

Coups in Fiji

Seesawing Democratic Multiracialism and Ethno-nationalist Extremism

By Vijay Naidu

THERE ARE two images of Fiji these days, one of a laid back tourist paradise and the other of a country of ethnic strife and military coups. It's been labelled 'coup coup land' and features prominently in discussions relating to the 'arc of instability' and the 'sea of troubles' that encircle Australia to its north.

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For ordinary people who live and work in the country, it is certainly not a paradise, but neither is it always and everywhere marked by strife. Life is generally a struggle to make ends meet and there are several challenges that emanate from socio-economic, ethnic, gender, regional and

age-based inequalities. Capitalist commercialisation affects all parts of the country but indigenous social, economic and political institutions, values and relationships persist.

Like people everywhere in the world, Fijians want peace and prosperity for themselves and their children. There has been more inter-ethnic cooperation than conflict. In the fashion of most other places, there have been struggles over political power among those who aspire to rule and control the country, but unlike most other places in the contemporary world, there has been a rather frequent resort to extra-legal means to gain and maintain power. Fiji has never been a real

democracy, it has been characterised by a 'façade' of democracy.

Following independence in October 1970, the archipelago enjoyed relatively stable government until 1987. Since then it has experienced more than a dozen governments and regimes, four general elections, a significant by-election, four coups and three constitutions. While most Fiji experts and commentators have been pre-occupied with ethnicity or race, attributing its problems to this dimension, the argument presented here is that there are a number of other factors that need to be taken into account to gain a deeper understanding of the country's predicament.



Photo: Eva Lawrence

To understand the Fijian enigma there is a need to uncover aspects of Fiji's pre-historical past, the British colonial era of divide and rule, colonial structures that established an hegemony of chiefs and their business allies, the Indian and Indo-Fijian struggle for equality and the successful inculcation of distrust towards them amongst indigenous Fijians, rivalry amongst chiefly lineages and their provinces, the emergence of an aspirant ethnic Fijian middle class, ethno-nationalism in the context of growing inequality and the persistence of exclusive ethnic institutions such as the Republic (previously Royal) of Fiji Military Forces.

Fiji's People

Fiji's demography, economy, social and political organisation has much to do with its colonial history.

'Fiji' was not the native name of the archipelago. As a result of the mispronunciation of the word Viti by neighbouring Tongans, the country became known to the European world as 'Feejee' and then as Fiji. The country's 900,000 people are divided into three broad 'racial' categories – 'Fijians', 'Indians' and 'Others'. They actually comprise 54 percent indigenous people of mixed Melanesian and Polynesian stock, 38 percent Indo-Fijians and the remaining eight percent are people of mixed racial ancestry (a majority known locally as 'Part-Europeans'), Rotumans (from the Polynesian outlier of Rotuma), Chinese, Europeans, descendants of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu labourers, Banabans, Tongans, Samoans and other Pacific Islanders.

There are intra-ethnic divisions amongst the larger categories – indigenous Fijians can be differentiated from each other physically as well as linguistically and culturally. Indo-Fijians likewise can be differentiated as descendants of either indentured labourers or free migrants, by physical appearance and along linguistic and cultural lines. A majority of ethnic Fijians are Christians and most Indo-Fijians are Hindus and Muslims.

Chiefly Rule

Prior to direct colonialism following the signing of the Deed of Cession in 1874, Fiji was never a united country with a common ruler. Instead there were scores of polities that were more or less independent of each other. Among these, the political fortunes of its 40 odd chiefdoms waxed and waned depending on success in warfare and strategic polygamous marriages between chiefly lineages. Such connections extended to Tonga and even Samoa. Intrigue, subterfuge and magic were integral to the dynamics of chiefly rivalries. A decade prior to British annexation as a 'Crown Colony', three major confederacies (Kubuna, Burebasaga and Tovata) had consolidated themselves through external (European and Tongan) support but without subordinating the inland dwelling tribes of the two main islands. The British and their eastern chiefly allies fought 'The Little War' to pacify the interior tribes. Subsequent to this war of pacification a Fiji-wide chiefly hierarchy was established through a system of indirect rule, with the 'paramount' chiefs of eastern Fiji at its apex. The Great Council of Chiefs created by the British Governor secured their interests and active collaboration. Christian missionaries not only proselytised successfully through the medium of chiefs, they replaced the traditional priests or bete in reinforcing chiefly authority. Divisions and rivalry among chiefs led to some opting to become Catholics, as against the majority who became Methodists.

Colonial Policy and Society

The British created a system of indirect rule over indigenous Fijians. At the pinnacle of this native administration sat the Great Council of Chiefs, an advisory body on all things Fijian established by the first Governor. Governor Sir Arthur Gordon confirmed the alienation of around 10 percent of Fiji's land area to European settlers and made some 84 percent of the country the inalienable possession of customary land-owning groups or mataqali. Following the massive toll on the indigenous population by a measles epidemic in 1875,

he also ruled that what he determined to be the 'Fijian way of life' should be maintained until such time that indigenous Fijian survival was assured. In practice this meant that 'traditional' Fijian life was heavily regulated: when people went to sleep, when they woke up, their daily routine of work (primarily subsistence agriculture), whom they married and even their movement was severely constrained. A system of pass law for ethnic Fijians persisted until the 1960s as did a prohibition on individual borrowing from banks and private individuals. Collective or 'communal' activities directed by chiefs were valued over individual endeavours.

