

FIJI'S COUPS OF 1987 AND 2000: A COMPARISON

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In 1987, a military seizure of power in Fiji jolted the South Pacific. It was led by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, who staged a further coup the same year before leaving the military to subsequently hold office as Prime Minister. In 2000, failed businessman George Speight spearheaded a further illegal seizure of power. In totality, these events caused economic and social dislocation, Fiji's loss of international status, and overt challenges to the rule of law. Most particularly, however, the resort to force highlighted serious and unresolved differences within the indigenous Fijian community. This article analyses and compares these coup events and discusses the implications for Fiji's unresolved challenges of nation-building.

En 1987, à la faveur de deux coups d'Etat successifs, les militaires conduits par le Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka devaient s'emparer du pouvoir à Fidji. Ce même colonel devait par la suite devenir Premier Ministre de Fidji.

En 2000, Georges Speight, un homme d'affaires ruiné, devait à son tour tenter d'accéder au pouvoir par la force.

Ces coups d'Etat successifs tous fomentés au mépris des règles de droit, ont non seulement indéniablement perturbé le tissu économique et social de Fidji, mais ont aussi entamé la crédibilité de ce pays dans l'arène internationale. Ils ont également servi de révélateurs des profondes cassures qui existent entre les différentes communautés fidjiennes. Dans son article le Professeur Rod Alley analyse et compare ces différents coups d'Etat et leurs implications pour la nation fidjienne.

I INTRODUCTION

Twice in 1987, and again in 2000, Fiji witnessed the removal of its governments through an illegal resort to force. By global comparison, these upheavals did not provoke the

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mayhem and violence such episodes readily ignite elsewhere. Yet their impacts staggered a young state that had entered independence committed to internal peace and the pragmatic accommodation of national ethnic differences. Why did these events occur and what do they tell us about Fiji and its possible future? What is the likelihood of their repetition in the years ahead? Can the 1997 Constitution, crafted to balance different ethnic interests within a democratic framework, survive the terrorism and hostage taking that toppled the Chaudhry government in May 2000? Beyond the chronology of these events, what is revealed about deeper-seated features within Fiji's polity? Can its traditional chiefly institutions operate within a system of settled constitutional rule? If not, does that presage a future of fractious tribalism masquerading as indigenous paramountcy? And how is such speculation affected by Fiji's increasing international exposure?

Before outlining the essential narratives of Fiji's coups, some general features warrant attention. A first concerns the role of random factors, in particular the availability of those willing to conspire to lead such risky operations. They may rationalise such risk by identifying themselves as the anointed chosen ones, ready to lead the country out of its wilderness. For Fiji, such allusion is deliberate; key figures shaping the coup episodes looked to Biblical inspiration with alacrity.

However once tasted, the coup experience can regenerate and mutate, providing local operational knowledge (how to do it), or arousing expectations that, once disappointed, inspire fresh recourse to violence. This compounds risk and uncertainty. The mix of determining who might lead a coup, relevant motivational considerations, and the vagaries of subsequent public response necessarily clouds any too ready comparison of these events.

A second comparative question concerns underlying conditions incurring recourse to force. Features here may include failed representation, growing disparities within and between major communities and, for most of the public at least, the opaque dynamics of élite rivalry and feuding. A third comparative aspect concerns civil-military relations before, during, and following a resort to force, and whether the state's security apparatus is operating within the rule of law. All three points assume relevance when comparing Fiji's coups of 1987 and 2000.

Possible grounds for comparison identified, the coup episodes necessarily reflected contrasting political conditions, play of personalities, scale of local impact, and international response. The location of operational responsibility for these actions also differed: in 1987, the military imprint was unmistakable, while the *putsch* of 2000 revealed confused parentage. Accordingly, each event tells a different story when explaining why constituted authority in Fiji fell to the force of arms.

II SITIVENI RABUKA'S COUPS OF 1987

Following independence in 1970, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's Alliance Party government dominated Fiji's politics. His influence radiated through a network of eastern island chiefly linkages, the Tovata confederacy, through which the extended Mara family operated. Publicly the Alliance campaigned as an inter-racial coalition, dominated by the Fijian Association, but also comprising organisations representing European, Chinese, and Indo-Fijians. These smaller bodies were willing to acknowledge indigenous Fijian primacy in return for undisturbed professional, educational and commercial advantages. Opposing the Alliance was the National Federation Party (NFP), backed primarily by Indo-Fijian rural, white collar, and small business sectors. The NFP's endemic factionalism permitted virtually uninterrupted Alliance incumbency until 1987. Although that period witnessed some social and economic progress, many within the indigenous community failed to advance. This stoked urban discontent, regional disaffection, and occasional outbursts of ethnic populism.

