

Should Australia try to re-establish democracy in Fiji using its aid program?

by Stephen Howes
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Should Australia try to re-establish democracy in Fiji using its aid program? Jenny Hayward-Jones thinks that we should. The Fiji elections held in September are a step in the right direction, but, as she acknowledges, only one step. The media in Fiji is not free, nor are NGOs. The judiciary is weak and the parliament will be pliant. Jenny argues in her latest Lowy paper, *Fiji's election and Australia: the terms of re-engagement*, that Australia should make an “effort to re-establish democracy in Fiji” by establishing parliament-to-parliament links, supporting NGOs and the media, and helping Fiji to recruit international judges.

I'm sceptical. To me, this is a classic example where we have a problem beyond our control: here, that Bainimarama, formerly head of Fiji's military forces, then coup-leader and dictator, and now elected leader, doesn't want a free media, or strong Parliament, or independent judiciary, or lively civil society. We can't do anything about that but nevertheless, the suggestion is to throw aid money at our problem. We use our aid to tackle things that aren't the binding constraint. The media might not be free, but we will train journalists so that, if they were, they could write probing articles. The parliament has no power, but we will bring MPs to Canberra so that they can experience what they are missing out on. These are ways to waste aid. They will make no difference.

Jenny's other suggestion is that we should leverage the military relationship. Or rather that we should announce an enhanced military relationship “with no strings attached.” If there are no strings attached, it is hard to see we can get any leverage. Jenny only suggests that the timing of the military aid can be managed to get Fiji to accept her proposed package of measures, not to actually get Fiji to move towards freedom of speech or of association.

What should we do? There is not much we can do. Australian ministers should continue to speak out on the need for a free press, independent judiciary, and so on. We could actually attach strings to our military relationship or our aid one for that matter. Perhaps the most useful thing we could do would be to get an ABC correspondent back in Suva. Unfortunately, Bainimarama *threw the last one out*, and then the ABC scaled back its Pacific coverage after the Australian government pulled the plug on the Australia Network. Getting a correspondent back to Suva will

not be easy. But it would do more for freedom of the press than any amount of journalist training and capacity building.

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