

Forum 'not under pressure from Fiji'

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Australia's Foreign Minister Stephen Smith has rejected suggestions that the relevance of the Pacific Islands Forum is declining under pressure from Fiji's Prime Minister Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama.

"Absolutely not," said Smith in response to the question in an interview on Radio Australia's Pacific Beat program.

He said Australia's Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Solomon Islands Prime Minister Derek Sikua were not able to attend the recent Forum meeting in Vanuatu because of campaigning and elections in their respective countries while Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare had "his own parliamentary issues to deal with".

The absence of the three leaders from the summit, and the backing by Sikua and Somare of Fiji's roadmap to democracy as a viable home grown solution at the Engaging the Pacific meeting of island leaders in Fiji a fortnight prior to the Forum meeting, is being seen as a split among members of the regional body over the Fiji situation.

Bainimarama has since said that Fiji wants to move away from its traditional ties with Australia and New Zealand and move closer towards China which he said is more understanding of what his government is trying to do.

Smith reiterated that Australia will continue to try and get dialogue going with Fiji's Prime Minister.

"There's unanimity amongst the Pacific Island Forum leaders that Fiji's suspension has to continue until they return to democracy. The same with the Commonwealth. But we've got to find a way back to a dialogue and we will simply redouble our efforts. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to respond in kind when Commodore Bainimarama expelled our acting high commissioner, but I didn't want to leave our professional diplomatic relationships with Fiji unrepresented in Canberra. So I turned the other cheek on that matter. It's simply a matter of us keeping at it. We are worried about Fiji moving further into an isolationist position, and in my conversations with the leaders of the Pacific and Vanuatu, we all believe absolutely in the need to just continue our efforts for a dialogue to bring them back to their full standing as a democratic Pacific nation."

Source: Radio Australia