The Fijian Labour Party formed in 1985 built support among indigenous Fijians disillusioned by an accumulating legacy of aloof, corrupt, and unaccountable Alliance rule. In a marriage of convenience, the Labour Party aligned with the NFP to contest the 1987 elections and achieve victory. Leader Dr Timoci Bavadra claimed that his Labour-led coalition offered Fiji a fresh start and 'a chance to install an efficient, responsive government in place of one that has been arrogant and corrupt through its two decade rule'.¹ Thus Bavadra's short-lived administration entered office on a platform of moderate social prescription, badly needed land reform, and a return to Fiji's 'nuclear free status'. It was no surprise that the policy for banning nuclear ship visits was raised by senior United States representative Vernon Walters when he visited Fiji in late April.

On the morning of May 14 1987, Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka sat witnessing proceedings in Parliament dressed as a civilian. At a pre-determined signal, he ordered balaclava-clad military personnel into the chamber where they arrested Prime Minister Bavadra and his colleagues. According to Rabuka, this was a coup executed 'to pre-empt a bloody situation in our beloved country and a devastation of homes and businesses'.² Behind this claim lay recent street disturbances, sporadic arson attacks, and overtly racist vituperation castigating the newly elected Bavadra administration. Most support was mobilised by the *Taukei* Movement, a collection of Fijians variously linked to the defeated Alliance Party, but otherwise united by little more than a commitment to topple the Bavadra Coalition (Lal, 1988: 72). In fact, the *Taukei* Movement's disturbances had receded before the coup,

1 Prime Minister Bavadra interview with David Robie, cited Robertson (1988), p 62.

2 Statement of Sitiveni Rabuka, broadcast 29 September 1987, Radio Fiji.

revealing a more substantive justification advanced by Rabuka. This was the threat that the newly elected government's policies posed to the interests, institutions and leadership of the indigenous community. That was apparent when Mara refused to condemn the coup, or use to his considerable authority to uphold the existing constitution. Rabuka also injected ethnic mistrust by claiming that the Bavadra government was primarily a front for Indo-Fijian commercial interests, and that it threatened indigenous control of land.

Following the coup, constitutional confusion reigned. Governor General Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau initially refused Rabuka's demands to suspend the 1970 Constitution. This followed advice from the Chief Justice, Sir Timoci Tuivaga, that such a suspension was illegal. The Governor General even recorded a broadcast, transmitted in the early hours of the day following the coup, declaring a state of emergency and assumption of executive authority. Significantly, he also called on the military 'to return to their lawful allegiance in accordance with the oath of office and their duty of obedience without delay' (cited Lal, 1988: 82). Following brief but intense rioting, and after discussions with the Great Council of Chiefs, the Governor General announced a 'compromise' plan. This established an interim Council of Ministers to rewrite the 1970 Constitution. It was dominated by Rabuka, but contained defeated Alliance figures including Mara.

The deliberations that followed reached a stage in September, where the Governor General had the support of Mara and Bavadra to a formula that was designed to gradually return the country to civilian rule, and that would protect essential rights and liberties. This agreement (the Deuba Accord) was barely days old when Rabuka sprang a second coup. His action was effectively a 'self-coup' – what Latin Americans term an *auto-golpe*. It resulted in an immediate clamp down on the news media, purge of the public service, and arbitrary jailing of judicial figures earlier challenging the constitutionality of the May declaration of emergency and suspension of parliament. Rabuka declared himself head of state, suspended the 1970 constitution, and declared Fiji a republic. These events immediately resulted in Fiji's suspension from the Commonwealth.

The following ten weeks saw a serious deterioration of civil order, human rights abuses, and the worsening incidence of crime. Methodist fundamentalism was in full cry, including bans on Sunday trading. Realising that he had unleashed forces beyond his control, Rabuka was forced to re-install civilian rule by December, retaining security responsibilities, but appointing Ganilau President and Mara Prime Minister. Of 21 Ministers named for this government, ten had served in the interim military-backed regime and 13 in the former Alliance government. Bavadra now stood politically marginalised where he remained until his death in 1989.

In the years that followed, Fiji staged only a hesitant economic recovery, its Indo-Fijian skill base of qualified personnel now haemorrhaged by long term emigration. Between 1987 and 1994, nine out of ten migrants were Indo-Fijian, the annual outflow of eight

thousand doubling that of the previous seven years (Forsyth, 180). Into the 1990s, the national proportion of those identifying as Indo-Fijians fell from its previous 51 to 44 per cent.