In sharp contrast to this stifling micro-management of indigenous Fijian lives, people of other ethnicities were left to the hurly burly of the market. Europeans emerged as owners and managers of plantations, mines, sugar mills and businesses as well as administrators and professionals. Some people of mixed ancestry came to acquire skills as tradesmen. The system of indentureship provided the colony with bonded labour from India, and throughout the colonial period Indians and Indo-Fijians formed the bulk of workers and later, commercial small farmers. A good proportion was tied up with the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) as tenant and contract farmers, and workers. Chinese and Chinese Fijians tended to be traders and owners of smaller enterprises. By the middle of the twentieth century Tuvaluans and Banabans were settled in Kioa Island and Rabi respectively. The descendants of 'Melanesian' labourers brought to clear forest lands to establish the first cotton and coconut plantations were relegated to the margins of colonial society. They constituted the underclass of a racially hierarchical society with whites on top and dark skinned people at the bottom. Chiefs and lighter skinned people formed the middle layer sharing some of the privileges of the European masters.

A form of separate development prevailed for much of the colonial period. The dualistic economy that emerged had a subsistence component,

largely ethnic Fijian, that produced a surplus of banana and copra (amongst other commodities), and a cash economy comprising commercial plantations, small sugar cane farms, market gardening, mining, manufacturing, transportation, wholesaling and retailing. In the second half of the twentieth century tourism took root and began growing.

Ethnic Fijian participation in the emerging 'mainstream economy' was mediated by the colonial administration. They were allowed to be employed as short-term workers in the mines, on wharves, and more permanently as clerks, government officials, policemen and for the churches. Their ability to set themselves up as independent (of the village) farmers was severely circumscribed. They were forbidden to enter the world of business. Ethnic Fijians such as Apolosi Ranawai who challenged this colonial orthodoxy were suppressed and exiled.

The colonial facilitation of migrant Indian labour, the increasing numbers of Indo-Fijians, and their struggles against European exploitation and dominance and for equal political representation and more secure land tenure contributed not only to a coalition of interests between the privileged white minority and indigenous chiefs but also to a sense of common indigenous Fijian identity. British colonial policy of separate and compartmentalised development coupled with differential treatment of the 'races' further ensured the preoccupation with 'race' in colonial and post-colonial Fiji.

Colonial rule was autocratic and political representation was based on 'race'. Throughout the colonial period Europeans were over represented. Although their numbers never exceeded 2 percent of the population, they were the first to obtain franchise and membership of the Legislative and Executive Councils and they had parity of representation with ethnic and Indo-Fijians. Ethnic Fijians were represented by their chiefs and did not have effective franchise until 1966. Women likewise first voted in the 1966 General Election. This was only four years before independence!

Fiji, in the eyes of Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, the leading chief for much of the colonial period, was akin to a 'three-legged stool'. Each of the legs of the stool was constituted by one of the three 'races' that comprised the colony. Europeans provided capital and skills; Fijians, their land; Indians, their labour. This was an inclusive, if somewhat distorted, view of the country's evolving political economy. Fiji's post-colonial history has reflected a trend towards a more exclusive ethnic Fijian dominated political order.

The Absence of Nation Building

The British did not seek to build a nation out of Fiji's diverse people and those who inherited the state continued to manage Fiji's political economy using divisive racial politics.

Although Fiji society evolved in the late 1960s as a deeply unequal class society, the prelude to independence was marked by racial bargaining and racial politicking. The Alliance Party constituted by the Fijian Association, General Voters, Indian and other minority groupings primarily acted in the interest of chiefs and large business.

The National Federation Party, led by Indo-Fijian lawyer-politicians, largely represented the interests of Indo-Fijian farmers and small business. Following the by-elections of 1968 (which took place in the wake of a 'walk-out' from the legislature by 'Indian members' of the National Federation Party), and their subsequent electoral victory with even bigger majorities, members of the Fijian Association marched through some of the urban centres to express their anger at the outcome. They demanded the repatriation of some Indo-Fijian leaders and maintained, 'Fiji for the Fijians'. A brief period of cooperation ensued in a ministerial form of government that gave portfolios to the leaders of 'Europeans', 'Fijians' and 'Indians' on the eve of colonial rule. This political honeymoon extended to the mid 1970s.

The 1970 independence constitution entrenched the power of chiefs and system of land ownership. It continued the

unequal representation of Fiji's 'races'. Europeans, now categorised together with persons of mixed ancestry and Chinese Fijians as 'general electors', continued to enjoy disproportionate representation in parliament. With less than five percent of the population, general electors held 15 percent of the seats in the lower house. Indo-Fijians, who constituted 50 percent of the population, were given parity of representation with indigenous Fijians, who numbered around 44 percent. Election into the 52-member House of Representatives was based on communal and cross voting electorates in a first-past-the-post system. The complex electoral system maintained ethnically reserved seats, encouraged ethnic politics and sought to ensure that the government of the country was in the hands of the ethnic Fijian chiefs and their business allies.

In the unelected Senate or upper house, chiefs nominated by the Great Council of Chiefs and endorsed by the Governor General, himself a chief, formed the majority. In Fiji's peculiar 'democracy', ethnic Fijian chiefly hegemony was assured by the electoral arrangement that assumed ethnic Fijian solidarity and general elector (the former European category) support. On this basis Indo-Fijian leadership was relegated to the role of filling the opposition seats.

