

## CASE STUDY: FIJI

### Global State of Democracy 2023 Report

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On 23 December 2022, Sitiveni Rabuka was sworn in as Fiji's latest prime minister, marking the Pacific nation's first constitutional transfer of power in the 21st century. An orderly outcome of the tightly contested election cycle was far from certain: Fiji has seen four military coups in the last 40 years, and Rabuka and his incumbent opponent, Frank Bainimarama, each led two of these coups (twice in 1987 for the former, and in 2000 and 2006 for the latter). Fears of a fifth coup—or some novel but similar catastrophe—had run high throughout the election cycle, during which both men made explicit, public, and ultimately unsuccessful calls for the military to leave its barracks and intervene in the electoral process. This history, as well as the peculiar central role it holds in Fiji's 2013 Constitution (which is discussed below), created the rare and opaque situation in which a country's coup-prone military arguably acted as a countervailing institution.

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#### TENSE ELECTION ENVIRONMENT

The first request for military intervention into the Fijian election occurred during the vote counting. Following a tense campaign, on 15 December 2022, Fiji Armed Forces Commander Jone Kalouniwai rebuffed overtures from Rabuka's People's Alliance for the military to take direct oversight of vote counting after reports of irregularities ([Reuters 2022](#)). Then official election results released on 17 December showed that neither Rabuka's People's Alliance nor Bainimarama's FijiFirst party had secured an outright parliamentary majority and would need to compete for the support of smaller parties to build a coalition government. After three days of interparty negotiations, People's Alliance announced it had done so, but FijiFirst refused to accept the results and explored legal and constitutional steps to delay the new government's swearing in ([Radio New Zealand 2022](#)).

With observers already worried that Bainimarama was exploring ways to resist leaving peacefully, and with the spectre of military intervention already raised by Rabuka's request on 15 December, tensions escalated sharply on

21 December. Citing media reports of racist attacks on Indo-Fijians fuelled by election tensions, Bainimarama and his loyal Police Commissioner Sitiveni Qiliho ([Giannini 2022](#)) formally requested the military leave its barracks and restore public order ([Singh 2023](#)).

This was a potentially incendiary request: Bainimarama had long portrayed himself as the guarantor of a unified civic Fijian identity—and therefore by default a defender of Fiji’s large Indo-Fijian minority—against ethnonationalist Indigenous Fijian (iTaukei) governments ([Mudaliar 2018](#)). Rabuka made an easy public foil for this claim: although he had insisted during the campaign that his administration would represent Fijians of all backgrounds, and signed a memorandum of understanding promising cooperation with the National Federation Party (traditionally supported by Indo-Fijians), the coups Rabuka led in 1987 were intended to safeguard Indigenous Fijian rights and traditional privileges ([Naivalurua 2022](#)). The Fijian public did not need reminding that concerns about racial harmony were given as justifications for Bainimarama’s coups in 2000 and 2006, the latter of which was followed by seven years of de facto dictatorship.

However, Commander Kalouniwai publicly declined the Police Commissioner’s request, the military stayed in its barracks, Bainimarama conceded, and Rabuka’s government was sworn in on 24 December 2022 ([Associated Press 2022](#)). But the question remained—what were the reasons for the military’s reluctance to intervene during the election?

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### ‘SECRETIVE CONSULTATIONS’

It should be assumed that both Rabuka and Bainimarama had good reasons to believe their requests for military intervention would be heeded. Their seemingly flimsy justifications and the lack of public demand for extraconstitutional measures were in line with Fiji’s previous coups—only in 2000 was there any significant public participation in coup processes or shows of distrust of the results. As one former member of Fijian Parliament put it in 2014:

The coups in our country do not occur as an extension of widespread and sustained public disaffection. They occur after private and secretive consultations amongst private individuals, who then find the requisite personality in the military to carry out the coup.  
([Baledrokadroka 2016: 185](#))

The existence of such ‘secretive consultations’ among the Fijian elite belies the publicly interethnic nature of Fijian elections and coup-plotting, as does Bainimarama’s relationship to the military. As an ethnic Fijian and former military officer, Bainimarama had included at the core of his programme of promoting interethnic unity a promise to integrate Indo-Fijians and smaller

minorities into the armed forces; however, by the end of his time in office the military remained 99 per cent ethnic iTaukei (Naidu 2019).

Furthermore, Bainimarama oversaw the adoption of Fiji's 2013 Constitution, which explicitly tasks the armed forces with 'ensuring at all times the security, defence and well-being of Fiji and all Fijians' (Fiji 2013: 56). This language essentially legitimizes the military's coup-making role, just as its mono-ethnic make-up entrenches its status as an institutional iTaukei check on democratic politics (Baledrokadroka 2015).

While the military declined to intervene in the electoral processes, it has not refrained from its historical practice of exerting indirect and behind-the-scenes influence over the government. In January 2023 Commander Kalouniwai harshly criticized aggressive government moves to sideline Bainimarama loyalists in government, accusing the administration of taking 'shortcuts that circumvent the relevant processes and procedures' that could lead to 'long-term national security consequences' (Radio New Zealand 2023). A meeting with a top minister in Rabuka's government shortly followed, and both sides issued public statements committing to Fijian democracy. Talk of an overt military intervention in politics receded after the statement from Kalouniwai, who remained publicly silent even during political events as dramatic as Bainimarama's six-year suspension from parliament over criticisms made of Fijian President Wiliame Katonivere (O'Brien 2023).

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## CAUSES REMAIN A MYSTERY

The circulation online of unsigned documents—allegedly prepared by FijiFirst, which denied the claims—in June and July 2023 accusing the government of violating the Constitution and calling for military intervention were again condemned by Kalouniwai, who said the military would respect the Constitution and the choice of voters (Kumar 2023). However, the existence of these documents dampened some optimism that the military was fully committed to abstaining from interventions. Militaries and security services are, to put it mildly, far from a reliable countervailing institution. It remains far from clear what accounts for its productive role in the 2022 election. Perhaps its central role in the 2013 Constitution assured military brass that it would remain an influential political institution under any administration. Other possibilities, such as the personal or political preferences of key military figures such as Commander Kalouniwai, may have played a key role but are not yet subject to public scrutiny.

The Fijian military played a constructive role in ensuring a democratic transition in this particular election but did so only by ensuring its absence and allowing democratic processes to run their course. While the specific reasons for this remain obscured from public view, the military's role enshrined in the 2013 Constitution and Kalouniwai's public criticism of the current government indicate that the military continues to see itself as a core Fijian political

institution. As recent experience from Myanmar, Pakistan and Thailand, and historical experience from Fiji itself and elsewhere in the region (Indonesia and the Philippines) attests, long-run sustainable democracy requires the removal of the military from the political sphere (Chambers and Waitookiat 2016; Shah 2019).

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