

Fiji-Aust row escalating says specialist

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An Australian specialist on the South Pacific says comments by Fiji's Prime Minister Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama on ditching ties with Australia and New Zealand and looking towards China marked a new level in the row with Australia and attempts to isolate Fiji.

Jenny Hayward-Jones is program director of the Myer Foundation Melanesia Program at the Lowy Institute.

"Other Pacific countries want to talk to Fiji, and Australia and New Zealand are the only ones maintaining this 'don't talk' policy," Howard-Jones said in comments published by The Age newspaper.

She said however that Bainimarama had overestimated China's interest in Fiji and willingness to help his government.

Cutting ties with Australia would also impact on Fiji's economy, Hayward-Jones said.

Bainimarama made the comments on local radio this week, saying only China could help Fiji now that Australia and New Zealand's policies towards his government had become clear.

He also attacked the Pacific Islands Forum for its continued suspension of Fiji over the island country's decision not to hold elections until 2014.

"I think we need to forget about the Forum, about Australia and New Zealand. Let's maintain the trade but forget about the politics," he said.

"We need infrastructure, we need water, we need electricity. Australia and New Zealand and America, none of those nations are going to provide that."

"We know that now because of their policies towards us, so let's forget about these nations," he said from China where he is attending the World Expo in Shanghai.

Fiji has become a big test of Australia's diplomatic influence in the Pacific, The Age said.

The Economist meanwhile said the Forum was in trouble over the Fiji issue.

In an article titled 'Adrift in the Pacific', the magazine said Papua New Guinea and Solomon Island leaders Sir Michael Somare and Dr Derek Sikua had endorsed the Forum's suspension of Fiji last year but at the 'Engaging the Pacific' meeting in Nadi last month, both leaders signed a communiqué which credited Bainimarama's government for having a "credible home-grown process for positioning Fiji as a modern nation and to hold true democratic elections".

“That’s a doublespeak endorsement of Mr Bainimarama’s refusal to hold elections until September 2014—which was exactly the grounds for his being turfed out of the Pacific Islands Forum in the first place,” the article said.

It also said that by keeping Fiji excluded from the Forum but included in sub-regional gatherings, his Pacific neighbours were sending Bainimarama a mixed message at best, while he in turn “has conceded nothing”.

“Until he does, and unless the Fiji problem is resolved some other way, it is unlikely that the Pacific Islands Forum will be able to achieve much else. Australia succeeded in persuading the smaller island states to start discussing a free-trade deal at last year’s summit in Cairns, but with Fiji excluded the prospects of success always looked bleak.

The hopes for a breakthrough on trade have since faded.”

Sources: The Age/The Economist