

Is Fiji's bottle half full or half empty?

An interview with Fiji's ambassador to the United States: Winston Thompson

Australian Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, famously condemned Fiji's first military coup, saying: "Today's events are particularly deplorable as the first military coup against an elected government in the South Pacific."

In the wake of the 1987 coup d'états, democracy has remained elusive for a post-colonial society deeply divided along racial lines. With further military coups in 2000 and 2006, Suva, Fiji's capital, has become the coup capital of the South Pacific.

The question is whether Fiji can chart a new course and re-establish a stable and enduring democracy. The choice rests with Commodore Frank Bainimarama, the leader of the 2006 coup and current head of government. Without his acquiescence, democracy will not return to Fiji. But, even with it, there are no guarantees. This is the puzzle Fiji faces.

Eddie Walsh spoke with Fiji's Ambassador to the United States, Winston Thompson, to hear his views on what progress has been made towards the restoration of democracy and the country's outlook for 2012.

Eddie Walsh: On Saturday, your country officially lifted the state of martial law that has been in place since 2009. While the move does not restore democracy, it has been hailed as a step in that direction by Commodore Bainimarama. How has the United States responded to the move?

Winston Thompson: I think the US sees the end of the emergency powers as a positive move. While the US has tended to allow Australia to determine the Fiji-US relationship, the US has been increasing its engagement with not only Fiji, but also with the South Pacific. Because Fiji is so pivotal to the South Pacific, there is now a new opportunity for the US to be more forthcoming in terms of facilitating the process back toward[s] a democratic government. Because of the holiday period, we have not had contact with the US State Department yet on these issues. But, I foresee things developing along these lines.

EW: Now that the public emergency regulations have been lifted, do you expect a significant shift in Western foreign policy toward Fiji?

WT: It is too early to see a major change since the announcement was just made. But I would imagine that there would be - because the things that have been changed by the government are the things that have been most objected to by these governments. So, it would be a bit unusual for them to have made

this stand all along and do nothing when these changes are brought in.

As you know, there are **three pillars to US policy towards Fiji**: 1) Implementing Section 7008 sanctions, 2) Protecting and promoting US interests, including maintaining full diplomatic relations in Suva and DC, 3) Doing no harm to the people of Fiji. The US has maintained this position all along.

The US was not very happy about the coup taking place, but they also wanted to make sure that the people of Fiji were not impacted. Although Australia and New Zealand imply that they have a similar "Do No Harm" policy, the impact of their sanctions has had very significant impacts against ordinary Fijians. In the case of the US, they have not imposed their sanctions in the same way.

The US also has welcomed the moves that have been made, including setting up the consultative process for the new constitution. Australia and New Zealand may have welcomed these moves as well, but there appears to be a certain degree of hesitancy and caution in what they say.

EW: Does this move provide a strategic opportunity to fully normalize Fiji-US relations, or do you need to wait for more concrete steps toward democracy?

WT: This is the moment. These moves by the government, in a way, are to conform to what other governments have asked us to do. So, it is an opening that we will certainly take-up. We will operate through the US State Department's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs on this.

EW: The lifting of martial law has been met with great skepticism in some circles, especially in Australia and New Zealand. Critics argue that the speech announcing the move itself indicates the current government is not committed to democratic values. One particular line has caused a lot of angst: "Public order, protecting the vulnerable, and safeguarding the economy will always be paramount." What was meant by this comment?

WT: For a country like Fiji, democracy is a very fragile thing. It can be tipped over by over exciting certain groups within society and causing turmoil. This has been the concern of the government in maintaining the public emergency regulations. If you allow too much freedom of expression, people are uncontrolled in what they say and you can get very heated emotions being generated, which is not in anybody's interest.

EW: Unfortunately, this can be the same argument given for preserving dictatorships as well. How then do you address skeptics who say that Commodore Bainimarama's lifting of martial law is disingenuous?

WT: We can only wait and see. The public emergency regulations have been lifted. What that line says, if

there is an explosion in violence, maybe we will have to look at it again. What the government is asking is for people to be responsible and not get over excited. We have had situations in the past where people have used the race card to demonize others, which has led to political instability. What the prime minister therefore is saying is that this is an issue that we will need to continue to watch.

EW: While the lifting of the public emergency regulations is important, do you think more needs to be done by the government to demonstrate your commitment to democratic values?

WT: On the strategic framework for change announced by the prime minister in 2009, we laid out a timeline for the process of getting to elections in September 2014. That framework said, in the first two years, we would focus on economic and social development. Then, there would be a process to developing and promulgating a constitution. And, finally there would be elections. We have kept to that timeline.