Ethnic Fijian chiefly hegemony was also ensured by certain institutions of the state or related to the state. These included the exclusively ethnic Fijian Administration (previously native administration), the Royal Fiji Military Force, and the Native Land Trust Board (NLTB) and off-shoots such as the Native Land Development Cooperation (NLDC). Entities such as the Fiji Development Bank were required to prioritise activities pertaining to indigenous Fijians. Ethnic Fijians were fast tracked into senior public service positions although there was near parity in ethnic representation in the public service as whole. Up till the 1987 coups, the public service was efficient and effective.

While political and administrative structures and processes continued to

classify and treat Fiji citizens racially, economic and social processes began to throw up with greater intensity both class and ethnic issues. Ethnic Fijians with the end of the restrictions on their movement increasingly became urbanised and employed as workers in both the public and private sectors. Work places became multi-ethnic and there was integration in a number of social clubs. Previously segregated residential areas and schools become more multi-ethnic. Socio-economic differences rather than 'race' became the primary determinant of residential site and school preference. The commanding heights of Fiji's economy were foreign (Australian)-owned or controlled.

The state was also heavily involved in commercial enterprises. Indo-Fijians featured in small and medium family-run businesses and the sugar industry. Owning less than two percent of Fiji's land, they were largely dependent on the NLTB and indigenous land owners for their leaseholds. The absence of long-term land tenure security was a strong incentive to seek off-farm employment. This in turn meant a preoccupation with education and training. Persons of mixed ancestry ran coconut plantations and were trade persons and professionals. Chinese Fijians engaged in market gardening, owned retail outlets and were in the professions.

While well represented in the public sector and government, indigenous Fijians were largely absent in business and in the professions (with teaching and nursing as exceptions). Differential achievement in education between the ethnic categories meant that the 'gap' between indigenous Fijians and non-indigenous Fiji citizens would continue. Various affirmative action measures to remedy these differences became politically controversial.

With independence, state power passed on to 'paramount' chiefs of the three confederacies and their general elector allies. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara of the Tovata Confederacy and husband of Adi Lady Lala Mara, paramount chief of Burebasaga Confederacy, became the Prime Minister. Ratu Sir



The Fijian military continues to all the tune.

Photo: Eva Lawrence

Penaia Ganilau of Tovata was appointed the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs. Ratu Sir George Cakobau of Kubuna confederacy became the first local Governor General. Their 'multi-racial' Alliance Party was expected to rule in perpetuity as long as there was significant solidarity amongst ethnic Fijians and the loyalty of general electors to their leaders was unchallenged. Neither of these was assured in the dynamics of peripheral capitalism, and changing relations between and within ethnic groups.

By the mid-1970s, the Fijian Nationalist Party was established by Sakeasi Butadroka, a former Alliance Minister who alleged that the Alliance Party led by the paramount chiefs pursued policies that enriched the chiefs and people of other ethnicities.

The Alliance Party had put in place several measures in education, employment, housing, rural development and access to credit to reduce the gap between ethnic Fijians and others. These had tended to benefit a small minority of indigenous people. Although he came from the province of Rewa, Butadroka quickly gained support from disaffected ethnic Fijians in the other 13 provinces. He popularised the slogan, "Fiji for the Fijians" and called for the repatriation of all 'Indians'. Interestingly he employed Indo-Fijian labour on his chicken farm and the Fijian Nationalist

Party (FNP) shared polling sheds with the predominantly 'Indian' National Federation Party (NFP). When the Alliance Party lost the April 1977 General Election, it was alleged that a number of FNP candidates had been financed by NFP supporters!

1977 - A Palace Coup

Fiji's first coup took place following the Alliance Party's surprise defeat in the General Election of April, 1977. Ethno-nationalists had significantly eroded Alliance Party support.

The NFP was surprised by this turn of events and was unable to immediately secure its advantage. Instead there was a leadership struggle as Siddiq Koya, the then NFP leader, was not seen by some in the NFP caucus as a suitable Prime Minister. Two ethnic Fijians were considered by the caucus as alternatives to Koya. Overtures were made to Ratu Mara to form a coalition government. He declined.

After three days Koya emerged as the person with majority support in the caucus and arrangements were made for him to be sworn in as Prime Minister. However, when he reached the Governor General's residence, he was informed that Ratu Sir George Cakobau, 'in his own deliberate judgement', as provided under the 1970 constitution had appointed Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara as Prime Minister.

Mara was deemed to have the support of the majority of the House of Representatives.

Three factors contributed to this 'palace coup'. The first was the disension over Koya's suitability as PM within the NFP which extended to some concerns about the loyalty of the civil service and the military to a NFP government. It was alleged subsequently that a faction within the NFP had 'secretly' approached the Governor General not to appoint Koya. Secondly, there was concern about ethnic Fijian reaction, and the response of the military and the police. Thirdly, the former Attorney General's advice to the Governor General about his reserve powers was questionable. This first 'bloodless' coup indicated that the electoral mandate could be over ruled by the Governor General and that factors such as ethnic Fijian response to a 'non-Fijian' government, civil service neutrality and the role of the military needed to be considered by those who challenged the power of chiefs.

