

LIKE many military leaders before him, Frank Bainimarama can be autocratic, stubborn, wilful, obstinate and disdainful of the traditional nuances of civilian politics.

He may also be the best hope, albeit in five years' time, of a democratic Fiji for all its citizens and not just the amply endowed indigenous majority.

If that seems a ludicrous proposition when constitutions are being abrogated and the media proscribed, it's time to consider some basic truths that seem to have been overlooked in the "good guy, bad guy" narrative that invariably passes for analysis in much of the Australian media.

The bad guys, of course, are held to be Bainimarama and his patron, Fiji's octogenarian President, Josefa Iloilo, who have defied the courts by ruling out any popular vote until they can change the electoral system.

The good guys are those calling for an immediate election: a coalition of lawyers, human-rights activists and elements of the local media, plus the man Bainimarama deposed at gunpoint in 2006, former prime minister Laisenia Qarase.

It's time to dispense with this simplistic premise because a compelling argument can be made that, in fact, the reverse is true; that Bainimarama and Iloilo, for all their flaws, are embarked on the more worthy crusade. Or certainly more worthy than they're being given credit for by their burgeoning number of foreign opponents.

The Fiji saga, by its very nature, defies simplicity, yet stripped to its bare essentials presents the international community with a stark choice between upholding the principle of democracy now and sacrificing racial equality in the process. Wait five years - maybe less if some international agreement could be brokered - and we might get both.

Bainimarama and Iloilo have decided that the brand of democracy Qarase champions makes second-class citizens of the 40 per cent of Fiji's population who aren't indigenous, and is not conducive to the development of a thriving, modern state. Qarase and his ilk, they've determined, can only be kept at bay if the electoral system is changed from one that favours indigenous Fijians to one that gives every vote equal weight.

So that is what they intend to do before the country goes to the polls again in 2014, and no amount of hectoring or sanctions is likely to deter them.

In the meantime, the regime needs to embark on that electoral reform, behave less erratically, cease harassing the media, expelling publishers, hounding its opponents and put its case far more cogently than it has.

Australia, in turn, needs to listen, assist in the electoral reform process and do all it can to prevent the collapse of the Fiji economy, which will hurt everyone but the elite and bolster our immigration queues when we can least afford it.

Why is Australia and the rest of the international community insisting on an immediate expression of the public will when Fiji's electoral playing field is yet to be levelled? That's the question that not only frustrates and angers Bainimarama, and fuels his increasing petulance, but perplexes many Fiji-born Australians such as myself.

For all the voluble calls by Kevin Rudd and Foreign Minister Stephen Smith for "a return to democracy in Fiji", they seem oblivious to the fact that there's never been real democracy in Fiji. That's right, never.

Certainly not the brand of democracy taken for granted in Australia, New Zealand, the US and in the European Union, those now casting themselves as righteous crusaders against Bainimarama's supposedly despotic rule.

There's no one-man, one-vote in Fiji but a contorted, distorted electoral system along racial lines that was always designed, in practice, to ensure indigenous supremacy.

This was a parting gesture of the British at independence in 1970 to their loyal Fijian subjects, along with guaranteed indigenous ownership of more than 80 per cent of Fiji's land area. It's certainly in stark contrast with the colonial dispossession of the native populations of Australia and NZ, and may account for the fact that many homes in republican Fiji still sport photos of the Queen.

No non-indigenous Fiji citizen can become the country's president, and just one,

Mahendra Chaudhry, made it to the prime minister's office before he was removed at gunpoint in 2000.

Nor is the president elected. He is chosen by an unelected hereditary body called the Great Council of Chiefs, the apex of a social order that insists indigenous rights are paramount.

Fiji citizens of Indian, European, mixed race or other island heritage are disadvantaged comparatively in everything from land rights to "positive discrimination" programs in employment and education that solely benefit the indigenous majority. They even have to suffer the apartheid-style humiliation of listing their race on immigration arrival documents.

Would Australians and New Zealanders accept this? Not on your nelly.

So why the chorus of regional disapproval when an indigenous Fijian, Bainimarama, finally decides enough is enough?

Forty per cent of the population not only lives daily with this disparity of rights but, in the main, accepts it.

Why? Partly in the spirit of acknowledging the importance to indigenous Fijians of their vanua (land and traditional ties) but mainly as the price of ensuring racial harmony. It's this largely

unspoken consensus that's underpinned whatever success Fiji has had as a functioning multiracial nation to date.

