

## OPINION PIECE

# Our fatally flawed policy on Fiji

*We should give Frank Bainimarama some credit for his steps towards democracy.*

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Fijians say *moce mada* when saying goodbye, with an expectation of seeing the other person soon. Australia's farewell to the Fijian government after the December 2006 coup was with an expectation that it was temporary. After five years, however, there's a sad appearance of permanence about the fractured relationship.

No doubt Fiji could do more to take irritations out of the relationship. Suva earlier on wanted our help, but it now believes that Canberra is not interested in listening to its side of the story. Not surprisingly, the Fijian government is not inclined to make concessions to Canberra.

Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama's recent decision to lift the Public Emergency Regulations was not bowing to external pressure: the move was aimed at facilitating constitutional consultations announced more than two years ago. While not done to curry international favour, Fiji hoped it would be taken as a clear indication Suva was meeting its own milestones for a return to democratic elections in September 2014. The Gillard government has apparently spurned the opportunity to use Fiji's move to rescind emergency regulations as a chance to reopen dialogue. Fiji's Foreign Minister, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, expressed his disappointment over this and Australia's continuing negativity towards Fiji, while expressing his appreciation of the Australian government's extension of a Pacific market access scheme that is helping to sustain Fiji's garment industry.

The fundamental flaw in Australia's approach is that it has never had a graduated plan for re-engaging with Fiji. The only clear benchmark for improving relations was asserted to be elections. Canberra has dismissed every political development in Fiji since the December 2006 military coup as inadequate or deceitful. Bainimarama has been obdurate on any changes of his own plan for democratic elections, whatever the foreign criticism.

In late-2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton accepted the best course for the US was to help the Fijian government successfully navigate the roadmap to 2014 elections. Should the Gillard government persist in demanding certainty with regard to elections while denying milestones in Bainimarama's roadmap, the chance for improved relations may recede for a decade.

Canberra's railing against perceived defects of Fiji's electoral roadmap has produced no positive effects. Quite the reverse; the strategy has severely diminished our relationship with Fiji.

So what comes next? Either the 2014 elections are not held or they are but under arrangements that produce an outcome of which Canberra disapproves.

In either case, Australia ends up with a government in Fiji that's very likely to go another five years with no basis for improved bilateral relations. The scenario of perhaps 15 years of political tensions between Canberra and Suva is entirely plausible. This is long enough to leave indelible scars on our regional relations.

Meanwhile, Fiji is getting on with new relationships that are less and less connected with Australia's interest in the Pacific islands region. Fiji has requested help on developing an electronic voter register in preparation for the promised 2014 elections, a digitised land register to assist with land reform, improved food security and aid to enable the recording of court proceedings.

Australian assistance here would provide appropriate steps for promoting Fiji's return to parliamentary democracy.

US President Barack Obama has made clear there's a long game in our region: in Australia, he argued that the Asian century had to be the Asia-Pacific century. Fiji is a vital element in this aspect of restructuring of regional affairs, but Australia continues to play the short game without effect.

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