The First Military Coup d'État

The 1987 coup is more widely known as Fiji's first coup because it was an overt military coup d'état by the Royal Fiji Military Forces (RFMF). This coup, like the earlier palace coup a decade earlier, returned defeated Alliance Party politician chiefs and their associates to power.

On 14 May, 1987, Lt Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, the third ranking officer in the RFMF, overthrew the month old Fiji Labour Party (FLP) and NFP coalition government of Prime Minister Timoci Bavadra. The FLP was formed by the Fiji Trade Union Congress (FTUC) following a wage freeze, perceived as the culmination of anti-worker policies by the Alliance government, and for the reason that the NFP did not adequately represent workers' interests.

The FLP was a class based party that sought to challenge the racial politics that both the Alliance and NFP were comfortable with. Preoccupation with ethnicity by these parties meant that issues of poor pay and working

conditions, growing inequality and poverty, as well as the perception of increasing corruption, were not addressed satisfactorily. The wage freeze was seen as oppressive, demanding action that would meaningfully change Fiji's governance in favour of the disadvantaged and vulnerable.

The FLP received strong support among voters in the 1987 general election. In the coalition government that was formed with the NFP, it became the senior partner with its indigenous Fijian leader, Dr Bavadra, a medical doctor actively involved as a trade unionist becoming PM. The government promised a more equitable and just society and began to implement its election manifesto. However, Bavadra was not allowed to fulfill his electoral promises.

Defeated Alliance Party politicians including chiefs, former trade unionists and senior public servants formed the 'Taukei Movement' or indigenous land owners' movement and agitated against his government. Arson, fire bombings, road blocks and other acts to foster instability were initiated. The Taukei Movement also organised public protests and demonstrations with very explicit racial overtones. The CEO of Emperor Gold Mines, an Australian company, was heavily involved in the initial destabilisation campaign. As these attempts at civil unrest failed to unsettle the government, a group of coup plotters, primarily Alliance Party people, approached Rabuka to overthrow the government.

The ambitious Rabuka who was frustrated with his limited prospects for further promotion in the military and had been seeking other employment opportunities, agreed to do the bidding of the conspirators. The then Commander of the RFMF (a son-in-law of Ratu Mara) and his deputy were ousted. His coup was applauded by the Great Council of Chiefs and appeared to have the support of the majority of ethnic Fijians. However, many ethnic Fijians from the western region were either lukewarm or opposed to the coup as were a good pro-

portion of urban indigenous Fijians. Rabuka was hailed as the saviour of the 'Fijian Race' and was given life long membership of the Great Council of Chiefs. The RFMF, a primarily ethnic Fijian institution formed to underwrite chiefly power, had responded to the 'threat of Indian domination'.

The Australasian and international media amplified this justification that appeared to be an adequate explanation for the 'rape' of Fiji's peculiar democracy. For them an indigenous people had risen against the 'migrant Indian race' to defend their right to self determination. Rabuka's smiling military moustached face was beamed world wide and the slogan that an Indian dominated government had been overthrown became widely accepted. There are still elements in the Australasian media that believe that Bavadra was an Indo-Fijian!

Dr Bavadra's appeals to the Queen, the British Government and to the governments of Australia and New Zealand largely fell on deaf ears. The government of the United States appeared to welcome the coup as Bavadra's government had banned nuclear powered and armed ships from Fiji waters. General Vernon Walters of the US military, who had gained notoriety with his association with military coups in several countries including Chile, had visited Fiji a few weeks before the overthrow of the FLP/NFP coalition government.

The FLP and NFP coalition government that Bavadra led was not 'Indian' dominated. Although it had a majority of Indo-Fijian supporters, its cabinet comprised equal numbers of the two major ethnic categories and included representatives of General Electors. It was Fiji's first genuinely multi-ethnic government, but without a strong representation of ethnic Fijian chiefs.

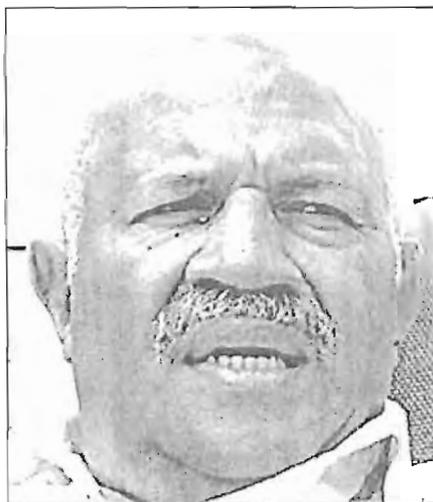
The Second 1987 Coup d'État

Despite the widespread violation of human rights of those who opposed the coup, particularly FLP and NFP leaders and their supporters, protests against Rabuka's coup continued. A

multi-ethnic 'Back to Early May Movement' presented a petition to the Governor General with thousands of signatures seeking the return to the Constitution and to the Parliament. Efforts by the Governor General and his advisers led to meetings between Bavadra and Ratu Mara and to an agreement on some form of a government of national unity. Rabuka and the unelected extreme nationalists were not part of these negotiations. They felt marginalised and acted decisively against any further compromises with the leaders of the deposed government. The September coup was instituted and once again FLP and NFP leaders and their supporters were detained and had their human rights viciously violated.

With this second coup, the 1970 constitution was abrogated, the Queen displaced as Head of State and the military sought to rule itself with the assistance of extreme Fijian ethno-nationalists. Fiji lost its membership in the British commonwealth.

