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## Redux: The season for coups

The 1997 Constitution could have presented Fiji with the opportunity to determine for itself a very different future. Indeed, Sitiveni Rabuka introduced it by declaring that ‘It is not enough that we should accept our collective presence in Fiji as simply one of coexistence. We should accept each other as belonging together as one people and one nation’.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the level of rhetoric, however, little changed. Fiji’s citizens did indeed gain a new national name; they were to be known as Fiji Islanders after the new name for the country. The term ‘islander’ held a different meaning for many people on Viti Levu (i.e. non-mainlanders) and was not widely accepted. Others believed its sole purpose was to sidestep the reality that one constructed ethnicity – Fijians – still held for itself the name of the country. Hence Fiji remained ‘a nation of separate identities’, sociologist Satendra Prasad argued, its political structures and institutions emphasising and feeding off ‘the separateness of those identities’.<sup>2</sup>

The Constitution, however, did restore some measure of equality to the country’s IndoFijians, perhaps the only sign of change to emerge from Fiji’s long post-coup decade. There were now 25 open seats in which candidates and voters were not demarcated along ethnic lines. Unfortunately, these seats represented only 35 per cent of the total lower house seats available compared with 48 per cent before 1987, with the

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1 *Fiji Times*, 24 June 1997.

2 S Prasad, ‘Civic challenges to Fiji’s democracy and the CCF’s agenda for the next decade’, in Arlene Griffen (ed.), *With Heart and Nerve and Sinew: Postcoup Writing from Fiji*. Suva: Christmas Club, 1997, p. 356.

majority still strictly divided along communal lines (23 Fijian, 19 Indian, one Rotuman and three General Electors). In addition, the political parties that contested the May 1999 election remained stubbornly divided along communal lines and the size of electorates perpetuated longstanding patterns of inequality. Fijian communal electorates held on average nearly 8,500 voters, IndoFijian electorates 10,500, and general electorates 4,600. Within the Fijian and IndoFijian electorates there were also huge variations. Urban Fijians, for example, comprised some 45 per cent of all Fijians in 1999, but received only 26 per cent of Fijian seats. Provincially based open seats were more evenly distributed but, with an average 17,500 voters, they vastly exceeded the size of communal seats.<sup>3</sup> Fiji's revised democracy still did not enable votes of equal value.

This should not have surprised; Rabuka never intended Fiji's return to multiracialism to be revolutionary. He wanted only for his proposed alliance with the National Federation Party (NFP) to demonstrate to all Fiji Islanders a transformed polity and thereby restore the Fijian *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT) as the country's natural rulers in the 1999 general election. But many Fijians did regard the Constitution as revolutionary. Rabuka had dramatically overturned one of the important goals of his 1987 coups, namely the primacy of Fijian communalism, and they abandoned his party in droves. Sixty-two per cent of Fijians voted instead for Fijian minor parties like the *Veitokani ni Leweni Vanua Vakaristo* Party (VLV), Party of National Unity (PANU), the Fijian Association Party (FAP) and Butadroka's reformed Nationalist Vanua Tako Lavo Party (NVTLP), some of which, like the VLV and the NVTLP, opposed the new Constitution and power sharing, and called for the reinstatement of Fijian paramountcy.

The Constitution also introduced a new way to record people's voting intentions. Voters were told that preferential voting would encourage parties to cooperate before elections. The SVT's alliance with the NFP signalled such cooperation and so, too, did the Fiji Labour Party's (FLP) coalition with PANU. But preferential voting also introduced distortions. Voters had two choices. They could either vote for a party's choice of candidates (above the line) or independently select their own preferences (below the line). The second option presented unfamiliar difficulties. The long list of candidates for each electorate so confused

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3 C Walsh, *Fiji*, 2006, pp. 360–63.

many voters that nearly 9 per cent of all votes in the 1999 election were invalid. Additionally, because most voters chose the simpler above-the-line voting option and accepted the preference deals that parties had worked out, outcomes were heavily dependent on how well parties had thought through the implications of their preference allocations. Many had not; some minor Fijian parties were so estranged from the SVT that they put Rabuka's party last, fragmenting the Fijian vote and denying the SVT its goal of representing and maintaining Fijian unity. The FLP more strategically swapped preferences to exclude its rivals, privileging the nationalists and VLV ahead of the SVT and especially the NFP, which it still regarded as its chief rival for the IndoFijian vote.

