



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Fiji

Fiji – FJI36386 – Methodist Church –
Methodists – Interim government – Church
officials
31 March 2010

1. Please give a general description of the current relationship between the Interim Government and the Methodist Church and its impact on the lives of Fijian Methodists.

The relationship between the Interim Government and the Methodist Church is strained; however, the majority of sources indicate its impact is limited to senior church members. Only one source stated that some ordinary church members had been harmed. Despite this, the possibility that the current relationship is having a greater impact on the lives of Fijian Methodists cannot be discounted; information on the current situation on the ground is difficult to obtain due to media censorship and the available sources cannot be considered as entirely conclusive.

In its attempt to sideline regime critics, the government has banned Methodist Church activities that it perceives have a political agenda – notably its annual general meeting and more recently its divisional, quarterly and monthly meetings.¹ Senior Church leaders have been arrested, briefly detained and in some cases charged under Fiji's *Public Emergency Regulations* (PERs – discussed further in question two), which were decreed in April 2009.² For example, on 4 February 2010, 15 Methodist Church Ministers were arrested and charged for breaching the PERs and other similar cases are still before the courts:

Fiji police have arrested and charged 15 ministers of the Methodist Church with allegedly breaching the Public Emergency Regulations. Assistant police spokesman Inspector Atunaisa Sokomuri said the 15 men were questioned yesterday and released on bail by police. He told FijiLive the group will appear in court in March. "They are alleged to have been found in breach of the condition of

¹ On 29 May 2009, the Fiji interim government banned the Methodist Church annual general meeting. On 13 January 2010 the ban was extended until 2014. In late January 2010, the interim government also banned all divisional and quarterly meetings. On 23 February 2010, the interim government confirmed that monthly meetings would also be banned. See Dorney, S. 2009, 'Fiji Methodists face ban', *Radio Australia News*, 8 June <http://www.radioaustralianews.net.au/stories/200906/2590854.htm> – Accessed 18 June 2009 – Attachment 1; Amnesty International 2010, 'Fiji: Downward spiral continues for human rights following persecution of prominent human rights lawyer' 2010, ASA 18/001/2010, 19 January, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA18/001/2010/en/8fb0dcc2-801c-49d3-855f-f37e8da4f007/asa180012010en.html> – Accessed 2 March 2010 – Attachment 2; 'Fiji Methodist church faces further ban' 2010, *Pacific News Agency Service*, 2 February – Attachment 3; 'PM urges Church executive to improve relations with Govt' 2010, *FijiVillage.com* website, 23 February <http://www.fijivillage.com/?mod=story&id=24031041891d23c352c811f0a7d4f3> – Accessed 24 March 2010 – Attachment 4

² Amnesty International 2010, 'Fiji Government misrepresents human rights record to UN', 10 February, PRE01/042/2010 <http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/fiji-government-misrepresents-human-rights-record-un-20100210-0> – Accessed 2 March 2010 – Attachment 5

the permit that was granted for the church's standing committee meeting last year," Sokomuri said.³

The government is directing its crackdown at senior Church members – probably because of their ability to wield influence. Bainimarama has repeatedly issued warnings to church leaders and has put them under military surveillance.⁴ The Methodist Church is the largest Christian denomination in Fiji; its membership comprises about 66 per cent of all indigenous Fijians (1996 census)⁵, which amounts to significant political clout in Fiji's racially divided political landscape (indigenous Fijians comprise 57.3 per cent of the population).⁶ The Methodist Church has always been a major player in Fijian politics; previous Church leaders have expressed strong ethnic Fijian nationalist sympathies and have supported governments claiming to represent these interests, including the deposed Qarase government.⁷ As an opponent of the current regime, the Methodist Church strongly condemned the 2006 Coup and continues to advocate for the return to democracy.⁸ In response, the Interim Government has called for the removal of former Church Presidents, Reverend Manasa Lasaro and Reverend Tomasi Kanailagi (whom it perceives as key opposition figures),⁹ and accuses the Church of colluding with former administrations. For example, in January 2010, Fiji Police Chief Teleni ordered an investigation against members of the Methodist Church hierarchy following espionage allegations by Commodore Frank Bainimarama:

Fijis leader Commodore Frank Bainimarama has said some Methodist Church ministers had been spying on the military for the previous government. Meanwhile, Fijis police chief Esala Teleni has ordered an investigation against members of the Methodist Church hierarchy following espionage allegations by Commodore Frank Bainimarama. Police spokeswoman Ema Dimila told FijiLive that the Police Commissioner had ordered the setting up of a special task force to carry out the investigation against church figures. Ms Dimila said the probe would also involve issues surrounding officers of the National Intelligence Bureau (formerly known as the Special Branch). She told FBC news a number of officers from the Fiji Police Force Special Branch have been sent home as Police widen investigations on the payment of Methodist church ministers to spy for the state.¹⁰

The relationship between the Interim Government and Methodist Church will probably remain strained for as long as Bainimarama's military regime remains in power. In

³ '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; 'More Methodist church leaders face court action over allegedly illegal meetings' 2010, *Radio New Zealand International*, 4 February <http://www.rnzi.com/pages/news.php?op=read&id=51734> – Accessed 24 March – Attachment 7

⁴ 'Military spies exclude 300 000 Methodists in Fiji from "Politics"' 2010, *Fiji Today* blog, 7 February <http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:I12fCTfyMAYJ:fijitoday.wordpress.com/2010/02/+15+Methodist+Church+ministers+fiji+february+2010&cd=5&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=au> – Accessed 26 March 2010 – Attachment 8

⁵ Jon Fraenkel, Stewart Firth and Brij V. Lal. 2009, *The 2006 military takeover in Fiji: a coup to end all coups?*, Chapter 9. Religion and politics: The Christian churches and the 2006 coup in Fiji, Canberra ANU E Press http://epress.anu.edu.au/coup_coup_citation.html – Accessed 26 March 2010 – Attachment 9

⁶ CIA 2010, CIA World Factbook: Fiji, 4 February <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/fj.html> – Accessed 26 March 2010 – Attachment 10

⁷ Newland, L. 2009, 'Chapter 9. Religion and politics: The Christian churches and the 2006 coup in Fiji', 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 9

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ 'Dorney, S. 2009, 'Fiji Methodists Face Ban', *ABC*, 5 June <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s2590745.htm> – Accessed 29 March 2010 – Attachment 1

¹⁰ 'Fiji Methodist church ministers named as behind church conference banned until 2014' 2010, *the Pacific News Agency Service*, 14 January – Attachment 11

March 2010, the PERs were extended until the end of April 2010,¹¹ indicating the government's intent to continue suppressing dissent. Moreover, on 25 March 2010, senior church members called for the resignation of some of their most senior leaders, indicating the force of government pressure.¹²

With respect to ordinary Fijian Methodists, two reports indicate that their lives have also been affected. For example, in its July 2009 submission to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Church stated that the proposed banning of its annual conference would infringe on ordinary church members' right to freedom of religious expression:

...Moreover, the proposed ban of the Methodist annual bazaar and conference is denial of the rights of the members of the Church to manifest their faith publicly in peaceful assembly, worship, and singing at the choir competition and related activities.¹³

The conference was banned on 29 May 2009, and in January 2010 the government extended the ban to coincide with the end of Bainimarama's rule – slated for 2014. The ban undoubtedly impacted, and will continue to impact, on ordinary member's ability to practise their faith at this event. The second report – from Reverend Jovili Meo, Chair of the Fiji Conference of the Uniting Church Australia – provides a second-hand account of ordinary member's subjection to adverse government treatment, and more generally notes that 'the people are suffering' (Reverend Jovili's observations are provided in more detail at question two). Although Reverend Jovili also notes that at the local level, the church can presently carry out its functions free from government interference, his observations reveal a level of military surveillance – at the local level – which is impacting Fijian Methodists' freedom of expression.¹⁴ Moreover, it should be noted that due to media censorship, other incidents of a similar nature may also be going unreported. Consequently, it remains possible that the strained relationship is having a greater impact than the majority of sources indicate.