A constitution promulgated in 1990 gave the Council of Chiefs power to appoint the President; a 34-member Senate comprising 24 indigenous Fijians; and a House of representatives allocating 37 seats to indigenous Fijians, 27 for Indo-Fijians, and six for other races. The seats allocated to Fijians comprised a gerrymander by discriminating against urban Fijians, previously decisive in electing the Bavadra government. The supremacist 1990 constitution also helped authorise a variety of so-called 'affirmative action' policies designed to privilege the indigenous community for public service employment, training, loan finance and scholarships. If anything, these measures increased economic and social polarisation within the indigenous community, as 'the institutionalisation of communal resource extraction ... reproduced the poverty and perpetual marginalisation of many ethnic Fijians' (Ratuva, 2000: 232).

Amidst industrial disruption in key industries and public resentment over the introduction of a value added tax, Rabuka left the military in 1992 to join Mara's interim government as a co-deputy premier with responsibilities for home affairs. Relations between these two figures then deteriorated, Rabuka assuming the presidency of the newly formed Fijian Political Party (or STV from its Fijian name). A 1993 report of a commission of inquiry, headed by Justice Kermode, concluded that a *prima facie* case existed for prosecuting Rabuka and others on charges of defrauding the National Bank. Proceedings did not eventuate in what was termed the Stephens loans affair.

Following a general election in February 1994, the STV won 31 seats in the 71 member legislature allowing it to form a governing coalition with smaller parties and some independents. Although marred by scandal, disunity and ineffectual policy delivery, this coalition facilitated an accommodation between Rabuka and the NFP's Jai Ram Reddy that set in motion a fundamental constitutional refurbishment.

III THE CHAUDHRY GOVERNMENT OVERTHROW OF 2000

In 1997, following the Reeves Commission Report, Fiji promulgated a new constitution. It was easily the most democratic in the country's history.³ As an attempt to accommodate a divided society, it provided electoral and power-sharing mechanisms designed to encourage the majority to offer fair representation to all communities, through partnership opportunities within coalition government. This constitution proclaimed Fiji a multiracial society seeking to promote social justice, the economic and social advancement of all

3 On Fiji's 1997 Constitution, see Lal (1997), Tarte (1998) and Robertson (1998).

communities, and respect for rights. A separate administrative system for indigenous Fijians was an acknowledged right, the primacy of these interests maintained as a protective principle. The 71 member House of Representatives was allocated 46 seats, elected from communal rolls allowing 23 for indigenous Fijians, 19 for Indo-Fijians, and four for voters of the smaller communities. A further 25 seats were available for representatives elected by voters of all communities from an open roll.

Although the new constitution encountered hostility among provincial indigenous Fijian opinion, 'political leaders found it difficult to uphold or sustain institutions, founded upon explicit denial of political equality, which profoundly undermined the broader international respectability of the small island state' (Fraenkel, 86). Rabuka took the unprecedented step of having NFP leader Reddy appear before the Council of Chiefs to recommend that a culture of co-operation replace confrontation (Aikman, 293). The Chiefs agreed to endorse a constitution that adequately catered for the representational and institutional interests of the indigenous Fijian community. However, this endorsement provoked resentment from numerous indigenous quarters. And as in 1970, attempts to promote, explain, or have this founding document translated into Fijian proved inadequate.

The May 1999 General Election, contested under the new Constitution, saw Mahendra Chaudhry lead the Labour Party to a decisive victory and become the country's first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister. Winning 37 of the 71 seats in Parliament, the Labour Party gained an absolute parliamentary majority. Five of the 37 elected were indigenous Fijians. With the Fijian Association Party and the Party of National Unity (PANU) winning 11 and four seats respectively, the Labour Party formed an electoral alliance, or so-called people's coalition. Never stable, this arrangement required a degree of political management that Chaudhry proved either unwilling or unable to provide.

Much of the 1999 electoral outcome was driven by retaliation. Winning only eight seats, Rabuka's STV party was punished by indigenous Fijian voters believing that it had conceded too much in the 1997 constitutional bargaining process, acted heavy-handedly in land occupancy disputes involving indigenous Fijian interests, and failed to curb such excesses as the National Bank scandal.⁴ The NFP sustained worse retaliation, failing to win a single seat despite capturing almost a third of the Indo-Fijian vote. Ruefully counting the

4 This institution expanded its lending programme in the early 1990s to a point where outlays based on shaky collateral and fraud outran deposits. A major bailout needed to ward off collapse forced the government deep into budgetary deficit (Forsyth, 1997: 183). An audit found many non-performing loans and loans made outside the bank's guidelines including to its staff members.

costs that it had sustained since the 1987 coups, the Indo-Fijian electorate found little enthusiasm for Reddy and his association with Rabuka.