Had results been determined by proportional representation, a new era might well have come into being. Instead preferential voting condemned the SVT to only eight seats instead of 15, and the NFP to the indignity of losing all its seats instead of gaining 10. This cost Fiji the opportunity to develop a meaningful and strong multi-ethnic Opposition. Instead Labour – which focused its campaign on cost-of-living issues rather than constitutional nirvana – won the election with 37 seats. Proportional representation would have awarded it only 24 seats. The parties with which it formed a People's Coalition similarly benefited from the distortions wrought by preferential voting. PANU won four seats instead of two and the FAP 11 instead of seven, although the VLV picked up three when it could have gained seven under a more representative system of voting.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, the persistence of post-1990 intra-communal rivalries, not electoral flaws, now most impacted on Fiji. Four days after the elections, Mahendra Chaudhry told Radio Navtarang talkback listeners that 'the NFP was the biggest enemy of the FLP and it was only fair that enemies be treated with contempt'.<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, the new constitutional era quickly became mired in the same destructive politics that had doomed Fiji's postcolonial development. Within seven years, it would be gone, swept away by yet another military intervention, and this time Rabuka would be little more than an ineffectual bystander.

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4 Walsh, *Fiji*, 2006, p. 362.

5 *Fiji Times*, 11 April 2008.

## Wheels within wheels

Constitutionally, the SVT had the right to cabinet places, as it passed the 10 per cent threshold for power sharing. But Fiji's political parties were in no mood to be conciliatory, especially Rabuka's SVT, whose share of the Fijian vote had collapsed from its high of 66 per cent in 1992 to 34 per cent in 1999, leaving it with only eight seats in the 71-seat parliament. Fijians still dominated the legislature but were now members of rival parties, many of whom joined the People's Coalition government as a demonstration of their opposition to the SVT. Never in Fiji's postcolonial history had an establishment party been so devastated in an election.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the SVT wanted more than just its three constitutionally guaranteed cabinet seats; it demanded four specific posts. Chaudhry refused to negotiate and denied the SVT any role in cabinet. It proved a costly mistake. Including the SVT within government might have calmed the political climate and strengthened support for the new Constitution. Instead Chaudhry encouraged his opponents to resurrect the very politics of ethnicity that Labour had long sought to overcome. Nor did Rabuka challenge his decision. Instead he declared his party the official opposition and retired from politics to chair the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC).<sup>7</sup>

His successor, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, one of the founders of the Taukei Movement in 1987, reportedly told the SVT's management board that 'people must be prepared to shed blood and die to get rid of the Chaudhry government'.<sup>8</sup> His strategy to woo disaffected members of rival Fijian parties into a grand alliance proved, however, to be less confronting. At first it seemed to have much going for it. Although PANU appeared a natural ally for the Labour Party given that members of both had a long association with western Fiji and its struggle against marginalisation orchestrated by eastern chiefs, PANU's leader, Apisai Tora, lost his seat because Labour ran a candidate against him and later denied him a seat in the Senate. Similarly, the VLV and FAP's rationale for cooperation with Labour evaporated with Rabuka's departure from the political scene.

6 This section draws on the chapter 'Mayhem and mutiny' in R Robertson & W Sutherland, *Government by the Gun: The Unfinished Business of Fiji's 2000 Coup* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 2001, pp. 1–49).

7 Alternatively known as the Bose Levu Vakaturaga or BLV.

8 Jone Dakuvula statement, [www.fijihosting.com/pcgov/docs\\_o/jd\\_defending\\_speight.htm](http://www.fijihosting.com/pcgov/docs_o/jd_defending_speight.htm), 2 November 2000.

Within the FAP, this change soon saw members of the eastern Tailevu province seeking control of the party from Adi Kuini Vuikaba, both the widow of Labour's 1987 Prime Minister, Timoci Bavadra, and a former Labour leader. But the grand coalition was not to be. The VLV wanted the SVT to admit its past mistakes, particularly its failure to declare Fiji a Christian state and retain the Sunday ban.<sup>9</sup> And the FAP dissidents procrastinated. Hence the SVT's political manoeuvring came to nought. Instead Labour's incompetence drove opposition to assume new forms outside the political arena.

