

Political upheaval in Fiji after MPs vote themselves huge pay rises

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After Fiji's parliamentarians voted last month to give themselves huge pay rises, the main opposition FijiFirst, the largest party in parliament, is facing collapse. This follows the resignation of party founder and former Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama and ex-Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum.

An overwhelming majority of MPs voted to accept a recommendation from the Special Committee on Emoluments for pay rises of 138 percent, as well as sharp increases for the prime minister (22 percent) and the president (42 percent). *Fiji Village* reported that 40 MPs voted for the increases—17 from FijiFirst—while seven were against and five abstained.

Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, who heads a three-party coalition government, played down widespread criticism of the outrageous increases, telling *Fiji Village* that MPs dealt with “affairs of the state,” and they were currently paid “like a pretty junior military officer.”

An ordinary MP's salary rises from \$FJ50,000 (\$US22,104) to \$FJ100,000 (\$US44,209), the president's salary from \$FJ130,000 (\$US57,450, non-taxable) to \$FJ185,000 (\$US81,766) and the prime minister's salary from \$FJ263,000 (\$US116,235) to \$FJ320,000 (\$US141,420). Large increases were approved for cabinet ministers, assistant ministers, the Speaker and the opposition leader.

The emoluments committee, made up of MPs from both sides of the House, also recommended the reinstatement of tax and duty-free vehicle purchases for cabinet ministers, increases in overseas travel allowances for the president and prime minister, an official residency for the Speaker and the opposition leader, plus medical and life insurance benefits for all MPs. All were approved.

Bainimarama—still leading FijiFirst while serving a one-year jail sentence for corruption—and acting secretary-general Fiayaz Koya responded by sacking all the party's MPs who voted for the increase. They informed the

Speaker the MPs had been expelled for not following a party directive to vote against or abstain. The vacant seats were to be filled by remaining FijiFirst candidates.

One of those sacked was FijiFirst's parliamentary leader Inia Seruiratu, who declared that MPs had “wants” and “needs” and “church commitments” to justify the salary hike. Senior MP Jone Usamate said: “We are disputing the legality of the termination letter and as far as we are concerned we are still Members of Parliament.”

The largest salary and benefits boost ever for MPs received widespread criticism, including on social media. The Dialogue Fiji organisation described them as “out of touch with the economic realities faced by the majority of Fijians and their sentiment.” Director Nilesh Lal said they were “utterly insensitive and inappropriate” while ordinary people were “subjected to austerity measures and fiscal consolidation policies.”

The Registrar of Political Parties, Ana Mataciwa, warned that FijiFirst must amend its constitution by June 28 or risk deregistration. She told local media the party's constitution does not have guidelines on how internal party disputes are resolved, which breaches the Political Parties (Registration, Conduct, Funding and Disclosures) Act.

Seeking to distance themselves, on June 7 Bainimarama and Sayed-Khaiyum suddenly announced their own resignations, along with most of FijiFirst's senior officials. These included president Ratu Joji Satalaka, vice presidents Selai Adimaitoga and Ravindran Nair, acting general secretary Faiyaz Koya, treasurer Hem Chand and founding member Saleshe Kumar.

The grubby affair further exposes the vast gulf that separates Fiji's venal and corrupt ruling elite from the mass of ordinary people. Both current and former prime ministers are ex-military strong men, responsible for carrying out coups—Rabuka twice in 1987 and Bainimarama in 2006. Bainimarama established FijiFirst

in 2014 to give himself a “democratic” façade for fraudulent elections that year and remained in power until defeated by Rabuka’s coalition in 2022.

Successive administrations have 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. 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 have been routinely banned. In March 2019 a stoppage by 33 air traffic controllers at Fiji Airports was declared unlawful. 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.

Bainimarama’s imprisonment is bound up with tactical disagreements within the ruling elite, which confronts a worsening economic and social crisis. The former PM was convicted in May for sidelining an investigation into graft at the University of South Pacific to protect pro-chancellor Winston Thompson, a former Fijian ambassador to the United States with close links to FijiFirst and the regime.

Amid an escalating cost-of-living crisis, thirty percent of the population lives below the poverty line. The COVID pandemic sharply exacerbated the social disaster: unemployment, around 6 percent before COVID, increased to 35 percent. The tourism industry, Fiji’s main foreign exchange earner, temporarily collapsed, sidelining 100,000 jobs. Half the country’s 880,000 population experienced extreme financial hardship and food shortages.

The tragedy is escalating amid a burgeoning methamphetamine epidemic. TVNZ Pacific correspondent Barbara Dreaver has reported that Fiji is “awash with meth,” and the drugs trade threatens the country with “a major societal breakdown.”

Earlier this year nearly 5 tonnes of meth, worth \$FJ1.6 billion, was found in two houses in Nadi. The size of the seizure would be enough to feed the Australian and New Zealand markets, where much of it goes, for a whole year.

With no drug rehabilitation program, the Women’s Crisis Centre is on the front line of the desperate social problem. Director Ilisapeci Veibuli said that with people living in extended families “it’s happening in the villages, it’s happening in the schools. Even children are using it.”

Village structures are falling apart and children are being used as mules.

Dreaver reported that over 300 street kids in the capital, Suva are “fighting for their future” amid the squalor. The epidemic is also sparking an alarming surge in HIV and AIDS due to sharing of needles.

There is corruption among the police. More than a tonne of the Nadi meth seizure is currently missing. Dealers boast about having “our guys” in the police force who are bribed to interfere with evidence and lessen charges. Investigations are ongoing into former police commissioner, Sitiveni Qiliho who was jailed along with Bainimarama for abuse of office.

The ruling elite, meanwhile, is cementing itself as a collaborator in the US-led wars in the Middle East and Europe and mounting confrontation with China.

As the second largest island country in the Pacific behind Papua New Guinea, Fiji is of vital strategic importance. While chairing the Pacific Islands Forum in 2021-22, Bainimarama operated as an ally of US imperialism, supporting the NATO confrontation with Russia in Ukraine and signing military agreements with Australia and New Zealand.

The pro-war agenda is being advanced by the current regime. Last October Fiji joined other Pacific Island states to vote against a UN resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. In February this year, an attorney representing Palestine at the International Court of Justice revealed that Fiji and the United States were the only two countries to side with Israel at an ICJ hearing at the time.

Most recently Fiji’s President Ratu Wiliame Katonivere met with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky at last weekend’s fraudulent “Summit for Peace in Ukraine,” held in Switzerland. Katonivere noted Fiji had voted in support of UN resolutions calling for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops and highlighted that Fiji had “cooperated” with the US to seize a Russian super yacht linked to a sanctioned oligarch.



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