On May 19 2000, failed businessman George Speight and accomplices seized Mahendra Chaudhry's constitutionally elected government at gunpoint in Fiji's parliamentary complex.⁵ This action was supported by members of the Army's Counter Revolutionary Warfare unit, an entity Rabuka established in 1987, led on this occasion by Major Ilisoni Ligari. While not physically present in the parliamentary complex to support the coup, Speight sympathisers included senior police and security intelligence operatives. They included Colonel Metuisela Mua, a previous head of intelligence dismissed by Chaudhry (Dobell, 179).

Fiji's President, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, proclaimed a state of emergency and promulgated emergency regulations. Acting on the advice of the sole Minister not incarcerated, Ratu Tevita Momoedonu, the President prorogued Parliament for six months. As civil order deteriorated, the Commander of the Fiji Military, Frank Bainimarama, informed the President that, in his opinion, the 1997 Constitution no longer offered a framework to resolve the crisis and therefore required abrogation. The President responded by indicating that should such an abrogation occur, then he would not return to the office of President. This signified that his departure was not a resignation, but a refusal to accept office under the new regime.

Prime Minister, Cabinet, and colleagues then remained incarcerated for almost eight weeks. The Army's failure to secure and isolate parliament, deny Speight access to the news media, or prevent his people from roaming Suva and farms beyond through looting, cattle stealing, and food theft expeditions, pointed to military acquiescence in the hostage taking. Trading on believable claims that indigenous Fijians would not kill each other, Speight and his rebels extracted substantial concessions, playing the hostage card to its maximum. They divided the Council of Chiefs and the Army, and succeeded in getting Josepha Iloilo and Jope Seniloli appointed respectively President and Vice President. Neither figure publicly opposed the hostage taking, Seniloli being identified as a Speight supporter.

Assuming power to rule by decree in July, the military government established an interim civilian administration. This was headed by Laisenia Qarase and comprised several figures closely identified with the STV, now espousing increasingly strident nationalist appeals to the indigenous community.

5 On Speight's dubious commercial background and United States mahogany timber connections, see Joseph Kahn, 'The Mahogany King's Brief Reign: Business Interests Lurked Behind Fiji's Haphazard Coup', *New York Times*, 14 September 2000.

The release of the hostages and restoration of order followed the Muanikau Accord between Commander Bainimarama and George Speight. In return for hostage release, evacuation of the parliamentary complex and surrender of weapons, Speight and his accomplices gained immunity by decree from criminal prosecution and civil liability. Once hostage release occurred, the military concluded that the Speight group's failure to surrender weapons warranted their arrest and incarceration on a nearby island to await proceedings on treason charges.

IV THE AFTERMATH

In November 2000 Justice Anthony Gates, ruling in a case brought by an Indo-Fijian farmer for material losses caused by the coup, determined that the 1997 Constitution remained intact and that Qarase's interim administration was accordingly illegal. The interim administration appealed that outcome. In early March 2001, the Court of Appeal upheld the Gates ruling on grounds that the interim administration could claim neither necessity nor public acquiescence as grounds for its power holding and constitutional abrogation. Hence the Court ruled that 'the Interim Civilian Government has not discharged the burden of proving acquiescence and has accordingly failed to establish that it is the legal government of Fiji. The purported abrogation of the 1997 Constitution has not been justified and it remains in place'.⁶

In response, the interim administration ignored the 1997 Constitution by refusing to convene the existing parliament. This was needed to ascertain whether Chaudhry had the support he claimed or, alternatively, whether a government of national unity could command confidence under another leader, Cabinet Minister Dr Tupeni Baba for example. Musical chairs then followed: Chaudhry was formally dismissed, and a temporary Prime Minister sworn in who reappointed Ratu Josefa Iloilo as President. Parliament was then dissolved, the temporary Prime Minister resigned, and Qarase reappointed Prime Minister pending fresh elections subsequently scheduled for August 2001.

The processes used by the President to reach this outcome lacked legitimacy and did little to resuscitate Fiji's standing abroad. Adi Kuini Speed, Bavadra's widow and former co-deputy Prime Minister, even characterised them as a further coup, claiming that 'every available opportunity to return Fiji to genuine constitutional democracy has been intentionally ignored'.⁷ In attempted exoneration, the President said that the Court of Appeal had misread public support for the interim administration. He insisted that the 'overwhelming show of support and confidence in them by the Great Council of Chiefs on

6 Fiji Court of Appeal Judgement, 1 March 2000, 47.

7 'Dissolution of Parliament is Third Coup', *Fiji's Daily Post*, (<http://www.fijilive.com>).

behalf of the Fijians and Rotumans, the majority community in Fiji, paints a totally different picture'.⁸

V EXPLAINING THE 2000 COUP

Several factors shaped the coup of 2000. First, there were the accumulated indigenous Fijian expectations raised by the 1987 coups, but then disappointed by Rabuka's ineffectuality in meeting them. This generated tensions unmet by the electoral process, regardless of its design. Rabuka was aware that Speight's people were determined to finish a task that they believed he had compromised.