Chaudhry was much to blame for this. From the very beginning of his prime ministership he fell out with the media, especially the major English daily, the *Fiji Times*, whose expatriate editor he tried to deny a work permit. When the newspaper responded with stories critical of government policies, Chaudhry overreacted and threatened to license the media into reporting more favourably. Despite having relished anti-government press during its years in opposition, Labour seemed suddenly to have morphed into the very authoritarian master it had long railed against. As one commentator later noted, Chaudhry's behaviour diverted public attention from Labour's laudable attempts to reduce the cost of living: 'Every condescending smirk in response to even perfectly reasonable questions were duly recorded and broadcast on the 6pm [television] news.'<sup>10</sup> It did not help that he also made questionable appointments; his son became his personal secretary and an inexperienced politician his information deputy. Neither had the skills nor the temperament to woo the media, and both became issues of controversy themselves.

Nor did it not help that Labour had inherited a declining economy, with 30 per cent of Fiji's people living in poverty, 20 per cent of its children malnourished, and cities congested with over 50,000 squatters.<sup>11</sup> Labour wanted to create a more caring state, to introduce a social wage with improved social services and infrastructure, and to halt the process of privatisation begun after the 1987 coups. It also wished to reverse the decline in rural infrastructure, to improve roads and upgrade educational facilities for all Fiji's citizens. Thirteen years after Bavadra, it still officially regarded itself as a multiracial party. Above all, it saw itself as a people's

9 *Review*, February 2000, p. 14.

10 Nesian, 'The forces coalesce', *Croz Walsh's Blog – Fiji the Way it Was and Can Be*, crosbiew.blogspot.com.au, 31 January 2010. The website is operated by Crosbie Walsh, a former professor of Development Studies at the University of the South Pacific.

11 *Review*, December 1999, p. 28.

party, not a party for elites. And it was the first opposition party to have survived beyond the formation of government. Hence its belief that criticism, particularly from the press, so early within its term of office was misplaced.

Nonetheless, Labour's critics believed it 'tackled too many well entrenched interests too quickly'.<sup>12</sup> Its attack on privatisation upset Fijian corporate interests who regarded it as an important avenue for Fijianisation. Its welfare measures were similarly received. Reducing interest rates from 11 per cent to 6 per cent for low-income homebuyers financially compromised the Housing Authority. Other commentators wished for more debate, believing that the removal of consumption tax (VAT) from medicine and food, instead of introducing specifically targeted poverty-reduction programs, advantaged the well off more than the poor. They saw a government bulldozing its way ahead rather than seeking to build consensus.

Indeed, many changes did needlessly engender resentment. Labour's attack on expatriates in the name of localisation challenged vested foreign interests for little gain. Similarly flawed was its axing of Fiji's Intelligence Service and its refusal to renew Police Commissioner Isikia Savua's contract beyond two years. Decisions about the mahogany industry also created resentments. At stake were some 52,000 hectares of rare plantation mahogany – variously valued at between \$136 million and \$500 million. Unlike the less valuable, fire-prone and poorer quality pine forests in western and northern Fiji, these high-quality stands lay in Viti Levu's damp central and eastern provinces of Tailevu, Namosi and Naitisiri. Like the Alliance Party in its dealings with western landowners over pine 20 years before, Labour antagonised their chiefs by not consulting with them on a preferred partner for mahogany milling. More dangerously it upset a plan by Fijian businessmen to profit from their links with one processing tenderer. The controversies engendered by these issues, together with allegations about the misuse of ministerial entitlements and the treatment of some Fijians in the public service, began to take their toll politically. Labour had clear goals but it found communicating them

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12 Rowan Callick, 'No ready way out of Speight's big hole', *Australian Financial Review*, 24 July 2000.

difficult and it did poorly in municipal elections in late 1999. 'If we are not careful with the little things we're doing,' conceded Deputy Prime Minister Tupeni Baba, 'it will blow up in our faces.'<sup>13</sup>

In the end, the land issue most damaged the Coalition in the eyes of its opponents. Rabuka's government had failed to resolve what would happen when some 40 per cent of the country's farm leases began expiring (one third of these before 2005). Many Fijian landowners wanted their land back. They had expanding families to accommodate or they wanted to farm themselves. Some believed that they did not benefit sufficiently from leasing land to warrant tying themselves to a new round of 30-year leases. If leases were to continue, they wanted them based on the market value of the land rather than its unimproved value and the lease period reduced. Neither response addressed the issue of land degradation, which was encouraged by short-term leases, nor the difficulties that Fijians faced obtaining loans for farm development.