From the available sources, it is clear that the government is targeting regime critics – demonstrated by its use of the PERs to charge its opponents. Although there is no information to indicate that church members have experienced adverse treatment simply for being Methodist, it should be noted that any regime critic risks arrest and charges under the current state of rule. As a result, in the current political climate, it is reasonable to expect that any ordinary church member who speaks out against the regime, or uses the church as an avenue for political expression, risks attracting the adverse attention of the government.

2. What restrictions, if any, are placed on ordinary members of the Methodist Church?

The PERs – which apply to everyone in Fiji, including Methodists – enable the Interim Government to deter public criticism under the guise of maintaining law and order. The government's use of means such as arrest and detention to enforce the PERs

¹¹ : 'Emergency rule in Fiji extended again' 2010, *Radio New Zealand*, 25 March

<http://pidp.eastwestcenter.org/pireport/2010/March/03-26-13.htm> – Accessed 30 March 2010 – Attachment 22

¹² 'Fiji: Methodist Church President, General-Secretary Asked to Step Down' 2010, *Radio Fiji*, 25 March
<http://radiofiji.com.fj/fullstory.php?id=26647> – Accessed 29 March 2010 – Attachment 14

¹³ Methodist Church in Fiji, 2009, Letter to Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 15 July
http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session7/FJ/MCF_UPR_FJI_S07_2010_MethodistChurchFiji.pdf - Accessed 29 March 2010 – Attachment 15

¹⁴ Reverend Jovili Meo, Chair of the Fiji Conference of the Uniting Church Australia 2010, Email to RRT Country Advice, 25 March – Attachment 16

has had the effect of intimidating members of civil society, including ordinary church members, and engendering a climate of fear. In 2009, Amnesty International, published an overview of the PERs provided below:

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)
- 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 prohibition of “manufacture, sale, use, display or possession of any flag, banner, badge, emblem, device, picture, photograph, uniform or distinctive dress” (sec. 19)
- the power of “any police officer or member of the Armed Forces” to search any person, vehicle or building on reasonable suspicions, as well as to use force including firearms, in effecting arrest. The Regulation adds that “no police officer nor any member of the Armed Forces nor any person acting in aid of such police officer or member using such force shall be liable in any criminal or civil proceedings for having by the use of such force caused harm or death to any person” (sec. 21)
- The Regulation authorizes soldiers “to perform all or any of the duties and functions of a prisons officer or police officer” (sec. 23). Those charged with committing offences under the Regulation may be tried in camera.

[***Note:** the full official version of the PERs can be found at Republic of Fiji Islands 2009, *Public Emergency Regulations 2009* (Effective 10 April 2009) PACLII website http://www.paclii.org/fj/legis/num_act/per2009273/ - Accessed 30 March 2010 – Attachment 23]

In addition to the PERs, the Interim Government has also placed the Methodist Church under military surveillance. Sources indicate the military is monitoring the movements of church executives; the Methodist Church has stated that ‘the phones of its leaders are tapped; their emails are intercepted; and they are followed by plainclothes officers as they move around Suva and the islands.’¹⁶ Many Fijian Methodists are also members of the military,¹⁷ enabling them to conduct covert surveillance in a non-military capacity.¹⁸ Due to the government’s actions, ordinary member’s freedom of expression is restricted under the current state of rule, resulting in church goers practising self-censorship (this is particularly relevant from Reverend Jovili’s observations discussed below).

