



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Fiji

Fiji – FJI35689 – Methodists – State of
Emergency – Freedom of assembly – New
Methodists – Leaders

9 December 2009

1 To what extent have Methodists, and in particular ordinary Methodists, been targeted by the current regime in Fiji?

Preliminary Note

The President of the Fiji Methodist Church stated its members are numbered at over 200,000.¹ A Christian monitoring agency of 6 September 2009 provides a higher figure:

The all-powerful Fiji Methodist Church which counts 329,759 members out of a little less than a million Fijians estimated populations.²

On 29 May 2009 the Public Emergency Regulations came into force:

The Emergency Regulations came into force on Good Friday when Fiji's constitution was abolished and all the judges were sacked. These sweeping regulations give Bainimarama's Government virtually total power under what is called "Fiji's New Legal Order".¹

According to Amnesty International (September 2009) Fiji is under a continuing state of emergency which has been prolonged several times since May 2009 and is now due to continue until December 2009; this enables the authorities to enact a series of prohibitions:

2.2 THE PUBLIC EMERGENCY REGULATIONS (PER)

The Public Emergency Regulations (PER) were issued and came into force at midday on 10 April 2009 immediately following the speech by the President. The Regulations were initially valid for 30 days, but have been extended for further periods every month since then. On 1 July, the government announced its intention to extend the PER to December 2009. The PER grants broad powers to the authorities in the name of "maintaining public safety".

These powers include:

- the prohibition of and powers to disperse assemblies (sec. 3)
- the closing of roads (sec. 4)
- "control of persons", namely the powers to place them under house arrest and similar restrictions (sec. 5)
- the prohibition, restriction or regulation of movement of persons in and out of towns, districts, islands etc. (sec. 6)

¹ Dorney, Sean 2009, 'Fiji Methodists face ban', *Australian Broadcasting Corporation website (ABC)*, 5 June. <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s2590745.htm> - Accessed 1 December 2009 - Attachment 1.

² Ho, D. 2009, 'Fiji Methodist Church gaining greater support from churches internationally', *Christian Today website*, 6 September. <http://au.christiantoday.com/article/fiji-methodist-church-gaining-greater-support-from-churches-internationally/6957.htm> - Accessed 23 November 2009 – Attachment 2.

- the imposition of curfews (sec. 7)
- the prohibition of the use of loudspeakers (sec. 14)
- censorship – restrictions on broadcasting or publication, and to this end, obliging the media to submit material for approval in advance and ordering publishers or broadcasters to “cease all activities and operations” (sec. 16)
- declaring areas, including premises, as “protected places” into which persons may enter only by special permission, and from which any person who is there in contravention of the regulation may be forcibly removed, including by “the taking of defensive measures which involve or may involve danger to the life of any person entering or attempting to enter the protected place” – in other words, using lethal force (sec. 17)
- detaining persons, including when police or army personnel are not satisfied “as to the purpose for which he or she is in the place in which he or she is found” and is suspected of endangering “public safety or the preservation of the peace, or is about to commit an offence against these Regulations”. Such detentions may be extended, by a “magistrate or police officer” for up to seven days (sec. 18)

... The fact that soldiers and police acting under the Regulation enjoy total impunity, including for the use of firearms, raises serious concerns that other rights, including the right to life (Article 3 of the UDHR) and to freedom from torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 5 of the UDHR), are also seriously jeopardized by the Regulation. At particular risk are real or impugned government critics.

As will be discussed below, the enforcement of the PER in practice has led to numerous human rights violations. The authorities have used the PER, under the guise of maintaining law and order, to deter any public criticism of the government, including by the short term detention of human rights activists, lawyers, judges, and journalists. This series of arrests and detentions has had the effect of intimidating members of civil society, engendering a climate of fear among them.³

Recent Arrests

A search of available resources has indicated that only leaders of the Methodist church are the target of adverse treatment as is evidenced by the following report cited above (Amnesty International (September 2009):

On 14 May 2009 police officers took in for questioning the former president of the Methodist Church of Fiji, Reverend Manasa Lasaro and detained him for two nights at the police station, following statements he made denouncing the abrogation of the constitution and the public emergency regulations. He had also reiterated the church’s opposition to the “oppression” of the interim government. The government’s chief censor under the PER Lieutenant Colonel Neumi Leweni had warned the pastors and members of the Methodist church that the government would not hesitate to cancel the much anticipated annual church conference in August 2009 if their statements were deemed to threaten the peace and stability of the country.

On 4 June, the government announced that it had cancelled the annual church conference. Despite the appeal of the leadership of the Methodist Church to Prime Minister Bainimarama to reconsider the cancellation, the government announced that the church conference may be cancelled for the next five years. The authorities insisted that the government would consider allowing the conference to be held if the church sacked two of its most senior ministers who had both served as Presidents of the Methodist Church and were accused by Bainimarama of being too politically active against the government.