But land always involved more than landowner demands. It also involved thousands of tenant farmers, most of them IndoFijians, who might at any time find themselves landless and unemployed. And it involved Fiji's collective economic welfare. Whatever happened to leases, Fiji had to ensure that it continued to earn vital foreign exchange from the productive use of its land. Any government would find these issues difficult to resolve. For this reason, President Kamisese Mara – while endorsing Labour's manifesto as good for Fijians – warned Chaudhry to give himself at least two years to win the confidence of Fijians before tackling the thorny issue of land.<sup>14</sup>

Instead, Labour immediately proposed extending existing 30-year farm leases and establishing a land use commission with a broad brief to address, among other things, the poor state of rural infrastructure. The Native Land Trust Board (NLTB), which administered all leased Fijian land, bitterly objected to losing its monopoly. Its officials began a campaign at provincial and village levels to frustrate the government's goals. It portrayed the Land Use Commission as 'a Trojan horse for a land grab and for emasculating the NLTB' and demanded that the NLTB be privatised to remove it from government interference.<sup>15</sup> Labour's failure to

13 *Fiji Times*, 20 December 1999.

14 *fjilive*, 30 April 2001.

15 Dakuvula, [pcgovt.org.fj](http://pcgovt.org.fj), accessed 2 November 2000; *Fiji Times*, 2 November 2000, p. 1.

build consensus now weakened its belated efforts to depoliticise the issue. The NLTB's counter strategy amounted to nothing less than a 'scorched earth campaign against Chaudhry'.<sup>16</sup> It did not help that Labour's public relations efforts focused almost exclusively on an English print media that it simultaneously argued was part of an orchestrated destabilisation campaign.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately for the Coalition, the land issue exploded at the very moment it introduced constitutional amendments, most of which derived from changes that the SVT had failed to enact in 1998. This convergence handed the SVT a new weapon to destroy the Coalition – a civil disobedience campaign against Labour's attempts to weaken Fijian institutions by mounting what it purported to be an Indian takeover.<sup>18</sup>

Pressure on the Coalition now assumed new forms.<sup>19</sup> In April 2000, Tora announced the resurrection of the Taukei Movement to fight against the Coalition's land schemes and reforms. Its first rally in Lautoka on 20 April drew few protestors but, in Suva eight days later, 8,000 supporters turned out. This time a wider number of Fijian parties helped in the organisation, including a new Indigenous Foundation headed by FAP politician Ratu Timoci Silatolu. The development alarmed Tora's brother-in-law, Savua. The government should listen to the grievances of the Taukei Movement, he warned. The police may not be able to cope with more protest. Chaudhry dismissed his concerns and told him not to interfere in politics.

The sudden escalation in tension, together with the re-emergence of the Taukei Movement, sent shock waves through Fiji. Both the Australian High Commissioner and the US ambassador urged Chaudhry to act

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16 Dakuvula believed that the NLTB had no interest in resettling evicted farmers or ensuring that farming continued. Its objective was simply to return land to Fijians regardless of the cost (Dakuvula, 'More land gossip from the grassroots', *Citizens' Constitutional Forum*, ccf.org.fj, 2 May 2001). Some Coalition members later alleged that the NLTB hatched the coup in conjunction with Fijian Holdings Ltd, one of whose senior executives planned to be its public face (pcgovt.org.fj, accessed 18 May 2000).

17 Minister for National Planning, Ganesh Chand quoted, *Fiji Times*, 21 December 1999, p. 3.

18 Dakuvula, pcgovt.org.fj, accessed 2 November 2000.

19 Behind the scenes, this might always have been the case. Commodore Bainimarama, the new RFMF Commander, claimed the old nationalist – Sakeasi Butadroka – demanded on the day after Labour assumed government that he launch a coup. Coup plotter Maciu Navakasuasua claimed that at the same time two Fijian businessmen, one heavily involved in the 1987 coups, and some Fijian politicians drew up a plan to shut down the Lami power station and use a mob to force a military intervention led by Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini. Fiji's future deputy prosecutor, Peter Ridgway, argued that plans had been drawn up for a coup in April 2000 based on a similar scenario of a breakdown in law and order. They did not go ahead because the plotters were unable to access the explosives and weapons required (Graham Davis, 'Fiji – democracy by the gun', *Sunday*, 7 May 2006, Nine Network; *Fiji Times*, 19 February 2003, and *Fiji Sun*, 12 January 2006).

cautiously. So, too, did many Labour sympathisers. It made more sense to create an atmosphere of stability and to address issues such as poverty and education rather than inflame ethnic tensions.<sup>20</sup>