Historically, these frustrations have emerged from an environment configured by colonial compartmentalisation, where identity for public purposes was institutionalised through the politics by communal electoral representation harnessed in defence of ethnic interests. Indigenous identity as paramountcy justified 83 per cent control of the land and disparaged universal rights as an alien intrusion. Similar compartmentalisation occurred through the indigenous Fijian administration and its land leasing arrangements. This generated unresolved accountability problems, manifest as resentment towards constitutional democracy, and divisions heightened by competition for access to economic advantages.

Although it did nothing of the sort, the 1997 constitution stood accused of weakening indigenous interests. Post-coup interim administration head Qarase claimed that it had 'weakened positive discrimination provisions, and other basic Fijian legal rights, and that taken with the Electoral Act it had saddled the Republic with an incomprehensible and unfair electoral system'.⁹ While erroneous, sufficient destabilisation had occurred to render that accusation believable among those keenest to hear it.

A second factor was the erosion of respect previously paid to indigenous national leaderships, increasingly viewed as corrupt, incompetent and unable to discharge customary responsibilities to ordinary Fijians within a market economy under the rule of law. Although Speight lacked the endorsement that his backers claimed, the bored, the unemployed, and the poorly educated within the indigenous community rallied in number to his ethnic demagoguery. Speight's people significantly included those alienated by the post-1990 'affirmative action' that, while privileging certain indigenous Fijians, seriously neglected most others. Assisting their drift from authority was a pervasive sense of aimlessness within the indigenous community. This exhibited public features. Hence for Aikman (293): 'Fijian political effectiveness continues being impaired by division among

8 Fiji Daily Post/PINA Nius Online, 16 March 2001, (<http://pidp.ewc.hawaii.edu/PIReport>).

9 Affidavit to the Court of Appeal, cited in Fiji Court of Appeal Judgement, 1 March 2000.

competing Fijian political parties which are likely to remain communalist, provincial and nationalist in their political orientation'.

The May coup did nothing to reduce those divisions by helping to revitalise long-standing attempts in West Viti Levu to found a fourth Fijian confederacy. These aspirations sought autonomy and relief from Tovata and other confederacy interests. Among Speight's confused objectives, clear at least was a determination to break with the established chiefly order epitomised by the Mara family and its influential marriage connections. These resentments resonated within the military, giving Speight scope to nominate those he sought to lead an interim post-coup administration in return for eventual hostage release.

Third, the upheavals revealed the costs sustained by an attrition of Fiji's stock of social capital. While attempts to advance the rights of women, environmental sustainability, and youth welfare had occurred, a shared vision of the national public good remained elusive. The coup crisis of 2000 widened, yet also stemmed from a vacuum at the centre of Fiji's public life. Social linkages needed to bind legitimising consensus proved either absent, ephemeral or personalised, political collaboration more about shared antipathy than prospective mandate.

A decline of professionalism among the police and the army aggravated regional and personal affiliations. Supposedly a national institution, the Great Council of Chiefs emerged as little better than a disputatious, vacillating, readily manipulated gerontocracy. Its tactics throughout the coup crisis displayed fecklessness, egregious public posturing, and the personal venality of individuals claiming to 'represent the Fijian people'. This left indigenous institutions vulnerable to domestic and international ridicule. Little was altered by the obsequious 'apologies' that the military proffered to the Chiefs for demeaning their status when Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara stood down as President, and through the May 29 imposition of martial law.

A fourth consideration involved Fijian's perennial land problems, where thirty-year cane farming tenancy leases, predominantly held by Indo-Fijians, began falling due in increasing number. Approximately 83 per cent of all land in Fiji is under indigenous inalienable status, 8 per cent freehold, 5 per cent Crown land, and state freehold 3.6 per cent. Most of Fiji's sugar cultivation is conducted on leased land; some owners seek its return for alternative uses, many others desire the re-negotiation of leasing terms and conditions.

Through consultation with the Council of Chiefs, the Chaudhry government developed proposals for a Land Use Commission and reform of the inefficient, yet still powerful Native Lands Trust Board. This engendered suspicions that Chaudhry was using land reform to divide chiefs from commoners, a schism that the coup did far more to incur. This

saw a rash of local landowner grievances, blockades, and hostage-taking. It was instigated by indigenous Fijians aggrieved over unsettled compensation claims for tourist development, airport, dam site, and plantation acquisitions.

