



Pacific Media Watch

Title – 6528 FIJI: Coup culture 'risks starving people'

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COUP CULTURE 'RISKS STARVING PEOPLE OF FIJI'

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By Guy Healy

SYDNEY (*The Australian/Pacific Media Watch*): Fiji's coup culture is costing it billions of dollars and unless democracy is restored the country risks hunger and further impoverishment, a leading Fiji economist and former shadow finance minister warned yesterday.

Days after Fiji-born Australian academic Brij Lal was arrested and deported from Fiji amid a diplomatic row, fellow academic Wadan Narsey told *The Australian* dwindling foreign investment in the Pacific nation was undermining its food production chain.

In speaking to *The Australian* yesterday, Professor Narsey, an economist at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji's capital Suva, risks arrest and detention for criticising the regime of military-installed prime minister Frank Bainimarama.

"Fiji's GDP fell almost 7 percent in 2007, the year following the coup that brought Commodore Bainimarama to power," Professor Narsey said.

"The biggest threat to Fiji's food security is the lack of investor confidence in Fiji, and that's a direct result of the coups."

Every indication was that poverty -- especially in rural areas -- was increasing, worsened by the rapid rise in the cost of living following the recent 20 per cent devaluation of the Fiji dollar, he said.

"The urban poor particularly are at severe risk of deteriorating nutrition because the costs of basic foods such as rice and flour had risen sharply, while their incomes had either stagnated or been reduced," Professor Narsey said.

A fellow USP academic -- who would not be named -- told *The Australian* yesterday that a pall of censorship had fallen over the country, and a handful of academics critical of the regime had been verbally

"silenced".

"People are risking their safety if they speak out. Under emergency decrees, the military have arrest and detention powers. People are scared," the academic said.

Those making even well-meaning comments against the regime's policies were likely to be taken to a military camp and subjected to abuse like (Australian National University professor) Brij Lal, the academic said.

"While Australian citizens may be generally safe, Fiji citizens face a real risk of physical violence," the academic said.

Fiji's four coups since 1987 will have cost \$10 billion in GDP by 2014, according to a research paper by Professor Narsey on rural development, obtained by The Australian. After the economy stagnated last year, early indications were there would be a further decline of 1-2 per cent in GDP again this year, he said.

Professor Narsey, an MP and shadow minister from 1996 until 1999, said he had presented his findings to the government and the media, but had suffered a media blackout.

The urban working class -- who don't have access to food gardens -- faced "sheer hardship" in obtaining nutritious and adequate food, unless local and foreign investment in business partnerships increased, he said.

Professor Narsey called on the military government to convene "a genuine political dialogue" with all political and social leaders.

The tragedy in Fiji was that total censorship of the media meant that the military government could not even be given public opinions that might help them and the country, Professor Narsey said.

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