



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice
Fiji

Fiji – FJI36443 – Methodist Church –
Protests – Interim Government – Church
leaders
16 April 2010

1. Please advise if there is any information on protests held in 2008 and whether Methodist Church leaders were arrested as a result.

There is no information to indicate a Methodist Church-led protest occurred in 2008 that resulted in the arrest of Methodist Church leaders. Only two reports of protests in 2008 were found:

- In March 2008, indigenous Fijian youths – represented by the Provincial Youth Forum – postponed their plans to conduct a rally after their leader was detained for questioning by the military.¹
- In December 2008, a coalition of non-government organisations staged a rally in Suva to highlight human rights abuses by the government. About 80–90 people attended and no arrests were reported.²

Although tensions between the Church and the Interim Government had been building since the 2006 coup – due to the Church’s condemnation of the coup; its opposition to the government’s proposed People’s Charter for Change³; and its use of church services as an avenue for political expression – there were no reports of Church protests or arrests in 2008. There was no official media censorship in 2008 and given the high profile of Methodist Church leaders in Fiji, it is reasonable to expect that any arrest of an individual belonging to the Church hierarchy would have been reported in the local or international press.

In September 2008 the Methodist Church conducted a week-long fundraising gathering in Suva, followed by a conference. At the conference, the Church’s opposition to the government’s proposed People’s Charter for Change was discussed, which did not result in any arrests.⁴ It is unknown if Methodist Church leaders were present at this event; however, that the Church was able to convene a gathering and discuss political matters indicates that its freedom of assembly was not restricted at that time.

2. Please advise whether any Methodist Church leaders were arrested at the beginning of 2009, or if it happened in May 2009.

All sources indicate that the government arrested Methodist Church leaders in May 2009 – after the 10 April abrogation of the constitution and introduction of the *Public Emergency*

¹ ‘Fiji police question youth rally organizer’ 2008, BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, 10 March – Accessed 9 April 2010 – Attachment 1.

² ‘PAC: NGOs rally to highlight Fiji abuses’ 2008, Australian Associated Press General News, 10 December – Accessed 9 April 2010 – Attachment 2.

³ Newland, L. 2009, ‘Chapter 9. Religion and politics: The Christian churches and the 2006 coup in Fiji’, pp 187, 190, 192–196, in Jon Fraenkel, Stewart Firth and Brij V. Lal. 2009, *The 2006 military takeover in Fiji: a coup to end all coups?*, Canberra ANU E Press http://epress.anu.edu.au/coup_coup/pdf/ch09.pdf – Accessed 26 March 2010 – Attachment 5.

⁴ ‘Methodists raise \$2 million’ 2008, *Fiji Times*, 4 September – Accessed 9 April 2010 – Attachment 3.

Regulations. The only known arrest of Fijian Methodists prior to this date was in February 2007 when the military detained the Church's legal adviser and senior administration officer for questioning over the Church's release of a 20-point plan opposing the 2006 coup; see Attachment 5 for a narrative of events.

In May 2009, the government arrested and temporarily detained several members of the Church hierarchy for criticising the regime, proposing a pro-democracy rally and proceeding with plans to organise the Church's annual conference. The 2009 US Department of State report summarises the series of events:

In May the government began a crackdown on Methodist pastors opposed to the government. From May 14 to 15, authorities detained Manasa Lasaro, a former president of the Methodist Church, to which approximately 30 percent of the population belongs, for writing a proposal for peaceful protests against the government. On May 29, the military issued an unsigned statement declaring that the Methodist Church would not be allowed to hold its 2009 annual conference. On July 19, the church's executive body decided to proceed with the conference despite the permit denial. On July 21, police and military officers detained Ro Teimumu Kepa, minister of education in the ousted Qarase government and the paramount chief of Rewa Province, where the conference was to be held. Police and military officers also detained and questioned the church's president, general secretary, and seven other senior church officials. All were held at military headquarters in Suva until July 23, when Kepa and four of the nine detained Methodist officials were charged with various offenses relating to breach of public order and released on bail. Subsequently five additional church officials also were charged with offenses related to their roles in organizing the conference. All those charged were subjected to strict bail conditions, which prevented them from communicating with each other, travelling, or taking part in church meetings and other church events.⁵

Further arrests of Methodist Church ministers have occurred since the above report. On 4 February 2010, 15 Methodist Church ministers were arrested and charged for breaching the *Public Emergency Regulations* (PERs) and other cases involving Methodist ministers are still before the courts.⁶ See Country Advice FJI36386, 31 March 2010, for detailed information on the strained relationship between the Interim Government and the Methodist church; its impact on the Church hierarchy and on ordinary Fijian Methodists.

⁵ United States Department of State 2010, '2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Fiji', Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including: c. Freedom of Religion, US State Department website, 11 March www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/eap/135991.htm – Accessed 12 March 2010 – Attachment 4.