Chaudhry's role was a fifth factor. From a trade union background, he entered office determined to rectify Fiji's worsening social disparities. As a man in a hurry, and advancing what he believed was a mandate for comprehensive change, Fiji's first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister brushed aside public scrutiny. Criticism magnified over his aloofness, arrogance towards the news media, and impatience with indigenous consensus formation processes involving chiefs and the National Land Trust Board. In return, some local news media outlets conducted personal vendettas against the Prime Minister, not least the long established but Murdoch-owned *Fiji Times*.¹⁰ These difficulties accumulated as Chaudhry ignored warnings that his coalition's Fijian Party members were starting to align with opponents. Rumours circulated that Chaudhry's hold as Prime Minister faced growing challenge within the Labour Party (Dobell, 176).

Taukei figures such as Apisai Tora exploited these conditions, promising indigenous economic primacy and playing upon the public's growing discontent with Chaudhry's style of administration.¹¹ Tora was embittered over Chaudhry's rejecting a deal that would have made a Fijian the Prime Minister (Henderson, 16). From early April 2000, the *taukei* movement escalated public protests and called on President Mara to dismiss the Chaudhry government. Petitions included demands to reverse a mahogany exploitation deal that disadvantaged Speight through an outcome that favoured British ahead of American interests. This left Speight well primed to detonate his coup, crucially assisted by former SAS officer Ilisoni Ligairi using arms stolen by sympathisers in the Meridian counter-revolutionary warfare unit. Support also emerged from civilians fearful over facing a planned corruption commission investigation.¹²

Externally, Fiji suffered economic dislocation through loss of existing trade concessions, sports boycotts, diplomatic isolation, international union bans, disruptions to trade and services, and potential Commonwealth expulsion. Given Fiji's role as a hub of intergovernmental activity, the crisis threatened the regional co-operation needed to improve sustainable resource management, Pacific Islands Forum economic co-ordination,

10 For one experienced local observer and former STV member, Jone Dakuvulu, *The Fiji Times* 'was blatantly antagonistic to the (Chaudhry)government and focused on highlighting allegations of corruption, nepotism and sexual indiscretions'. Cited By David Robie, 'Fiji Politics is personal in Small States', *Pasifika Nuis*, 17 December 2000, (<http://www.pl.net>).

11 From the term *taukei* meaning indigenous Fijian. For background on this movement, see Robertson (2000).

12 Sydney Morning Herald, June 28 2000.

and fishing treaty formulation. Some of these functions, it was suggested, could re-locate from Suva to Samoa.

Fiji also risked loss of generous sugar, tuna, and garment export subsidies and benefits offered under existing access arrangements to the European Union market. Export earnings from sugar production promised recuperation, but garment manufacturing, tourism and aviation faced longer-term damage. Unemployment, crime and prostitution increased. Development assistance from Australia (A\$21 million a year) and other sources faced critical review and possible reductions, while the Suva-based University of the South Pacific's future was clouded by staff departures.

VI THE COUP EPISODES COMPARED

Points of possible comparison previously identified included the play of chance, underlying structural determinants, and factors affecting the control of force. One way to address these questions is to ask - advantages of hindsight apart - whether conditions in each instance would have facilitated an emergence of substitute Rabukas or Speights. Certainly random elements did play a role, but they followed rather than preceded each coup episode. In both cases, for example, the military insisted that uncertainty and insecurity justified resort to extra-constitutional rule, even though these claims contained an element of the self-fulfilling. However, what of the claim that under Bavadra or Chaudhry's rule, configurations willing to resort to force would eventually have formed and then acted?

One response is that they would have done so long as the gap between performance and identity politics continued to widen. Collier (1998) identifies performance politics as a system that facilitates economic growth, social capital formation, and community co-operation. Voters punish poor performers and re-elect those delivering good performance. Identity politics, by contrast, reinforces differences limiting social capital formation and public co-operation. Loyalty is maintained irrespective of economic performance. Governments afford higher priority to delivering patronage than supplying services to the median voter. Kin groups offer networks of reciprocal obligation, a primary function devised for societal insurance needs. Transposed into the modern economy these principles of reciprocal obligation persist, but adapt and even flourish, regardless of their destabilising public organisations designed to improve performance by rewarding merit. In time, strain accumulates so that coup-makers can tap concerns 'about the legitimacy of the existing system of governance, whether from self-serving or sincere motives' (Fry, 296).