But Chaudhry ploughed on regardless and his second deputy, Vuikaba, came to his defence. ‘Decisions of the nation’s leaders should be respected,’ she argued: ‘Leaders should be left to implement what they thought was right.’<sup>21</sup> This was not what many less autocratically inclined Labour members wished to hear. David Pickering, Deputy Leader of the Opposition, suggested an alternative solution: ‘replace Chaudhry with his deputy [Baba] and do the whole country a favour’.<sup>22</sup> Some members of the Coalition came to the same conclusion. They were alarmed at Chaudhry’s casual disregard of the dangers facing his government. When the NVLT, now led by the political outsider Iliesa Duvuloco, announced a rally in Suva on 19 May to petition the President to dismiss the Labour government, abrogate the Constitution and return all freehold land to Fijian ownership,<sup>23</sup> Home Affairs Minister Joji Uluinakauvadra promptly proclaimed a ban on further protest marches. Unfortunately Chaudhry overruled him, prompting Coalition dissidents to escalate their plans for his removal.<sup>24</sup>

Kubuabola also finalised an end game. The SVT plotted a motion of no confidence with FAP dissidents Silatolu and Ratu Tu’uakitau Cakanautu, the man tipped to replace Vuikaba as leader of the FAP. Whether an attempt to regenerate a Grand Fijian Alliance or, more simply, to prompt Coalition dissidents to move rapidly towards their goal, the SVT’s strategy heightened a growing sense of crisis. Kubuabola later insisted that he had no interest ‘in overthrowing a government that was

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20 See comments of Dr Anirudh Singh (*Fiji Sun*, 4 May 2000), constitutional lawyer Yash Ghai on the Social Justice and Affirmative Action Bill, and journalist Tamarisi Digitaki (‘Dangerous tinkering’, *Review*, April 2000, p. 17).

21 *Fiji Times*, 10 February 2000.

22 *Fiji Times*, 4 May 2000.

23 The petition also called for the country’s official name ‘Fiji Islands’ to revert to Fiji (*Fiji Times*, 1 February 2003).

24 Chaudhry would be permitted to celebrate one year in office until 20 May but would be replaced by Deputy Prime Minister Tupeni Baba in the following week. This theory was forwarded by FAP’s Viliame Volavola, the Coalition’s Minister for Urban Development and Housing (*Fiji Times*, 23 May 2000) and Australian High Commissioner Sue Boyd (*New Zealand Herald Online*, 21 August 2000). The later interim prime minister, Lai Qarase, also claimed to know of ‘rumblings within the Coalition’ and thought that a planned vote of no confidence had a good chance of succeeding (*Review*, August 2000, p. 11). Other Labour Party officials denied the rumour (*Fiji Times*, 23 August 2000, p. 3). Chaudhry approved the march on 26 April 2000.

self-destructing,<sup>25</sup> but it was clear that, by mid-May, there were many overlapping conspiracies afoot, so many in fact that it became difficult to distinguish them. Within these kava-infused wheels within wheels, coup whispers gained volume.

Indeed, FAP research officer Inoke Sikivou became so alarmed at what he heard that he started holding regular meetings with Special Branch officers.<sup>26</sup> Third Battalion (3FIR) Commanding Officer Lt Col Viliame Seruvakula, who had sent intelligence operatives into the field after the elections, began regular briefings on the political situation with military HQ in late 1999. By May 2000 intelligence reports suggested an imminent coup, but Seruvakula lacked firm details and names, and sometimes suspected he was deliberately being fed false information.<sup>27</sup> Undoubtedly the patchwork of ad hoc and loosely connected conspiracies and their fluid membership also made detection difficult. Yet, if Fiji's military leaders were awake to the possibility of political disruption, who among them took the lead? Not military commander Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama who, on the eve of his departure on 12 May to a UN peacekeeping conference in Oslo, appeared relaxed about possible threats. 'Well, you guys had better be prepared,' he warned his officers.<sup>28</sup> But the military were anything but prepared. In this they were not alone.

25 *Review*, June 2000, p. 11.