The two coups eventually returned power once again to the paramount chiefs of eastern Fiji. Rabuka and his allies, which included for sometime Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau (Governor General and then President after the second 1987 coup), decreed a new constitution in 1990. This constitution reserved for indigenous Fijians the positions of the President and Vice President, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance, the Minister for Home Affairs, the Minister for Fijian Affairs, the Minister for Lands, the Chief Justice, the Commander of the Fiji Military Forces, the Commissioner of Police, the Chairman of the Public Service Commission and other senior government positions. It provided for a parliament with an absolute ethnic Fijian majority and a reservation of seats entirely on an ethnic basis. Voting was to be based on racially allocated electorates. Ethnic Fijian representation was based on the 14 provincial constituencies, which led to divisions within and between provinces. It also stipulated that no less than 50 percent of all public service positions were to be held by ethnic Fijians



Sitiveni Rabuka

and Rotumans. Several other affirmative action measures for Fiji's indigenous people were enabled. This included a grant of \$20 million to Fijian Holdings Limited (FHL), a private ethnic Fijian investment company. Private family share holding in FHL, as against provincial share holding, enriched an element of the ethnic Fijian middle class including Lasenia Qarase, the then CEO of Fiji Development Bank.

Rabuka twice ran for elections under the 1990 constitution, (described as autocratic, feudalistic and racist) and was able to rule Fiji until May 1999. Between 1987 and 1999 Fiji lost some 10 percent of its population, mainly Indo-Fijian but also other non-ethnic Fijians as well as some well educated ethnic Fijians.

The country's economy did not grow and corruption became rampant culminating in the collapse of the National Bank of Fiji and the loss of more than F\$220 million. Sugar cane farm leaseholds began to expire and government failed to provide viable options to farmers and land owners.

The one redeeming feature of Rabuka's leadership was that he supported the review of the 1990 constitution as required in its provisions and came out firmly in support of the 1997 constitutional amendments, against the wishes of ethno-nationalists in his party. The new constitution has several positive features including provisions for power sharing; a 'compact' in its preamble that recognises the contribu-

tion of all ethnic groups while giving primacy to indigenous interests, and a comprehensive bill of rights that proscribes discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. However, it fails to make the firm break away from race based representation as recommended by the Constitutional Review Commission led by Sir Paul Revees.

The Third Coup d'État

With the assistance of the new rather complicated alternative vote 'above the line or below the line' preferential electoral arrangement under the 1997 constitution, the People's Coalition group stormed to power in the April general election of 1999. Led by Mahendra Chaudhry, this coalition comprised the FLP, the Fijian Association Party and a number of minority parties representing ethnic Fijians and general voters. These parties largely allocated voting preferences amongst themselves. Numerous ethnic Fijian parties emerged before this election reflecting regional/provincial and ideological differences as well as fragmentation based on personalities. Fiji had changed considerably over the previous two decades. Chiefly hegemony based on ethnic Fijian solidarity was increasingly tested and even eroded.

There were numerous disputes over chiefly titles in several provinces especially where these provided access to sizeable rental incomes from leases and royalties. A new generation of aristocrats emerged desirous of perks of public office, but without the mana or cooperative instincts of their fathers. Provincial and confederacy rivalries also became more overt as Rabuka had allocated positions and benefits on these bases. He openly disputed Ratu Mara's views and maintained, amongst other things, that the latter had known about and had approved of the 1987 coup. There was an emergent and assertive ethnic Fijian middle class that had benefited from affirmative action policies including funding support for buying individual (as against provincial) shares in the Fijian Holdings Limited.

Socio-economic inequality and poverty had increased. Poverty did not dif-

ferentiate ethnically. A majority of the poor actually worked but what they were paid was grossly inadequate. Labour market and taxation reforms adversely affected them. VAT (GST) was a big blow to the small holders and workers in the country. As sugar cane farm leases began to expire, farmers felt increasingly insecure. Poor governance, widespread corruption and mismanagement of public funds had enriched elements of an aspirant ethnic Fijian middle class at the expense of the broad masses.

Although Rabuka's Soqosoqo Vakavulewa Ni Taukei (SVT) Party and the NFP had campaigned on their success at multi-ethnic cooperation as reflected in the 1997 constitutional settlement and a promise of continuing such cooperation in tackling a range of Fiji's problems, they were defeated at the polls. The SVT lost heavily and the NFP for the first time since independence was not represented in parliament. The FLP's bread and butter, 'you can't eat the constitution' campaign had evidently resonated with the voters but the FLP, led by Mahendra Chaudhry, had also successfully eroded the NFP's Indo-Fijian support by ethnic outbidding – campaigning with the message that the NFP had 'sold out' by agreeing to a smaller number of reserved seats for Indo-Fijians (reduced from 19 to 23). Similar charges were laid against Rabuka and the SVT by ethnic Fijian outbidding parties. Jai Ram Reddy, the leader of the NFP, and Rabuka paid the price for ethnic cooperation in an election that dwelt on ethnic and class inequalities. However, the SVT's bad governance and the deterioration of services (exemplified by water and power cuts) were also factors that moved voters against it.