As far as Fiji is concerned, the prime minister has made it very clear that the public emergency relations would be lifted. Next, he will be announcing the setting up of the consultative process for the constitution. By the end of this year, the constitutional review will be fully underway. It will be developed in 2013, explained and promulgated to the people, and then available in 2014 in order to hold the elections.

EW: The Sydney Morning Herald newspaper recently ran a piece with Lieutenant-Colonel Tevita Mara. He argued that the end of emergency rule would make little difference for Fijian hopes for democracy. He also cautioned that Commodore Bainimarama was attempting to clear the domestic political field behind the scenes so that he can run unopposed in the future. What is your reaction to these comments?

WT: Lt Col Mara has been making these comments since he left Fiji. Having been part of the Fijian military at a very high-level, it is a bit incongruous - as if he was not an uninvolved and innocent bystander. When he first started making these statements, he said the lifting of the emergency regulations, the registration of voters using electronic means, and intention to set up a review committee for the constitution would not happen at all. Now that they are happening, he is questioning whether it is genuine. In terms of eliminating the competition for Commodore Bainimarama to have the field all to himself, I think that is a scare tactic that is not realistic.

EW: It would appear counter-intuitive that the government would take one step forward with the lifting of martial law and immediately take one step back with the prosecution of political opposition leaders. Why then is the government suddenly moving forward with charges against Mere Samisoni and other political leaders?

WT: I think it is probably just a coincidence that they are happening at the same time. She is a fairly spirited sort of woman who tends to make overheated, rash statements. These have been overheard and she now will have her day in court. If she was making statements and plotting as are stated in the charges, then she is going to face the legal situation that she has created.

EW: In 2010, your government made a pledge to improve the human rights situation. Almost 18 months later, Human Rights Watch and others continue to publicly admonish Fiji over its human rights record. When you speak of keeping your promises to the international community, do you feel the government has followed through on its human rights pledge?

WT: The lifting of the public emergency regulations has dealt with lot of criticisms related to the freedom of association, freedom of speech, and human rights generally. So, people will be free to make comments, associate and return to a normal life. Now that the decision has been made to the lifting of the emergency regulations, there is a new platform for reviewing the situation in Fiji.

EW: The International Trade Union Confederation has argued that Fiji is prosecuting 'an all-out assault on trade unions in Fiji'. In 2011, there also were increasing calls for Fiji to restore freedom of the press. Now that the public emergency regulations have been lifted, do you expect the government's approach toward trade unions and media to change in 2012?

WT: The fact that the public emergency regulations there prevented their meetings and association, so perhaps the criticism was justified. Now, the unions will be free to meet and do whatever they were doing before.

The Media Industry Development Degree 2010 continues. There has always been a self-regulated organization where complaints against media were directed. But, the government felt the issue wasn't being taken seriously enough by that body. The government indicated that, unless that body took its job seriously, they would have to pass legislation. So, that legislation came in when it was felt that claims against the media for exaggeration and incorrect reports were not being taken seriously.

With respect to ownership of the media, many countries have laws which restrict offshore ownership. I don't know that ours is particularly different from standard international practice. Because the *Fiji Times* was wholly owned by News Corporation, they couldn't satisfy local ownership requirements.

The *Fiji Times* also was, for a long period, very critical of the government who felt it was not very helpful in getting Fiji moved in a positive direction to get back to elections in the proper state. If you continue to criticize and print things that are not correct, you keep the collective mentality in an unsettled state. In the end, the frustration with the ownership and editorial direction of the newspaper meant you had to do

something.

EW: The process of demilitarization is not currently addressed in the strategic framework. Is there a timetable for the troops to return to their barracks?

WT: When the process gets to the stage of preparing for elections, the need to have the military visible will change. At the moment, many military officers man positions in the civilian government. I would imagine they would return to their military positions then.

EW: Your comments would suggest that there is no timetable to address issues which fall outside of the strategic framework. Given that uncertainty over these issues is fuelling doubts over your government's commitment to democracy, do you feel it is now time to broaden or deepen the strategic framework?

WT: The challenge is there. There will be disbelief; there will be skepticism. In the fulfillment of these objectives and as more are announced, including the constitutional review committee, things will fall into place. As people see these things moving along, it will incrementally improve relations. The framework was a broad statement with a very long timelines. As time goes on, there will be a need to be more specific and fitting things into the timeline. In terms of giving greater credibility to the process, maybe we need to be more specific on some of those other points.