According to Reverend Jovili, Chair of the Fiji Conference of the Uniting Church Australia, at the local-level, the Methodist Church is presently able to carry out its functions and services free from government interference, but at the higher level, things are very difficult and any high-level meetings require government approval. Importantly, Reverend Jovili does note that some ordinary members have been affected, and this is possibly more widespread than sources indicate (due to media censorship). From his most recent trip to Fiji in March 2010, he notes:

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 its 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**

¹⁵ Amnesty International 2009, *Fiji: Paradise Lost: A Tale of Ongoing Human Rights Violations: April-July 2009*, September, ASA 18/002/2009, p15 and 24
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA18/002/2009/en/0024be13-bdd1-47d2-875a-863fff41f978/asa180022009en.pdf> – Accessed 29 March 2010 – Attachment 17

¹⁶ McGeough, P. 2009, ‘An unholy alliance of church and state’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 November
<http://www.smh.com.au/world/an-unholy-alliance-of-church-and-state-20091128-jxwu.html> – Accessed 30 November 2009 – Attachment 21

¹⁷ ‘Dorney, S. 2009, ‘Fiji Methodists Face Ban’, *ABC*, 5 June
<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s2590745.htm> – Accessed 29 March 2010 – Attachment 1

¹⁸ McGeough, P. 2009, ‘An unholy alliance of church and state’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 November
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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!¹⁹

3. Would a family member of a local church steward be at any greater risk of harm than any other ordinary member of the church?

A family member of a local church steward could be at greater risk of harm than an ordinary member of the church, if the respective church steward was a vocal regime critic. If the local church steward was not a regime critic, and did not involve himself in politics, it is unlikely that he, or his family, would be at risk of harm.

According to Bruce Mullan, Associate Director Church Solidarity (Pacific), UnitingWorld, the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma does have the position title 'steward', who is a lay person exercising administrative leadership in local churches.²⁰ Although there are no reports of local church stewards receiving adverse treatment from the Interim Government, sources indicate that the Methodist Church is under military surveillance. As a result local ministers and stewards are probably also being monitored. Many military personnel are also members of the Methodist Church, enabling them to monitor church services in a non-military capacity.

Fijian authorities are probably monitoring church office bearers such as a 'chief steward' if they are active against the current regime. According to Reverend Jovili Meo, the chief steward is second-in-charge to the minister. The chief steward performs a managerial and administrative function in support of the minister, who typically presides over several churches at the village level.²¹ By virtue of being related to a chief steward, a person may also be under surveillance and at risk of harm. However, this may depend on the extent of the chief steward's activities against the government, or whether they have been arrested or detained for a period of time by government.

4. Would a Minister in the Methodist Church of Fiji ever refer to himself as the 'Chief Priest' of a 'Church Circuit'?

No. According to available sources, the role 'Chief Priest' does not exist. The Methodist Church uses terms such as 'Reverend', 'Standard Minister', and 'Superintendent' for persons in leadership roles, according to Reverend Jovili, and the term 'Priest' is not used in the Methodist Church.²² According to Bruce Mullan, Associate Director Church Solidarity (Pacific), UnitingWorld, the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma would not refer to anyone in their ministry as the 'Chief Priest'.²³

The Methodist Church uses the term 'Church Circuit' to refer to a group of local churches, served by a team of local preachers and ministers including the superintendent minister.²⁴

¹⁹ Reverend Jovili Meo, Chair of the Fiji Conference of the Uniting Church Australia 2010, Email to RRT Country Advice, 25 March – Attachment 16

²⁰ Bruce Mullan, Associate Director Church Solidarity (Pacific), UnitingWorld, Email to RRT Country Advice 'Methodist Church in Fiji', 24 March – Attachment 19

²¹ RRT Country Advice 2010, Email to Reverend Jovili Meo, Chair of the Fiji Conference of the Uniting Church Australia 'Methodist Church in Fiji - questions from the Refugee Review Tribunal', 24 March – Attachment 18
²² *ibid*

²³ Bruce Mullan, Associate Director Church Solidarity (Pacific), UnitingWorld, Email to RRT Country Advice 'Methodist Church in Fiji', 24 March – Attachment 19

²⁴ The Methodist Church of Great Britain 2010, 'Structure', The Methodist Church of Great Britain website <http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=opentogod.content&cmid=13> – Accessed 29 March 2010 – Attachment 20

Attachments

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