Yet it also depends on indigenous Fijians displaying their own generosity of spirit or, more pertinently, not being too greedy in sequestering all the spoils for themselves.

What Qarase, Bainimarama's chief political opponent, did before he was overthrown in the 2006 coup was to cross an important line.

By insisting that indigenous Fijians gain coastal rights as well as land rights, and be paid cash by other citizens to swim in, fish in and even cross their seas, he demanded more from the other races than many regarded as equitable and fair.

By doing so, he recklessly jeopardised the delicate consensus on which Fiji's future as a viable independent entity depends.

Just as bad, in Bainimarama's eyes, Qarase's coastal bill raised the spectre of envy and conflict between Fijians themselves, for those living in remote areas would never be able to glean the riches available, for instance, to those holding the tourist industry to ransom.

For all their comparative advantages, many ordinary indigenous Fijians still maintain a barely disguised sense of grievance against other races, perpetuating the myth of a threat to their way of life.

This was the big lie of Fiji's first coup in 1987, the preposterous spectre of then military strongman Sitiveni Rabuka claiming indigenous interests were threatened because an indigenous Fijian, Timoci Bavadra, was surrounded by a brace of Indian cabinet members.

Ordinary Fijians should be asking their own leaders why they're still disadvantaged, because if they are being fleeced, it must be by their own elite who have been in control since independence. The political instability of recent years is all part of a crude tug of war between competing Fijian chiefs, career politicians and (mostly) wannabe business types for the spoils that come with government: patronage, leverage, the dispensing of contracts and the accumulation of wealth.

The apotheosis of this was the 2000 coup led by the strutting George Speight, who was merely a puppet for a gaggle of opportunistic chiefs and commoners who used the Indians as scapegoats in a sordid lunge for power.

In an obscene echo of their atavistic past, the Speight clique trashed the supposed citadel of local democracy, the parliament, took hostage then prime minister Chaudhry, and proceeded to engage in an eight-week orgy of drunkenness and sex.

Enter the hero of that hour, but the man Rudd and much of the international community now casts as a villain nine years on.

Bainimarama, as military chief, tricked Speight into surrendering, and turned him over to the courts to be dealt with for treason. He also had to contend with a bloody mutiny in his own ranks in which he barely escaped with his life. Yet no one seems to ask a simple question. If he really wanted to be Fiji's dictator, why didn't Bainimarama impose his will then, when a grateful nation would have strewn garlands at his feet?

Instead, history tells us, he handed over power to Qarase, a one-time merchant banker whom he trusted to stabilise the country, lay to rest the racial bogey once and for all and return Fiji to a semblance of democracy.

What did Qarase do? Not just extend indigenous supremacy but bring some of the key players in the 2000 coup, who Bainimarama wanted punished, into the heart of government. Qarase got plenty of warnings to back off but didn't. It was only a matter of time before Bainimarama's fiery temper snapped.

Qarase never believed one of his own would oppose him, but it was a grave miscalculation based on his own ignorance of Bainimarama's background and attitudes.

Most of the Fijian elite come from exclusively Fijian schools but Bainimarama grew up with other races at Suva's Marist Brothers College, where the emphasis was on multiracial tolerance and nation building. His friends say the relationships he forged there are real and enduring.

He's said to be gripped with a sense of destiny yet has some glaring blind spots, such as a tendency to shoot his mouth off when the occasion calls for at least a modicum of diplo-speak.

More serious for even Bainimarama's staunchest supporters are some appalling lapses of judgment, including the latest, muzzling the local media and expelling foreign journalists such as the ABC's Sean Dorney.

The most glaring was when he reinstated his brother-in-law, Francis Kean, as head of the navy after Kean spent nearly two months in jail for killing an uncle of the groom at the wedding of Bainimarama's daughter.

"What's wrong with that?", Bainimarama has testily asked interlocutors. Plenty.

Yet for many Fijian citizens, the military chief remains their best hope for a meaningful stake in the future, and if he can deliver on his promise of equal rights, all will be forgiven.

It's certainly a striking paradox that having forged vibrant, multicultural nations from their own monocultural origins, Australia and NZ should be condemning Bainimarama for trying to do the same in Fiji.

Graham Davis is a Fiji-born journalist who reported successive coups for the Nine Network's Sunday program and is now a principal of Grubstreet Media.