26 Inoke Sikivou, interview, *RFMF Board of Inquiry Report into the Involvement of the First Meridian Squadron in the Illegal Takeover of Parliament on 19 May 2000 and the Subsequent Holding of Hostages until 13 July 2000 (BoI)*, 24 October 2000, p. T654. The Board of Inquiry was held in the months immediately prior to the November mutiny, but its report never became public. Subsequently, 3FIR Commander Tevita Mara leaked the report after he fell out with Bainimarama and fled to Tonga in 2010. He alleged that Bainimarama refused to speak to the board and ordered all copies of its report destroyed. The report is posted on his web site at [www.truthforfiji.com/uploads/8/4/2/3/8423704/1st\\_meridian\\_report\\_rfmf\\_opt2.pdf](http://www.truthforfiji.com/uploads/8/4/2/3/8423704/1st_meridian_report_rfmf_opt2.pdf). It is divided into two parts, each numbered separately. To identify the separate sections referred to here, page references for the findings are preceded with an F, Transcripts of interviews with a T.

27 *BoI*, pp. T938–T939.

28 *BoI*, p. T944; testimony of Lt Col Viliame Seruvakula. Ratu Tevita Mara later alleged that Bainimarama knew about the coup but took no steps. The President had questioned the wisdom of departing Fiji at such an unsettled time, but Bainimarama insisted in order to distance himself from it ('Fiji's dictator Frank Bainimarama's truth revealed', [www.truthforfiji.com/uploads/8/4/2/3/8423704/fijis\\_dictator\\_frank\\_bainimarama\\_revealed.pdf](http://www.truthforfiji.com/uploads/8/4/2/3/8423704/fijis_dictator_frank_bainimarama_revealed.pdf), 17 December 2011, p. 3). Tarakinikini made a similar claim in an affidavit in 2005 (*Fiji Times*, 16 April 2005). These views are based solely on the 'convenience' of his absence or on his role as commander (he was responsible; he must have known). Seruvakula, however, who claimed that Rabuka seemed at the time to be the one most aligned with Ligairi, harboured no such suspicions about Bainimarama. It is unlikely that he would have protected Bainimarama from the rebels on his return to Fiji if he believed Bainimarama was in cahoots with them (*BoI*, pp. T939–940). Later in 2005 he claimed that the colonels Jone Baledrokadroka and Tarakinikini were among the senior officers behind the coup (*Fiji Times*, 2 March 2005).

## Fracturing the postcolonial state

In fact the key to the events that unfolded lay very much with the military, and demonstrated the dangers inherent in the highly bureaucratic and centralised colonial-heritage state that Mara and later Rabuka had both done so much to construct but could do little to prevent unravelling. In the end both would suffer personally as a result.

Indeed, the attempted coup, which took place on Friday 19 May 2000, drew heavily on Rabuka's first coup for inspiration. But this copycat coup had two striking features that set it apart: first, it was poorly planned and, second, it stunned Fiji's main ruling institutions, which responded in confused ways.

Undoubtedly, the initial 'coup de farce' would have collapsed but for the later improvisations of two very important recruits, former British Special Air Service (SAS) Warrant Officer Ilisoni Ligairi, and the man who unintentionally became the public face of the coup attempt, George Speight.

Ligairi joined the British Army in the early 1960s and served in Ireland, Saudi Arabia, Kenya and Oman as a member of the SAS. He retired to Fiji in 1984 where, some three years later, he served as Rabuka's security advisor before becoming founding Commander of a 70-man antiterrorist Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit (CRWU)<sup>29</sup> that Rabuka established as a palace guard to protect his 1987 coups. It was a spectacular promotion for a man who had only ever been a non-commissioned officer and had never received officer training.

Regarded as a specialist elite, nearly half the CRWU's personnel were drawn from Ligairi's (and Rabuka's) Vanua Levu, a reflection of its origins following the 1987 re-establishment of Tovata political dominance. It trained apart from the rest of the army and jealously retained its guardianship ethos. During the 1990s it allegedly engaged in covert operations, spying on politicians such as Vuikaba as well as unionists, cane farmers, business people, NGOs and diplomats. It even spied on NZ military forces engaged in joint exercises with the Republic of Fiji

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29 The CRWU was renamed the First Meridian Squadron in 1999 and placed under the command of Lt Penaia Baleinamau. It was later claimed that the CRWU had never been gazetted as a unit within the RFMF; in all probability was an illegal entity (*Fiji Times*, 31 July 2003).