On the evening of 20 July, police arrested Adi Teimumu Kepa, paramount chief of Rewa and the powerful Burebasaga confederacy (one of the three Fijian confederacies) from her home

³ Amnesty International 2009, *Fiji: Paradise Lost: A Tale of Ongoing Human Rights Violations: April-July 2009*, September, ASA 18/002/2009, p15 and 24 – Attachment 3.

and questioned her overnight at the Central Police Station in Suva. Adi Teimumu was arrested because of a letter that she wrote informing the people of her province (which was to host the Methodist Conference this year) that the annual conference would still take place despite the government's announcement that it was cancelled. Amnesty International was informed that after interrogation by police, Adi Teimumu was taken to the military barracks on 21 July for further questioning by senior army officers about her letter. She spent the night of 21 July in the cell at the army barracks instead of a cell at the police station.

On 22 July, Adi Teimumu and four senior members of the Methodist church were charged under the PER. The Methodist ministers who were charged included the President and General Secretary of the Church. On being granted bail by the court, Adi Teimumu and the Methodist ministers were forbidden by the magistrate from holding any meetings or publishing anything that relates to the annual Methodist church conference. They were also forced to surrender their passports.

On 27 July, a further five Methodist Ministers were arrested, questioned and later charged for their alleged roles in organizing the annual church conference. More than 10 Methodist ministers have been arrested and detained since 21 July on similar related charges. (Footnote no.3)

Political affiliation of the Methodist Church

According to a report of 23 July 2009 by Dr John Harrison of the University of Queensland's School of Journalism and Communication, the Methodist church is perceived by the State as an opposing force because its advocacy ethnic Fijian nationalism:

Now the Fijian situation is not as clear cut. While it is the dominant religious institution in a country that is exceptional in its devotion to the Christian faith, the Methodist Church in Fiji has been one source of ethnic Fijian nationalism. In the past, it has been called "the Taukei movement at prayer". So it carries this baggage in the current dispute with the interim government which proclaims a commitment to a multi-ethnic Fiji.

...During his visit to The University of Queensland this week, human rights activist and Fijian Methodist, Rev. Aquila Yabaki, was asked how he saw the current stand-off between church and state in Fiji. He replied: "The one with the gun. He will win."⁴

For this reason the Methodist Conference which was due to take place in August 2009 was cancelled by the authorities:

However, the police and military in Fiji announced on Friday May 29th that a permit for this year's Methodist Conference was being refused under Fiji's Emergency Regulations.

...The reason given for the refusal to allow the conference to proceed was that "political" subjects would be discussed which could lead to trouble.

On June 3rd Fiji's Methodist Church leaders sought a meeting with the Commodore to plead for the ban to be lifted. The meeting went ahead but Bainimarama refused to yield. Those present at the meeting representing the government give a clear indication of how tightly Fiji is now under military control.

⁴ 'Harrison, J. Dr. 2009, 'Fiji's frank and fearless Methodists', *Australian Broadcasting Corporation website* (ABC), 23 July. <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s2634451.htm> - Accessed 1 December 2009 – Attachment 4.

Alongside Bainimarama were his Minister for Works, Naval Captain Timoci Natuva, the Commissioner Central, Lieutenant Colonel Mosese Tikoitoga, the Secretary for Information, Lieutenant Colonel Neumi Leweni and another military officer, Lieutenant Colonel Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba.

The Military in Fiji

The military make all the important decisions in Fiji these days.

The Fiji Methodist Church President, the Reverend Ame Tugae, had appealed to the Government to allow the conference to take place saying the church's 200,000 plus members around the country always looked forward to the two week event in August.

However, Commodore Bainimarama countered with a demand that the Church sack two of its former Presidents, the Reverend Manasa Lasaro and the Reverend Tomasi Kanailagi.

The Reverend Kanailagi was the Fiji Methodist Church President at the time of George Speight's 2000 coup and several years later it was revealed that at the time that Speight was holding Mahendra Chaudhry and other members of his Government hostage, he had secretly written to Speight hailing what he had done and supporting the "cause" of indigenous Fijian rights.

The Reverend Lasaro was taken in for questioning by the police last month after giving a sermon supporting peaceful protests advocating a return to democracy.

After the failed meeting with Commodore Bainimarama, the General Secretary of the Methodist Church, the Reverend Tuikilakila Waqairatu, told the online news service, FijiLive, the Church had no reason to sack the two pastors.

"Right now we do not believe the ministers have offended. The Prime Minister wants the church not to be involved in politics, however the church's involvement in politics is for the spiritual and moral aspect of it," the Reverend Waqairatu said.