As required by the new constitution's power sharing provision, the FLP invited the SVT to be part of government. However, after the SVT had allegedly set down difficult conditions that were not acceptable to the FLP, the latter refused to have the SVT, the party that still had the largest number of indigenous MPs representing the 'Fijian establishment' in its multi-party

cabinet. Instead the FLP combined with a number of minority ethnic Fijian parties to form government. A majority of the cabinet were ethnic Fijians and Chaudhry became Fiji's first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister. His appointment had become contentious within the coalition. The Fijian Association Party had initially refused to accept his nomination by the FLP, but Ratu Mara, by now the President of the Republic (and almost openly opposed to Rabuka), had persuaded Adi Kuini Bavadra, Dr Bavadra's widow and the leader of FAP, to support Chaudhry. The FAP split over this and remained divided.

In the year that Chaudhry's 'Peoples Coalition' ruled the country a number of significant policy innovations were made. International Financial Institution inspired reforms were ended. Cuts and redundancies in government and statutory bodies were stopped. Funds allocated to destitutes were significantly increased. VAT (GST) on food items consumed by the poor was withdrawn. The government's financial management kept improving. Chaudhry also curtailed the use of consultants by government departments and sacked members of boards who had been appointed by the previous government. Among the casualties were George Speight, the Chairman of the Fiji Hardwood Corporation and a protégé of Jim Ah Koy, the former SVT Minister of Finance, and Maika Qarikau, CEO of the Native Land Trust Board, who was sacked from his position as a board member of the Fiji Development Bank. Both these persons were to play leading roles in the putsch that was to follow.

With the defeat of the SVT, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, whose political career was launched as a 1987 coup conspirator, took over from Rabuka as leader of the SVT. He immediately formed a group to destabilise the new government. Acting in a similar vein but more overtly, the ethno-nationalist leader, Butadroka, approached the military to overthrow the People's Coalition Government. The military did not accede to his request.

In his 12 months in office, Chaudhry managed to alienate many people including businessmen being investigated for tax evasion, media personalities, certain chiefs, and civil servants and the Commissioner of Police. Chaudhry's government's preference for the long-established Commonwealth Development Corporation's bid to harvest mahogany forests over that of an American venture capital company upset the latter. His government's failure to satisfactorily explain the proposed land commission and the allocations of \$28,000 to each evicted cane farming household (mainly Indo-Fijian) and \$10,000 to in-coming landowners (ethnic-Fijian) starting to farm commercially provided a pretext for the revival of the Taukei Movement.

Prominent in the movement once again were defeated politicians, chiefs, Methodist Church ministers and ethno-nationalists. Apisai Tora, a former fire-brand trade unionist and a long standing politician who had allied his party with the FLP, was instrumental in the movement's revival. Protest marches were organised in several towns and cities culminating in the large 19th of May 2000 march through the capital, Suva. Chaudhry had over-ruled his Minister for Home Affairs' decision to ban the march in the name of democratic freedom and the right of people to express their dissent.

On the very same day, George Speight and seven members of the Counter Revolutionary Warfare (CRW) Unit of the Fiji Military Forces entered parliament and took Chaudhry and the coalition government hostage. On that fateful day of the putsch, indigenous Fijian youths rampaged through Suva looting, burning and trashing shops belonging to Indo-Fijians and others. Harassment of rural Indo-Fijian communities, home invasions, thefts of household items, farm implements, produce and animals continued for weeks without effective police response. These incidents were reminiscent of scenes of Mugabe's land appropriation in Zimbabwe publicised previously in the local media. In one reported incident a police truck was used to cart stolen taro and the carcass of a cow to

the parliamentary complex from Muaniweni in Naitasiri Province. Traumatized and insecure, scores of Indo-Fijians fled their rural homes and set up as 'refugees' in Lautoka.

Prime Minister Chaudhry and his government ministers were held hostage for 56 days in the complex. Chiefly factions from Kubuna and Tovata together with elements of the ethnic Fijian middle class jostled to displace Ratu Mara and his supporters. The then military commander, Commodore Voreqe (Frank) Bainimara, took over the reins of government on the 29th of May deposing the President (advised by Rabuka and Savua, the Commissioner of Police) and declaring that he had abrogated the constitution. Ratu Mara had earlier orchestrated a controversial resignation of the coalition government. Having got the military to depose the President and apparently abrogate the constitution, George Speight sought to put in place a government of his choosing.

This did not eventuate. Following an accord by the military and the hostage-takers under which the latter were granted immunity if they released the hostages and returned all arms, the hostages were released. A new president, Ratu Josefa Iloilo, was appointed as well as a military-appointed interim government, led by Lasenia Qarase as Prime Minister. The ministers in the government were mostly ethnic Fijian professionals. The military subsequently arrested George Speight and other putsch leaders for the failure to return all arms and violently suppressed his supporters in the provinces of Naitasiri, Tailevu, Cakaudrove, Bua and Macuata.

In November a mutiny at the Queen Elizabeth Barracks resulted in the killing of three loyal soldiers and Bainimarama had to flee for his life. After the mutiny was put down, five suspected mutineers were apprehended and beaten to death. Altogether eight soldiers, two policemen and two rebels were killed in the coup and the mutiny of 2000.

