

PAC 13C

# Coups in Fiji

## Seesawing Democratic Multiracialism and Ethno-nationalist Extremism *DEVFORUM, 2*

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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.

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Photo: Eva Lawrence

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!

Page 26

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

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 Australian 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

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 land-owners (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 firebrand 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 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

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.*).