Military Forces (RFMF) in 1996.<sup>30</sup> The 60-year-old Major Ligairi fostered its guardianship role. Every year members of the unit trained on Rabuka's Valavala estate on Vanua Levu, 73 kilometres north of Savusavu and celebrated the 1987 coup anniversary with him. Although the unit underwent changes after Ligairi's retirement in 1997, it possessed no clear organisational structure or standard operational procedures. Intelligence operatives, who rarely trained with the rest of the unit and remained close to Ligairi, dominated its leadership. Ligairi officially answered to the RFMF Commander but, in reality, he headed what amounted to a private army 'with its own agenda'. It was doubtful, the RFMF's subsequent board of inquiry into the events noted, if the Commander was ever privy to any CRWU activity.<sup>31</sup> In all probability, Ligairi and his close intelligence operatives alone planned the simple repeat of Rabuka's May 1987 coup, a task made all the easier when Bainimarama brought Ligairi back at the end of April 2000 as a training advisor to assist the CRWU protect international delegates at the forthcoming African Caribbean Pacific (ACP) conference in Suva.<sup>32</sup> The unit's training officer, Captain Shane Stevens, later told the RFMF's board of inquiry that, had Ligairi not been there, the CRWU would not have launched the coup.<sup>33</sup> The board agreed, but rooted home most of the blame for the coup to the RFMF for allowing one man so much power, especially one it considered so ill-equipped to be a director and planner.<sup>34</sup>

One of the CRWU's intelligence operatives was 36-year-old Sergeant Vilimoni Tikotani. Described to the board of inquiry as arrogant and boastful, 'Commander Bill' Tikotani bragged to journalists soon after the start of the coup of his own role in its planning.<sup>35</sup> Fired up from his visit to Rabuka's estate and the following celebratory *yaqona* (kava) session on Sunday 14 May, he 'saw the opportunity to execute the coup when the

30 These charges were made by the prosecution during the court martial of CRWU soldiers (*Fiji Times*, 30 & 31 July 2003).

31 *Bol*, pp. F37, F47.

32 *Bol*, p. T876; testimony of Lt Col Filipo Tarakinikini. The African Caribbean Pacific (ACP) grouping came into existence at the same time as the ACP–EU Lomé Convention in 1975 and existed to strengthen the voices of otherwise disparate former colonies in their dealings with the European Union (EU). Its Suva conference was charged with producing a successor agreement to the Lomé Convention.

33 *Bol*, p. T1002. Baleinamau also regarded Ligairi's role as pivotal (p. T64).

34 *Bol*, p. F47.

35 Mary-Louise O'Callaghan & Christopher Dore, 'Shadowy figures thicken the plot', *Australian*, 24 May 2000; Dore wrote of Tikotani 'madly waving his cocked handgun around at reporters with a deranged smile on his face, exclaiming his prowess and detailing the planning that went into the coup' ('Just another day in paradise', *Australian*, 27–28 May 2000, p. 24).

nationalist protest march was approved'. As NVTLP President Viliame Savu later acknowledged, 'all attention by the security forces would be on the march while there would hardly be any focus placed in Parliament'.<sup>36</sup> Thus, on his return to Suva the very next day, Tikotani contacted the NVTLP's Peceli Vuniwai and provided the one crucial element that all the various conspiratorial groups lacked, confirmation of military involvement. Said Savu, 'we assigned Navakasuasua and Peceli Vuniwai to work with them' in order to hastily prepare an indigenous fight-back against the policies of the Labour government.<sup>37</sup> Clearly the initiative was not entirely Tikotani's, Ligairi was the special ingredient. 'When they told me this thing is set, I just asked, "Who's this? Who's that?"' Ligairi later disingenuously recalled: 'And then I say, "OK, go ahead"'.<sup>38</sup>

On the Tuesday, Ligairi informed some of his officers to be on standby for the Friday march,<sup>39</sup> in what capacity they were not told. Even the conspirators seemed uncertain. At a meeting in Colo-i-Suva the next day, Tikotani, Vuniwai and Maciu Navakasuasua, a mining-explosives expert and participant in earlier abortive post-election conspiracies to bring down Labour,<sup>40</sup> discussed assassinating Chaudhry but decided, instead, for the event that would coincide with Duvuloco's NLTV march on Friday 19 May. On the 18th, a small cache of weapons was smuggled into parliament and hidden in the FAP photocopy room in preparation. Other weapons were smuggled out also on the Thursday.<sup>41</sup> Selected CRWU soldiers were told they were to protect VIPs if the march turned violent; others were purposely kept in the dark.

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36 This proved all too true. The police, however, were also totally unprepared for the march's descent into rioting. Its Riot Squad, based in Nasinu, could not attend the crisis, allegedly because its bus had been diverted to pick up Police Commissioner Savua's son from Yat-Sen School (*Fiji Sun*, 2 September 2004).

37 *Fiji Sun*, 22 September 2005.

