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Fiji's former Prime Minister imprisoned on politically motivated charges

On 3 August, Laisenia Qarase, Fiji's former Prime Minister, was sentenced to one year in prison by the High Court of Fiji on abuse of office charges. Amnesty International is concerned that the charges were politically motivated, and believes that Qarase may have been imprisoned solely for his political beliefs and his opposition to the current military government.

Qarase has been a vocal critic of the government, which overthrew his government on 5 December 2006. In 2007, he brought a case against the military, which led to the Fiji Court of Appeal ruling on 9 April 2009 that the coup was illegal. The following day, the military government abrogated the constitution and dismissed all judicial officers. Some judicial officers were subsequently reappointed.

Qarase was charged in 2008 in relation to incidents which took place more than 20 years ago. According to the prosecution, as a financial advisor to the Fijian Affairs Board and Director of Fiji Holdings Limited (FHL) in 1991, Qarase applied to purchase shares in FHL on behalf of a number of companies. Qarase denies any wrongdoing and claims that he followed proper company procedure and laws when applying for the shares.

The Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) claims that Qarase breached his duty as a government official by failing to disclose his interest in the other companies when he applied for shares. However, it is not clear how the purchase of shares in a private company led to the charges of abuse of office. Qarase denies that he was a government official at the time of the alleged offence. Even if he had been a government official, Amnesty International is not aware of any evidence that indicates that Qarase misused his position to obtain an unfair advantage.

Amnesty International is also concerned about other individuals facing trial on criminal charges which appear to be politically motivated. Daniel Urai, President of the Fiji Trade Union Congress, was charged with sedition after meeting with unionists in Australia and New Zealand in late 2011. Mere Samisoni, a 74-year Fiji businesswoman and former politician, was charged with trying to overthrow the government earlier this year. Samisoni has been a vocal critic of the military government and has close family ties to Lieutenant Colonel Tevita Mara, who abandoned his military post and fled to Tonga in May 2011.

Amnesty International calls on the Fiji government to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Laisenia Qarase from prison if he is being held solely because of his political beliefs;
- Ensure that Daniel Urai and Mere Samisoni receive a fair trial in accordance with international human rights law and standards.