⁶ '15 ministers charged in fresh PER crackdown' 2010, Fijilive website, 4 February <http://www.fijilive.com/news/2010/02/04/23393.Fijilive> – Accessed 24 March 2010 – Attachment 6; 'Fiji Methodist leaders plead not guilty in PER case' 2010, Radio New Zealand News International, 25 March – Accessed 16 April 2010 – Attachment 7.

3. Please advise whether there is any information on members of congregations being arrested who were involved in protests, not just church leaders.

There is no information to indicate that members of congregations have been arrested for involvement in protests. Moreover, since the April 2009 abrogation of the constitution and enforcement of the PERs, Fijian authorities have been invested with extraordinary powers to prohibit and disperse public gatherings,⁷ and no reports of protests since the government's May 2009 crackdown were found. It should be noted, however, that due to media censorship (since April 2009), information on the current situation on the ground is difficult to obtain. As a result, ordinary members of congregations may have been arrested for anti-government activities including protests and attempting protests.

Although not protest-related, one source has indicated that ordinary members of congregations, specifically the Methodist Church, have been arrested and detained by the government. According to Reverend Jovili, Chair of the Fiji Conference of the Uniting Church Australia:

As a former Methodist Minister myself, I was warned by the church leaders to focus on the Gospel when preaching. It is difficult to be that "prophetic voice" that is, to preach about the truth regarding the oppression, socio-economic woes, political manipulation and indoctrination by the present regime. **The people are suffering.** When I preached on Sunday, people came in big numbers to listen but later some were not so happy that I did not touch on the problems that they were facing. Fijian people do not ask questions, just follow directives. That is how we were brought up to obey the chiefs and those in leaderships. With the strong pull from the army leaders on one side and the church on the other side, the people are confused. They filled up churches on Sunday because it's the only place and time they find solace and comfort. On the outside, their Sunday attire in white looks good, but sitting with them and discussing issues, I saw how depressed they were. But they did not tell all because there would be spies in their midst. **Some church members were already taken to the army camps for questioning and stripped naked, ran around the ground and humiliated. People did not talk about this openly, but in private, they would share some of these frightening stories. Everybody is being watched, especially high profiled people and ordinary church members who are making small noises against the govt, of course, the media...only the 'good' stories, good to the regime are printed.** They all look forward to the restoration of democracy ...they said in 2014, we will see!⁸

Importantly, under the current government, any regime critic risks arrest and charges under PERs. As a result, it is reasonable to expect that any ordinary member of a congregation who speaks out against the regime, risks attracting the adverse attention of the government and possibly arrest.

⁷ See Part II, 'Powers For Maintaining Public Safety – Prohibition and dispersal of assemblies etc.' Section 3(1) in Republic of Fiji Islands 2009, *Public Emergency Regulations 2009* (Effective 10 April 2009) PACLII website http://www.pacii.org/fj/legis/num_act/per2009273/ –Accessed 30 March 2010 – Attachment 8.

⁸ Reverend Jovili Meo, Chair of the Fiji Conference of the Uniting Church Australia 2010, Email to RRT Country Advice, 25 March – Attachment 9.

4. Deleted.

5. Deleted.

Attachments

1. 'Fiji police question youth rally organizer' 2008, BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, 10 March – Accessed 9 April 2010.
2. 'PAC: NGOs rally to highlight Fiji abuses' 2008, Australian Associated Press General News, 10 December – Accessed 9 April 2010.
3. 'Methodists raise \$2 million' 2008, *Fiji Times*, 4 September – Accessed 9 April 2010.
4. United States Department of State 2010, '2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Fiji', , Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including: c. Freedom of Religion, US State Department website, 11 March.
5. Newland, L. 2009, 'Chapter 9. Religion and politics: The Christian churches and the 2006 coup in Fiji', pp 187, 190, 192–196, in Jon Fraenkel, Stewart Firth and Brij V. Lal. 2009, *The 2006 military takeover in Fiji: a coup to end all coups?*, Canberra ANU E Press http://epress.anu.edu.au/coup_coup/pdf/ch09.pdf – Accessed 26 March 2010.
6. '15 ministers charged in fresh PER crackdown' 2010, Fijilive website, 4 February <http://www.fijilive.com/news/2010/02/04/23393.Fijilive> – Accessed 24 March 2010.
7. 'Fiji Methodist leaders plead not guilty in PER case' 2010, *Radio New Zealand News International*, 25 March – Accessed 16 April 2010.
8. Republic of Fiji Islands 2009, *Public Emergency Regulations 2009* (Effective 10 April 2009) PACLII website http://www.pacii.org/fj/legis/num_act/per2009273/ – Accessed 30 March 2010.
9. Reverend Jovili Meo, Chair of the Fiji Conference of the Uniting Church Australia 2010, Email to RRT Country Advice, 25 March.
10. Deleted.
11. Deleted.