

Time for a New Policy Approach to Fiji?

Written by Nicole Forrester and Eddie Walsh, Guest Contributors
Tuesday, 08 November 2011 11:37



For more than two decades, Fiji has endured a coup culture. During the latest military coup in 2006, Commodore Bainimarama removed Prime Minister Qarase's duly elected democratic government. Since then, Australia has actively leveraged its bilateral and regional influence to urge Bainimarama's Interim Government to hold free and fair elections. The regime's failure to return to democracy has led to Fiji's suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum and the Commonwealth.

In addition, Australia has imposed autonomous sanctions, including suspension of ministerial contact and defence cooperation, an arms embargo, and visa restrictions on Interim Government ministers, senior public servants and appointees, ranking Fiji military members and coup supporters, and their families. This group represents, writ large, the resident Fijian leadership and policy elite. It likely also contains a large portion of Fiji's next generation of leaders.

Fiji has responded by promoting policies aimed at making the country less dependent upon its traditional partners, particularly Australia and New Zealand. It has strengthened ties with non-Western powers, particularly China. It also has worked to transform the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) into a viable alternative to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). Finally, it has reached out to both ASEAN and India in order to further diversify its political and economic relationships.

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There is growing criticism of the Australian policy towards Fiji. Critics assert that the hardline Australian position fails to account for the toxic nature of the Fijian Government that was removed from power in 2006. While not condoning the military's use of force or alleged reports of human rights violations, opponents suggest that Australian policy should be moderated if for no other reason than the fact that it has failed to achieve its stated objectives. They argue that failure to change Australia's policy approach risks pushing Fiji further from its traditional partners, undermining the West's strategic interests in the South Pacific.

The Australian Government rejects such criticism outright.

Recently, the voice of the Fijian people captured centre stage in the debate when the Lowy Institute for International Policy conducted a survey of Fijian views on domestic and international issues. The survey reported that 66 percent of the Fijian people said Bainimarama was doing either a very good or good job.

Canberra branded the poll findings as absurd and without credibility - despite Lowy's standing as the premier independent think tank in the region.

The Lowy Fiji Poll methodology and whether it was able to overcome perceived - or real - fears of intimidation and reprisal for answering honestly deserves further discussion and investigation. However, in the absence of hard evidence to undermine the integrity of the poll or credibility of the pollsters, the Government's condemnation of its findings is troubling. Senior Government officials' claim to be "surprised" by increased criticism of Australian policy is also odd. If Australia's policy approach isn't working, vocal and public criticism is to be expected.

Overall, Australia's policy has resulted in severe deterioration of its bilateral relationship with Fiji. This was clearly illustrated by Fiji's declaration of the previous Acting High Commissioner Sarah Roberts persona non grata in July 2010. Now, Fiji regards Australia merely as a "donor country and post-colonial influence" rather than a partner in its future. This is not a position from which Australia can hope to influence Fiji to behave more democratically.

Given that Australia and its partners appear unwilling to employ more coercive tactics (such as military intervention) to achieve regime change, a new policy approach must be considered. The record demonstrates that Fiji can successfully mitigate the punishment that Australia seeks to

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impose through attempts at regime isolation. Does Canberra expect the current approach to deliver different results in the future?

If the Australian policy approach is not moderated, there is a serious risk of outside actors, including China and India, gaining a stronger strategic foothold in the South Pacific.

Bainimarama, now chair of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), is attempting to turn Fiji into the new leader of the South Pacific. As Australia and its partners continue with sanctions, it is no coincidence that the MSG has granted observer status to Asian powers such as Indonesia (somewhat counter-intuitively for the Melanesian West Papuans) and China. As Fiji looks more closely to Asian powers as development partners, Australia risks being left out in the cold.

One of the key soft power tools available to Australia is educational scholarships and student visas. How can Australia expect to positively influence the next generation of Fijian leaders when Canberra has sanctioned many of those who might apply for them by family association with the current regime? These are the future Fijian leaders that Australia should be targeting to demonstrate firsthand the importance and benefits of a broad and deep democratic society.

It is time for a strategic reassessment of Canberra's policy. The Government must determine whether it should abandon value-based policies that have yet to achieve desired effects. It also must assess whether its current policy approach risks undermining its claim to lead in the South Pacific, a role the country has coveted for the better part of a century. Finally, it must work with its partners, including the United States, to gain better insight into the regional implications of its policy for Western strategic interests in the South Pacific.

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