Fiji's coups comprised attempts to entrench identity at the expense of performance politics. Yet following 1987, and especially the 1990 Constitution, a reassertion of identity politics failed to alleviate, and probably aggravated, the intra-Fijian tensions exploited by Speight and his supporters. The 'ethnic' agenda diverted attention from recurring,

unrelieved social and economic problems afflicting the poor of all communities. Needed solutions stayed both distant and complex (Ghai, 5). Nowhere was this more evident than over land: by 2000, the tenancy issue had assumed ominous dimensions, thousands of predominantly Indo-Fijian farmers facing displacement under conditions of harassment, violation by intimidation, and physical abuse from indigenous Fijians. Without resolution of the land tenancy issue, Fiji's staple export earner - the sugar industry - faced disintegration in the decade ahead.

Fiji's failure to deal with its problems after 1987 prompted international pressure demanding a return to civilian rule in 2000, when the country was warned that a breakdown of constitutional rule would lead to economic decay and social dislocation. Between 1987 and 2000, international non-governmental human rights activity intensified in the South Pacific. The 1991 Commonwealth Harare Declaration established benchmark principles stipulating Commonwealth member adherence to universal human rights, and abhorrence of racial discrimination. Governments of the Commonwealth and the organisation's senior officials regularly reiterated those principles. A human rights delegation, sponsored by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, visited Fiji in August and September 2000 and met with a range of civil society groups. After local consultations, it concluded that the military-backed interim administration lacked public support.

The Commonwealth's Harare principles influenced formulation of the Pacific Islands Forum Bitekawa Declaration of 2000. While 'recognizing the importance of respecting and protecting indigenous rights and cultural values, traditions and customs', this upheld universal human rights principles. More specifically, and in contrast to Forum reluctance to engage over Fiji's internal political situation in 1987, the Bitekawa Declaration offered a roadmap.¹³ This would assist the Forum in constructively addressing 'difficult and sensitive issues including underlying causes of tensions and conflict (ethnicity, socio-economic disparities, and lack of good governance, land disputes and erosion of cultural values)'.¹⁴ This included possible assistance through statements of joint position, creation of a ministerial action group, fact finding eminent persons or third party mediation, and the possibility of considering other, unspecified measures in the event of a domestic crisis persisting.

13 The Forum in 1987 did not allow its reluctance to discuss Fiji from raising internal developments in New Caledonia and *apartheid* in South Africa. Eighteenth South Pacific Forum, 29-30 May 1987, Draft Summary Record, Agenda Item 6 (New Caledonia); item 4 (17) Commonwealth and South Africa.

14 Bikitawa Declaration 31st Pacific Islands Forum, Bikitawa, Republic of Kiribati, October 28 2000.

Internally, both coups exposed solid outcrops of chiefly opposition to constitutional, political and legal arrangements not meeting their conceptions of indigenous paramountcy. Former High court Judge Madraiwiwi maintained that here 'you're talking about a group of men, mostly in their 50s and 60s, who have a particular idea of the world, in which the place of Fiji is central. That idea of the indigenous Fijian, and his identity, comes before everything else. Everything, whether it be politics, the law, religion ... is subject to that view'.¹⁵

Significantly, the coup episode of 2000 sustained far worse damage than its predecessors to Fiji's economy, property, fabric of social trust, and international image. It witnessed serious resort to criminality as gangs opportunistically exploited weak and inconsistent policing to loot, pillage and destroy. More pronounced, too, was a self-serving resort to smugness, insularity and anti-white prejudice displayed by powerholders. This was insinuated though numerous claims by the interim regime's publicist, Ratu Inoke Kuboabola, about vulnerable Fiji wanting to do no more than mind its own business, and suffering invidious isolation from the bullying tactics of Australian and New Zealand governments.

VII CONCLUSIONS

Comparing Fiji's coups raises the question of whether these episodes have indelibly ethnicised Fiji's politics by precluding a return to democratic, constitutional rule. What might we conclude after considering either side of that question? Two perspectives emerge – a first according priority to the immutability of ethnic determinants, the other affording greater weight to political pragmatism.

From the first perspective, these events undoubtedly witnessed the use and abuse of ethnic identity appeals to maintain privilege and political power. Such appeals justified resource distribution functions either performed by or sheltering indigenous institutions in a modernising economy. Although Fiji had slowly evolved electoral mechanisms designed to facilitate cross-ethnic compromises, the ideology of indigenous paramountcy retained its potency. Here the economic policies and recruitment practices of colonial governments created ethnic inequalities, consequential conflicts 'aggravated by the failure of the foreign-dominated export economies to increase income-earning opportunities by expanding and diversifying commercial and industrial enterprise. These circumstances ensured that competition to control the state in order to control the allocation of resources would become all the more intense when colonial rule ended' (Norton, 1981: 313).

