nationalist wing of the ruling elite, which Rabuka supports, seeks to maintain political and economic privileges for the traditional chiefs and was bitterly opposed to aspects of Bainimarama’s rule, particularly over issues of land ownership.

Rabuka is no less authoritarian than Bainimarama. He ruled as prime minister from 1992-1999 after leading two military coups in 1987 to boost the position of ethnic Fijians against Indo-Fijians, many of whom fled the country. He now leads an unstable government overseeing simmering anger in the working class.

Fiji’s workers and youth are suffering skyrocketing inflation and the destruction of thousands of jobs exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The poverty rate is nearly 30 percent and, as internationally, more austerity measures are on the way.

As for Bainimarama, he has been jailed over one instance of an abuse of power, but his major crimes are a litany of attacks on the social and democratic rights of the Fijian working class.

Fiji’s administrations have all been anti-democratic and anti-working class, imposing harsh austerity measures while intimidating opposition parties, with repressive media restrictions and violence by the police and military. The sedition provisions in Bainimarama’s Crimes Act and Public Order Act have repeatedly been used to target journalists and government critics. Assemblies, protests and strikes are routinely banned.

The COVID-19 outbreak that began in April 2021 quickly spread and for a considerable period, the country’s vaccination program proved inadequate and the health system faced collapse. Bainimarama repeatedly refused to implement a nationwide lockdown to control the escalating numbers, saying it would “destroy” the economy.

The pandemic sharply exacerbated the country’s social disaster. Fiji’s unemployment rate, around 6 percent before COVID, increased to 35 percent. The tourism industry, the country’s main foreign exchange earner, collapsed with the loss of 100,000 jobs. Half the country’s 880,000 population experienced extreme financial hardship and food shortages. Bainimarama seized on the crisis to tighten his rule. Amid emerging

protests, nine opposition MPs were arrested after criticizing a government land bill.

Opposition by workers has always been ruthlessly suppressed. In March 2019 a stoppage by 33 air traffic controllers at Fiji Airports was declared unlawful. Shortly afterwards, the government banned two May Day protests and arrested over 30 workers and trade union officials for breaches of “public order.” They included protesting workers who had been sacked and locked out by the Fiji Water Authority.

The imperialist powers were prepared to support Bainimarama as long as it suited their interests. Under pressure from Washington, Canberra and Wellington made it a priority to restore relations following Bainimarama’s coup in order to fend off China’s growing influence. Concerned about his initial “Look North” orientation to Beijing, they endorsed Fiji’s 2014 bogus election, paving the way for the restoration of full diplomatic, economic and, above all, military relations.

Fiji plays an important role in the escalating US-led geo-strategic confrontations in the Pacific against China. As chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, Bainimarama was instrumental in arranging US Vice President Kamala Harris’ involvement in the organisation’s 2022 summit, from which China was excluded. With Bainimarama emerging as a key ally, signing military agreements with both Australia and New Zealand and supporting the US confrontation with Russia in Ukraine, Washington has earmarked Fiji as one of the main “hubs” of its upgraded engagement in the region.

According to Fiji’s 2013 Constitution, Bainimarama’s conviction rules him out of contesting an election for the next eight years unless any appeals are successful. Nevertheless, he will retain formal leadership of FijiFirst, still the single largest party in the parliament. In a country that has experienced four military coups since 1987, Bainimarama continues to wield influence in the armed forces and the state.



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