The Methodist Church in Fiji

About 80% of Fiji's indigenous people are members of the Methodist Church. With 90% of the military being indigenous Fijians this has led to some speculation as to the extent of support Commodore Bainimarama has from within his own ranks for banning the Methodist Conference. (Footnote 1)

The New Methodist Church

A new Methodist church which is supported by the government was allowed to operate as:

a Christian revivalist religious movement called the New Methodists is getting serious support from another of Commodore Bainimarama's close associates, the Police Commissioner, Naval Commodore Esala Teleni. Commodore Teleni's brother is leading the New Methodists who hold services every Sunday in Suva's big indoor sports stadium.

Police Commissioner Teleni himself has launched a Christian Anti-Crime Crusade.

A Fiji One television news item several months ago featured the Police Commissioner in uniform berating his officers, many of them Hindus and Muslims, for not given his Christian Anti-Crime Crusade sufficient support (Footnote 1)

However, according to the Sydney Morning Herald of 29 November 2009 this new Church was also placed under restrictions on the grounds of being a security risk to the state:

the ascent Vulaono's New Methodist Church coincided with calls for Fiji to be declared a Christian state in which only "good Christians" could be appointed to government. "The New Methodists have a right to exist under the Declaration of Human Rights," a senior lay Methodist acknowledges.

"But to be supported by the Government? That's a different question," says Rika.

...Ultimately the police-led New Methodist crusade became too embarrassing for the regime. Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum saw himself as a sensitive new-age guy, so Teleni had to be hauled in, *The Sun-Herald* was told.

There was no public announcement. "The closest to an official announcement was a letter from the chief censor to editors, ordering them to cease broadcasting the New Methodists' paid programs on the grounds that they had become a security risk," a media source says. Says Barr of the police crusade: "It was a stupid thing." The priest dismisses Vulaono as something of a charlatan – "he roars and yells at sinners; to hear him preach is out of this world. People were upset as much by the influence he was gaining over the police and young people as by the contradiction of Frank's claim to want a multi-religious society, an

"Then, suddenly, it was over. I spoke to the PM's secretary – he waved his hand and said, 'Finished.'"

There are doubts that Vulaono ever attended Bible school, much less had any formal training as a church minister, and he is a target of ridicule in the blogs that thrive in Fiji despite, and because of, the regime's censorship of the media.

"The joke around town," according to a women's rights activist, "is that Frank shut Pastor Vulaono down, [because] he had a problem with the whole Christian thing – he just didn't like seeing the preacher become so powerful."⁵

⁵ Mc Geouch, P.2009, 'Fiji: an unholy alliance of church and state', 29 November, *The Sydney Morning Herald* - Attachment 3

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Non-Government Organisations

Amnesty International website <http://www.amnesty.org/>

Human Rights Watch (HRW) website <http://www.hrw.org/>

International News & Politics

Australian Broadcasting Corporation www.abc.net.au

Australian Broadcasting Corporation Transcripts <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/tranlist.htm>

The Courier Mail <http://www.news.com.au/couriermail/>

Sun Herald www.smh.com.au

BBC News website <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

Region Specific Links

Fiji Daily Post www.fjidadilypost.com

Fiji Times www.fjitime.com

Radio New Zealand International www.rnzi.com

Topic Specific Links

Global Ministries (The United Methodist Church) <http://Gbgm-umc.org>

The Methodist Church of Great Britain www.methodist.org.uk

Uniting Church in Australia www.unitingworld.org.au

World Council of Churches www.oikoumene.org

Ekklesia (think-tank) www.ekkleisia.co.uk

Christian Today <http://au.christiantoday.com>

Compass Direct News www.compass.direct.org

Church Resources www.cathnews.com

Christian Solidarity Worldwide <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk>

New Methodist Christian Fellowship www.new-methodist.com.fj

Search Engines

Google search engine <http://www.google.com.au/>

Yahoo search engine <http://search.yahoo.com>

Copernic search engine

University Sites

Australian National University www.anu.edu.au

Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIAC Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

MRT-RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachments

1. Dorney, Sean 2009, 'Fiji Methodists face ban', *Australian Broadcasting Corporation website* (ABC), 5 June. <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s2590745.htm> – Accessed 1 December 2009.

2. Ho, D. 2009, 'Fiji Methodist Church gaining greater support from churches internationally', *Christian Today* website, 6 September. <http://au.christiantoday.com/article/fiji-methodist-church-gaining-greater-support-from-churches-internationally/6957.htm> – Accessed 23 November 2009.

3. Amnesty International 2009, *Fiji: Paradise Lost: A Tale of Ongoing Human Rights Violations: April-July 2009*, September, ASA 18/002/2009, p.15 and 24.
- 4 'Harrison, J. Dr. 2009, 'Fiji's frank and fearless Methodists', *Australian Broadcasting Corporation website* (ABC), 23 July. <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s2634451.htm> – Accessed 1 December 2009.
5. Mc Geouch, P.2009, 'Fiji: an unholy alliance of church and state', 29 November, *Sydney Morning Herald*. (CISNET CX236966)