

Ex-army strongman Rabuka confirmed as Fiji PM

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The Daily Morning Voice Online Desk: Former military strongman Sitiveni Rabuka was on Saturday confirmed as Fiji's prime minister, after accusing the outgoing government of stoking "fear and chaos" to derail his return to power. Rabuka replaces the imposing Frank Bainimarama, who toppled the government in a 2006 military coup and became the country's prime minister a year later. The 74-year-old Rabuka said he felt "humbled" to be prime minister as he made his way out of parliament to be sworn in by the country's president. The two-time coup leader and former prime minister narrowly triumphed over Bainimarama by 28 votes to 27 in a secret ballot held in parliament, speaker Naiqama Lalabalavu announced. A chorus of cars honked in celebration as they drove past the parliamentary building in the capital, Suva.

European Union Ambassador for the Pacific Sujiro Seam tweeted his congratulations to Rabuka shortly after the announcement. The military had been deployed on the streets of Suva as Rabuka and Bainimarama raced to cobble together a coalition government following a deadlocked general election. Citing unsubstantiated reports of ethnic violence, Bainimarama said the military was needed to maintain "law and order". But former military commander Rabuka — who served as prime minister between 1992 and 1999 — said the government was "sowing fear and chaos" and "trying to set the nation alight along racial lines". Many Fijians feared the government's claims of ethnic violence and subsequent military deployment were a pretext for a "creeping coup". It marks an extraordinary political comeback for Rabuka.

The former Fijian rugby international locked in a coalition deal to form a government on Friday afternoon, after successfully wooing the kingmaker SODELPA party. SODELPA had earlier chosen Rabuka's People's Alliance over Bainimarama's Fiji First, but that vote was ruled invalid by the country's election supervisor. Fiji has been upended by four coups in the past 35 years.