EW: We have talked a lot about whether Fiji needs to do more to demonstrate its commitment. But, as a diplomat, you probably have strong views on how the international community could improve its side of the engagement as well. What actions can the international community take to encourage Fiji to move forward on the reforms that they are demanding?

WT: The government has put out a timetable which it has adhered to, but there remains a certain attitude in the international community. Some in the international community have criticized what the government has done in its pathway back to democracy. As a consequence, Fiji has looked to other sources for friends and assistance and developed new partnerships and relationships.

So, I think what has happened over the last five years is that there is a new pattern of relationships which has developed. We have moved away from the traditional ones, which relied on Australia and New Zealand very heavily, as well as the United States and other Western countries to some extent. We have become more associated with other countries. China has always been there. Japan has been much more assisting. New relationships have developed with Indonesia, India, and other non-aligned movement countries, like the Melanesian Spearhead Group.

In some cases, these countries have endorsed what Fiji has done. In others, they have said, what you do

is up to you. They have said that we will continue to provide what assistance where we have in the past and you will sort yourself out in good time. Whereas the others have said that you have to do this, that, or the other - regardless of whether Fiji thinks that is the right thing to do. This is the issue with our traditional partners.

EW: One of the arguments made in defense of the coup was that it was necessary to prevent the further politicization of race in Fiji. How then is the current government working to overcome this issue in the run-up to elections?

WT: The government has systematically removed the issue of race out of the whole society and body politic. That has been there since Fiji was a colony. So long as it was there, it compartmentalized the people. You had a communal look in electing officials to whatever office, not just the parliament. This perpetuated this sense of being separate. Now, all people in Fiji are regarded as a Fijian. Before, this was reserved for just one group of people. The removal of those potential sources of friction has provided a better basis to move on. Over time, hopefully this will leave people less to feel different about. The government also has followed through on recruitment to public service and into the government on a meritorious, non-racial basis. It is going to take time. I am sure with time the information collected by our statistics bureau in government will confirm these trends.

EW: Fiji is not the only country that is forced to deal with deep ethnic cleavages within its society. From your perspective, why then do you think that current government is not being recognized for its efforts to bridge the racial divide?

WT: It is hard to understand for those familiar with the Fiji situation. Tensions can boil over very easily when people are not responsible. Our past history shows that irresponsible actions have tipped the situation over. It's a reality that we have to live with. My view is that others tend to look at this very narrowly in their definition of democracy and freedom. Generally, these attributes have evolved in these countries over many years. They have become entrenched and stabilized and society adheres to them. In the developing countries, these values are not as well entrenched. You have to be more careful or they will unravel.

EW: There are many examples in which the military leadership elects to stand-down prior to a return to democracy. There have been calls for similar moves in Fiji. Do you see widespread support within the current government to remove the military from politics prior to the 2014 elections and is there a timetable for this process?

WT: I am not privy to such talks. That said, the previous coup leader, Sitiveni Rabuka, did stand down, became a political figure, stood for elections, and came back in as the prime minister. In this case, I would

imagine that Commodore Bainimarama could follow a similar path.

EW: It is clear that some major challenges remain in Fiji's path to democracy. However, progress also appears to have been made in the past year. Looking ahead at 2012, what are the diplomatic 'wins' that you are trying to achieve and what are the most serious risks facing those efforts?

WT: The basic position that Fiji has, and has been following, is the strategic framework for change to build a better Fiji. We want to make Fiji a more balanced country, first in terms of socio-economic development and then, updating the legal framework and laws. This removes the issues which have been divisive for Fiji. Only then can you move forward with the constitution and elections. In terms of performance along that continuum, the government has followed it. It has not conformed to what some other countries have set out though who want elections immediately.

Fiji has been saying all along that our whole issue is that the basis of the constitution is wrong and must be fixed. But, that is falling on deaf ears. Now, we are at the stage that the public emergency regulations are lifted. We are getting ready for the constitutional review phase, with the economic and social development plans having been fully launched.

The only challenge for us is if we do not follow through on the commitments we have laid out in the strategic framework. Assuming that we continue along that line, we would have to be accepted at face value once these things are done.

Now, the relationships that have been on ice need to be reviewed and normalized with countries like the United States. It has been put that when we have announced a date for elections that things will happen. But, that date has already been set for 2014.

We are comfortable with where we are at on our timeline. We remain open to other countries being part of our development processes, and we are very appreciative of those who have stood by us these past five years. But we are clear on where we are going and will not be dictated to by those who've been less than helpful up to now.

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