In appointing Qarase, the military leader believed that he was putting in



George Speight

place a moderate former banker who would work in the interests of all communities. However, from the very outset Qarase sought to placate ethno-nationalists. He proposed an affirmative action blueprint for indigenous Fijians and Rotumans that the Great Council of Chiefs endorsed. He strongly opposed the legal challenge to the attempted abrogation of the 1997 constitution. His government rewarded several backers of George Speight's putsch with cushy appointments. He converted his group of government ministers into the Soqosoqo Duavata Lewe Ni Vanua (SDL) Party to fight the 2001 general election. He patronised the Methodist Church, the officials of which formed the Assembly of Christian Churches to support his election campaign. His efforts at post-coup reconciliation were directed primarily at ethnic Fijians through Christian churches. On this pretext public funds were siphoned to a group of Christian denominations led by the Methodists.

Meanwhile the desecration of Hindu places of worship continued with ineffectual police response. Home invasions, violent robberies, muggings, other street level crimes and intimidation of Indo-Fijians and non-ethnic Fijians became commonplace.

The SDL Party with Qarase at its helm won the 2001 General Election. There were several allegations of vote

rigging and vote buying (including the multi-million dollar agricultural scam) against the SDL. Acting deliberately against the power-sharing requirements of the Constitution, he refused to accept the FLP, the other major party, to form a multi-party government. Qarase instead chose to align with the Conservative Matanitu Vanua Party (CMV) which had won seats in Tailevu and Cakaudrove. This was George Speight's Party and George Speight himself had stood and won a seat. As he was unable to attend Parliament, a by-election followed and his brother was elected. Using delaying tactics in complying with the court judgements in favour of the FLP, Qarase was able to serve five years as Prime Minister of an SDL/CMV government.

During this time, the economy grew moderately but unemployment was widespread. Emigration continued and Fiji became a remittance economy largely as a result of the earnings of security workers in the Middle East and caregivers in Pacific Rim countries. Financial mismanagement and allegations of corruption were widely reported.

The government blamed the 2000 instability, the putsch and the coup on Chaudhry. Qarase did not dissociate himself from hate speeches by government MPs and Senators. Several persons implicated in the putsch served as ministers. Still others, such as the Vice President, having been convicted for putsch related offences were released after serving a fraction of their sentence under 'compulsory supervision orders'. There was a reluctance to support investigation and prosecution of those implicated in the putsch and mutiny. The government blocked the renewal of the contract of Australian prosecutor, Peter Ridgeway, who had been successful in obtaining convictions of several putsch supporters. It also sought to remove Bainimarama as Commander of the RFMF as he was not prepared to 'forgive and forget'. Bainimara remained opposing any dilution in the process of bringing to justice those involved in the putsch and mutiny of 2000.

The Fourth Coup d'État

The relationship between the SDL/CMV government and the military deteriorated to the point that in the general election of August 2006, the military was seen to be openly campaigning against it. A moderate New Alliance Party had been formed by a former military commander, Ratu Epeli Ganilau (son of the first President Penaia Ganilau and son-in-law of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, former PM and deposed late President) which apparently was favoured by the military. By this stage, the SDL had absorbed the ethno-nationalist CMV. With his electoral victory, Qarase continued to astutely cultivate the business community but also to openly advocate public sector reforms in conjunction with his affirmative action policies. He invited the FLP to form the multi-party government in accordance with the constitution. However, with a clear majority and elements of the FLP in tow, the SDL confidently pushed its ethno-nationalist agenda supported by a majority of ethnic Fijian voters. The military challenged this orientation of the government, asserting that it was the final protector of national interest as clearly stipulated in the 1990 constitution. The government maintained that no such provision existed in the 1997 constitution, referring the matter to the President and then to the Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, matters were brought to a head when the government persisted in pushing three bills that were vehemently opposed by the Commander of the RFMF. These were the Promotion of Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill, the *I Qoliqoli* Bill and the Land Tribunal Bill. The first sought to end the investigation and prosecution of those behind the putsch and mutiny of 2000. It was amongst other things designed to give amnesty to putsch perpetrators. In spite of widespread opposition, Qarase persisted with these bills until a few weeks before his overthrow. The *I Qoliqoli* Bill purportedly returned the ownership of customary fishing grounds to their indigenous owners. However, the lack of sufficient prior

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consultation created considerable misunderstanding amongst different parties. While there is an established convention for the respect of customary fishing rights areas, proprietorial control of the type that was envisaged in the bill would give exclusive domain to customary owners that hitherto had not existed. There appeared to be no consideration given to the interests of the large numbers of squatters who reside on marginal coastal lands. The tourist industry strongly opposed the bill and some customary rights owners went around exhorting money from tourists for swimming in their *naiqoliqoli* or even walking on the beach.



Voreqe Bainimarama

The Land Tribunal Bill followed on from the policy of the SDL/CMV government of allocating F\$500,000 for customary land owners to buy back freehold land that they felt was taken without due recompense. Currently, customary owners own close to 90 percent of Fiji's land and it is likely that indigenous Fijians own another two percent freehold land. With the remaining land either in the possession of the state or owned by private land owners, there are large numbers of people with very little or no access to land. The military saw this bill as another example of SDL's capitulation to ethno-nationalists.

Over the last three months the threat of military intervention grew louder. Qarase either did not take the threat seriously or felt that his electoral mandate would allow him to withstand the pressure from the military.

