

Fiji government again cancels Methodist conference

by [David Crampton](#)

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Wellington, New Zealand, August 25 (ENInews)--The annual conference of Fiji's Methodist Church, due to start 23 August, was cancelled by Fiji's military government for the third consecutive year after church leaders defied a government directive to step down from their positions.

Fiji's Land Force Commander Colonel Mosese Tikoitoga, also directed that no Methodist Church minister be allowed to leave the country, and banned permits under the Public Emergency Regulation for all official Methodist Church meetings. There are concerns that the ban will lead to the collapse of the Methodist church administration and severely affect funding.

Michael King, World Church Relationships Team Leader for the Methodist Church in Britain, said the ban was a "massive setback" in church/state relations, given that it seemed that relationships had improved and the political situation had eased.

"If the conference had been allowed to go ahead, there would have been a normal and constitutional change in church leadership and a sense of returning to normality," he commented in a news release on the British church's website. About 1,000 delegates who had already arrived in Fiji were told to go home.

Tikoitoga told the news website Fijilive that Methodist church President Ame Tugauwe and General Secretary Tuikilakila Waqairatu should have stepped down from their positions ahead of the conference as they were charged earlier with breaching emergency laws. "They refused to accept that explanation. They maintained that a person is innocent until proven guilty," Tikoitoga said, adding that a meeting with church officials "ended ... with no clear direction so we cancelled the [conference] altogether."

Church members were charged with attending an unauthorized meeting held in April 2009 and were held for questioning by police in July that year. In September last year, the Fijian Government dropped most of the charges against church leaders.

Earlier this month, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, prime minister of the Pacific Island nation, had lifted a ban on the conference until 2014, on the condition that each conference would be no longer than three days, and the two leaders would not speak. Church executives attempted to meet government officials on 22 August to decide who would chair conference meetings. But no government official attended so the executives decided that Tugauwe would chair meetings.

The Methodist Church is the main faith for indigenous Fijians, and was aligned to the government overthrown in a 2006 bloodless coup. Since the coup, Fiji has suspended the constitution, detained opponents and suppressed freedom of speech. Meanwhile the church cancelled a news conference which was to be held 25 August.