15 Comments made when interviewed by Teuila Tualaulelei, 'Deep Cracks disfigure troubled Fiji', *The New Zealand Herald Online*, December 20, 2000.

This, then, was the prism through which the coup events were planned, rationalised and interpreted. These events gave space for ethnic entrepreneurs, individuals running different personal agendas that bid up the differences and prejudices within and between the major communities. *Taukei* movement activities and variants emerged as handmaidens and beneficiaries for the coup conspiracies and their outcomes. Once at large, such ethnic populism threatened the chiefly structure's constituency among the rank and file of indigenous Fijians. Whatever his eventual legacy, there is no doubting the substantial discrediting that Speight's rallying of the marginalised sustained to indigenous authority structures.

Indigenous primordial sentiment was further consolidated by the conflation of ethnicity with indigeneity. This feature was more marked in 2000 than in 1987. Indigeneity asserts that 'First Peoples occupy an encapsulated ("entrapped") status as dispossessed subjects of a larger political entity' (Fleras, 191). Moreover, when 'applied to the principle of indigeneity, ethno-politics encompasses that constellation of belief and behaviour that openly challenges the paramount authority of the sovereign state, while reasserting the legitimacy of indigeneity as the preferred source of popular consent and of entitlement' (Fleras, 192). This discourse offered advantages to leaderships keen to blame current predicaments upon forces originating offshore. The internationalisation of indigenous rights issues also gave Fiji's autochthonous power systems an opportunity to claim the country's internal situation warranted 'special understanding' from the international community. Although not exonerating resort to force, this denounced existing constitutional systems as foreign imports ill-designed for local conditions. Ethno-politics manipulating indigeneity upheld unaccountable tribal hierarchies, resource allocation practices flouting the law, and discrimination against women. Yet the chiefs had no monopoly over indigeneity's appeals, a force that has grown as it has decentralised.

Overall, the first perspective sees any attempted resolution of Fiji's upheavals heavily limited under conditions of presumed ethnic hegemony. Authority systems in the indigenous community have insisted upon entrenching existing privileges, denying democratic forms potentially threatening those interests. Uneasy civilian control of the military and evident lack of contrition regarding human rights violations impedes relief from the mistrust bred by violence and upheaval.

After the coup crisis of 2000, Fiji illustrated the conditions that those analysing communal conflict regard as destructive: increasing political, economic and status inequalities; deteriorating economic conditions; lessening of inter-communal interaction and communication; and the dissolution of shared institutions and identities (Kriesberg, 43). Unlike El Salvador or South Africa, Fiji has no Truth Commission.

What, then, of the alternative perspective? This sees the advantages of pragmatic accommodation intensifying as the costs of upheaval continue rising. Entering 2001, the

damage caused by declining tourist, employment, and capital formation returns was more than evident. Public resort to force and dislocated law enforcement had taken their toll, emulated by a growth of criminality with violence. This threatened the wealth generating Indo-Fijian community physically and psychologically, and reinforced existing, historically configured social divisions and boundaries. Lal believed it would take a generation to heal the scars of 2000 – 'reflected in the images of looting and violence on the streets of Suva, the fleeing of terrorised Indo-Fijians from parts of the Rewa delta to safe havens in West Viti Levu, the destruction of schools and desecration of places of worship, the unruly Fijian mob roaming the neighbourhoods around the parliamentary complex'.¹⁶

Furthermore, the Fiji economy's growing internationalisation had exposed it to external demands seeking stronger accountability of local financial, corporate and land management systems. Although the derailing of constitutional government in 1987 and its hesitant recuperation saw accountability stagnate within the indigenous community, external investment and development assistance indicated that they would not return without it.

International exposure may have consolidated the country's ethnic compartmentalisation, or entrenched chiefly determination to withstand advancement of equal electoral representation. However, in supporting Bavadra and then Chaudhry, the poorer, urban-based Fijians displayed a willingness to use the ballot to unshackle deference to established tribal hierarchies. That determination will not abate, sense suggesting that it seek expression through a fair electoral system, not recourse to rioting in the streets.

Finally but not least, it warrants recall that, following the coups of 1987, Fiji did eventually determine upon the path of systematic constitutional refurbishment. In the immediate aftermath of Rabuka's coups, few would have forecast that a decade later Fiji would have a constitution marrying essential democratic principles with a defence of indigenous interests. That constitution was built from assumptions that sustained peace in divided societies requires a tolerance of ethnic differences, strong legal protections for group and individual rights, and political institutions able to encourage bargaining and inclusive coalitions. It is difficult to see this emerging in Fiji outside a democratic political system which, despite injury, retains a foothold for the years ahead.

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