He had tried to foment dissension within the military and to undermine and sack the commander but these had not worked. Military officers sympathetic to government were simply compelled to leave the army. With the military commander away in the Middle East, the Prime Minister approached the President's office to sack Bainimarama and appoint another Commander but the officer appointed found that he had no support among his colleagues. He withdrew and went on leave pending an inquiry into his role in this last failed effort at removing the Commander. Another person who contributed to the escalation of the tense game of brinkmanship was the Commissioner of the Fiji Police, Australian Andrew Hughes, who assumed he would be able to investigate the Commander for sedition and other military officers over the removal of a container of arms from the Suva wharf without police approval. Media stories of the Commander's likely arrest for sedition charges abounded.

The New Zealand government made an unsuccessful last ditch effort to stave off the coup. After taking time out watching the annual Sukuna Bowl rugby and other sports competition between the military and the police, the Commander acted on the 5th of December to overthrow the Qarase government. His action has once again led to Fiji's expulsion from the Commonwealth and to widespread international condemnation of the coup. Fiji's economy is again in a nose dive.

While most civil society organisations and NGOs have expressed their opposition to the coup, divisions are apparent between those who primarily support parliamentary democracy and those who are mainly engaged with issues of social justice. Ironically (given its past support for coups), the Methodist church and its allies have come out strongly against the military action and are advocating the return of the Qarase government, democracy, the rule of law and constitutionality. So did the Great Council of Chiefs (*although, since this article was written, it has changed its mind - Ed.*).

Analysis and Conclusion

Fiji has experienced five coups. On the first four occasions there was a return of power to the chiefly status-quo and its allies. There was a reaffirmation of the politics of ethnicity over the politics of class. Subsequent to the 1987 coup, when the commoner Rabuka usurped power and there was an erosion of chiefly mana. He was applauded and given special privileges by chiefs and a majority of indigenous Fijians.

In 2000 George Speight sought to replicate Rabuka but only received the support of some chiefs and the anticipated support of the military proved to be an illusion. He and his supporters have reinforced long-term rifts amongst chiefly lineages. Qarase and his SDL government owed their appointment in 2000 to the RFMF but instead of serving wider national interests, he championed narrow ethno-nationalist interests. The jostling for power and influence among chiefly factions and elements of the indigenous Fijian middle class continued to the 2006 general election and its aftermath.

Commodore Bainimarama felt that Qarase had betrayed the trust placed in him. It is apparent that there has been a significant shift in the position of the military vis a vis the ethno-nationalist project. Changes in leadership have brought about changes in the personalities, values and attitudes of senior military officers over the last 20 years. On the surface it appears that they are no longer primarily a military to merely underwrite chiefly interests or ethnic Fijian interests.

Post-2000, and the experiences of having a renegade segment of its forces take part in the putsch and subsequently attempt a mutiny, the military is defining its own interests, which it perceives as being more attuned to national interests. However, there is perhaps another underlying explanation for the behaviour of senior military officers, which is that as chiefly hegemony is disintegrating, they are aligning themselves to those who are

seeking the middle ground rather than the extremists. There is a realisation that the ethno-nationalist agenda has been used by an element of the ethnic Fijian middle class to enrich themselves at the expense of the wider community. The cabal involved in this fraudulent conversion of public funds for personal gains had not involved military officers. The latter therefore had no stake in the ethno-nationalist cause.

Over time too, Bainimarama, who had acted inadvertently to serve the ethno-nationalist agenda in the confusion of the 2000 putsch and its aftermath, has consolidated his position within the military. Several senior officers sympathetic to the ethno-nationalist cause have been retired or sacked. With the loyalty of his senior officers firmly behind him, Bainimarama appears to have the confidence to tackle the very people he appointed to state power and institutions such as the Great Council of Chiefs that have previously legitimised ethno-nationalism.

There is concern in some quarters of a less altruistic reason - the possibility that they might be evading investigations into the deaths of suspected mutineers in 2000. There is a need to bring closure to this tragic episode in Fiji's recent past and for this to be done transparently.

Moreover, while Bainimarama may see himself and the military today as the real upholders of the rule of law, of law and order, of justice, and of multi-racial democracy - there is evidently a failure to respect and tolerate the rights of citizens to hold and publicly proclaim dissenting views.

His failure to castigate his soldiers for unacceptable harassment, intimidation and abuse of NGO activists, does not bode well. The development and strength of Fiji's peculiar democracy owes much to its strong civil society and NGOs are determined to protect their democratic space. If the military wants respect from NGOs, it has to afford them the same courtesy and accept that many NGOs will continue to oppose their latest illegal intrusion into the political arena.

Meanwhile socio-economic processes continue to transform Fiji society. The fourth military coup may give rise to a new chapter in Fiji's politics - a firm movement away from divisive politics of ethnicity to politics that support multi-racialism. This would be predicated on the removal of racially divisive political and administrative structures and processes, and the adoption of an electoral system that better reflects the aspirations of ordinary people for a just and democratic Fiji.

The military coups d'état that the country has experienced over the last 20 years have been to Fiji's detriment. Coups up till the current one were designed to maintain chiefly power and to promote narrow ethnic interests that benefited elements of an aspirant ethnic Fijian middle class and its business allies. It remains to be seen as to whose interest the December 2006 coup will serve. There has to be a general consensus in the country that changing governments by the barrel of the gun is no longer acceptable. Together with this, there has to be discussions and decisions about the nature and structure, composition and necessity of a military force in an island country with no external military threats.

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Further Reading

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