

# NOW THE GOOD NEWS

Fiji's coup has won support in surprising places. If its leader can keep his reforms—and soldiers—on track, it might even work By Elizabeth Keenan



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**W**HEN MILITARY COMMANDER Frank Bainimarama seized power in Suva on Dec. 5, he was instantly denounced by Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., the E.U., the U.N. and the Commonwealth. Exiled Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase continues to vent outrage by phone from his island village, but his countrymen don't seem to be rallying. Soldiers at checkpoints receive abuse, but also smiles, handshakes, food and flowers. Some staunch democrats who condemned George Speight's botched coup in 2000 find themselves endorsing the aims of this takeover, if not the assault rifles that

made it possible. The Methodist Church and the Great Council of Chiefs, bastions of indigenous society, have urged Fijians—including Qarase—to support the multiracial interim government “for the betterment of the nation.” Writing in the *Fiji Times*, Catholic Archbishop Peter Mataka called Australia and New Zealand’s shunning of the Bainimarama administration “regrettable and shallow.” Some Fijians, he wrote, believe democracy and the rule of law “were abused and circumvented long before the military ousted the Qarase government.”

In Fiji, it seems, not all coups are equally offensive. Many see the latest one as the inverse of the 2000 putsch, whose race-

**NEW ORDER** A soldier patrols in downtown Suva. “People feel safer now,” says Rouse

nationalist goals were taken up by the Qarase government. Where Speight’s gang represented indigenous supremacy, traditional autocracy and the self-interest of wealthy insiders, Bainimarama and his team are seen by many as champions of racial inclusiveness, meritocracy and the common man. For Prue Rouse, a vice-president of the Royal Commonwealth Society of Fiji, the ousting of the twice-elected Qarase government is no great loss. “Were we really a democracy over the past six years?” she says, citing allegations of ballot rigging in the 2001 and ’06 polls (which Qarase has strenuously denied).

"We were told we were, but it never felt like it." In a Jan. 1 report, Fiji Human Rights Commission director Shaista Shameem accused the Qarase government of "rampant abuse of power and privilege" and said the military had acted for "the security, defense and well-being of Fiji." "When you think about the endemic corruption [in] the former administration," said Ratu Epeli Ganilau, a former head of the Council of Chiefs who is now Fiji Affairs Minister, the latest coup was "the lesser of two evils."

It's Bainimarama's vow to clean up corruption that has won him most credit with the public. Transparency International Fiji urged the Qarase government to act against rising corruption, but it didn't seem to listen, according to chairman Hari Pal Singh. "If the military is cleaning up corruption," he told the *Fiji Times*, "then we are more or less with them on that, and support their campaign." (A TI director, Aiyaz Sayed Khaiyum, is now Attorney General.) Under the previous government, officials "manipulated the system to get money and benefits when they needed it," says human-rights activist Thakur Ranjit Singh, a columnist for the *Fiji Sun*. "They appointed people from their own provinces, people they can manipulate. As more details of the corruption are coming to light, people are more comfortable with the new government." For Suliana Siwatibau, chair of the Pacific Centre for Public Integrity, this coup "seems like a completion of the task the military tried at the end of the 2000 events," when it appointed Qarase as caretaker prime minister. "It thought his government would do a clean-up, but they didn't. They got further away from that goal. The military wants to restore government that's clean and accountable—this is what it sees as its job."

In a new-broom whirlwind, Bainimarama has announced he will set up an Independent Commission Against Corruption and launched audits of public agencies where funds have gone missing. Also on the agenda are overhauls of the civil service, long seen as a hotbed of nepotism, and the Native Land Trust Board, whose handling of rents and royalties from indigenous land has angered many traditional owners. Acting Chief Justice Anthony Gates, who restored the Constitution in 2001 in the face of death threats, has been asked to investigate claims of judicial bias and "un-judge-like behavior." Bainimarama's hand-picked ministers, who include reformist chiefs, lawyers, ex-civil servants and Opposition politicians, "are principled, moderate people who have Fiji's best interests at heart," says the Commonwealth Society's Rouse. "This is a multiracial government," says Ranjit Singh, "and they have

policies that encompass the whole community. Qarase was always seen as a sectarian leader governing for the indigenous people."

The Qarase government relied on the support of the Conservative Alliance party, which openly defended the 2000 coup. "They never brought in the Freedom of Information bill and the Code of Conduct bill," says Rev. Akuila Yabaki, head of the Citizens' Constitutional Forum. "Yet these are a requirement of the Constitution." Instead, Yabaki says, Qarase energetically pursued "three divisive bills which would sustain his uneth-



Interim P.M.  
Bainimarama

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"I am determined to put honest, credible and competent people in positions of power."

ical hold on the votes of indigenous Fijians," who make up 51% of the population. The first, which would have given amnesty to all participants in the Speight coup, sparked a furor—and a threat from Bainimarama to remove Qarase if it wasn't withdrawn. (The government also stirred anger by prematurely freeing five chiefs jailed for their role in 2000.) The other two bills would have transferred Fiji's shores and waters to indigenous ownership and allowed tribal groups to claim private land. Qarase said he stood for "an inclusive society, where the views of every com-

munity and group are taken into account." But "the special interests of the Fijian people, including their right of ownership to their natural resources, must also be protected." Many thought the balance tilted mostly one way. "You had the feeling that only the [indigenous] Fijian Who's Who had a place in Fiji," says British-born Rouse. "Everyone else was here on sufferance."

In 2000, Indo-Fijians were the coup's biggest victims. This time around they're its biggest fans. Indigenous people are more divided, but many commoners warm to Bainimarama's claim that he is acting "against the rich, powerful and deceitful." "People who benefited from the Qarase government's policies feel aggrieved and want it back," says Ranjit Singh. "But a large chunk of the younger, educated Fijians are sick of the older leaders benefiting at the expense of the common people." Bainimarama has vowed to cancel a planned hike in Value Added Tax and boost programs to help the 1 in 3 Fijians who live in poverty. But the economy was already in trouble under Qarase. If investors pull out or other countries impose aid or trade sanctions, keeping those promises will be tough.

Another worry is the behavior of the armed forces. The Human Rights Commission has received some 15 reports of soldiers humiliating or beating people who've made what the military terms "inciteful comments." Bainimarama said all allegations would be investigated, but complaints continue. Also looming are legal challenges by sacked officials, including the former Chief Justice, and by Qarase and his SDL party, who want the High Court to rule the interim government unconstitutional. Qarase also accuses Bainimarama of staging the coup "so he won't answer charges he was facing" for sedition.

The Centre for Public Integrity's Siwatibau hopes the new administration will "put as their topmost priority getting us back to democracy as soon as possible." Meanwhile, though, she sees a "hopeful glimmer": "Because of all the debate, people are becoming more informed about democracy and the role of the people," she says. "Some people are saying maybe this was a blessing so we can be educated to what's going on. Our political parties have always exploited our differences. Now more people are speaking up about the need to live happily together." Qarase's elected government was seen as caring most about the happiness of indigenous Fijians. Bainimarama's force-backed government aims to make Fijians of all races happy. If—and it's a huge *if*—he can implement his idealistic program, he might just have pulled off the coup to end all Fiji coups. ■