38 'Cyclone George', *ABC*, 15 November 2000, [www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/s198296.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/s198296.htm).

39 *BoI*, p. T449; testimony of Lt Charles Dakuliga.

40 Davis, 'Fiji – democracy by the gun', 2006.

41 *BoI*, pp. T451–2. Dakuliga and others were concerned at the instructions they were given and returned their weapons to camp.

Navakasuasua also drafted the media-savvy Speight to be their spokesperson.<sup>42</sup> The 44-year-old would-be corporate star, son of a senator and closely ally of the businessman and former SVT politician Jim Ah Koy, had spent most of his early life overseas, studying in the United States and working in Australia. His political and business connections in Fiji promised a privileged future after he returned in 1998. In little over a year he became one of Fiji's most senior forestry executives, poised to reap lucrative rewards from processing plantation mahogany. But that world crashed when the Rabuka-led government lost office. His chairmanship of Fiji Hardwood Corporation Ltd and other directorships ended and he was charged with currency offences. In the weeks prior to the coup the frustrated Speight held discussions with Duvuloco and lobbied the FAP to overthrow the Coalition government, even joining in on discussions at its parliamentary rooms.<sup>43</sup> At 8.45 am on Friday 19 May he met up with Tikotani and Ligairi, allegedly for the first time, at the School of Maritime Studies in Laucala Bay.<sup>44</sup> Together they agreed to proceed with their coup that day, although how exactly still remained fluid. According to Savu, the CRWU soldiers wanted to 'shoot to kill' if necessary but were convinced instead to focus on taking hostages.<sup>45</sup> Navakasuasua also alleges that Speight wanted first to seize Mara, but a quick phone call that

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42 Although termed a 'Part-European', George Speight had Fijian family and a Fijian name, Ilikimi Naitini, which he rarely used. Later attempts to shroud Speight's actions in Fijian mythology claimed his surname meant 'the coming of the end' (Jone Luvenitoga, 'The vision', *Sunday Post*, 14 March 2004). But Fiji's rigid racial compartmentalism could work against him. Thus Rabuka's public mocking of Speight's claims to be a champion of indigenous rights: 'I am still waiting for him to make his announcement in Fijian' (*fjilive*, 21 May 2000). However, 'Few thought to question George Speight's origins', according to Madraiwivi, 'or his new found commitment to the indigenous cause'. Instead they were persuaded by the rhetoric and vision that he would restore to them control of their destiny (Madraiwivi, 'Ethnic tensions and the law', 2004).

43 *Bol*, pp. F24; T654, testimony of Sikivou. Allegedly Speight also met with Police Commissioner Savua and Rabuka at JJ's Restaurant in downtown Suva on 18 May (*fjilive*, 19 December 2002). On the same day, Speight and Savu allegedly also met with members of the NLTV, FAP, the Taukei Movement and the SVT, including Jo Nata and Silatolu, in the SVT office as they were discussing the march and finalising the petition. They informed the group of the coup. A further briefing was held at 6 pm (*Fiji Times*, 5 December 2002, 9 & 19 February 2003).

44 Tikotani claims he met Speight for the first time on Wednesday 17 May (Dore, 'Just another day in paradise', *Australian*, 27–28 May 2000, p. 24), although Navakasuasua seems to suggest it may have been the Thursday when they lunched or dined at Duvuloco's home (*Fiji Sun*, 20 & 21 September 2005).

45 *Fiji Sun*, 22 September 2005. Savu claims that Jim Speight wanted to oust Mara at the same time as Chaudhry (*fjilive*, 19 July 2004).

morning to the Presidential Palace soon established Mara's unavailability. His private secretary, Joe Browne, would receive the marchers' petition instead.<sup>46</sup>

Back in the parliamentary complex, other FAP conspirators were busy working the phones. At 8.45 am Sikivou overheard Silatolu claiming that he would be prime minister by the end of the day.<sup>47</sup> Fifteen minutes later at CRWU headquarters, Lt Penaia Baleinamau briefed his unit to prepare for a VIP protection exercise and then left for the School of Maritime Studies. Speight's brother, Jim, an Australian citizen, took additional weapons from the CRWU armoury in his vehicle. By 10.30 am the two Speights, Tikotani, Navakasuasua and three CRWU soldiers were preparing to enter parliament while Ligairi headed for the RFMF camp to rally the troops. All were confident that the military would back them,<sup>48</sup> so confident in fact that the small group was woefully unprepared. They possessed few weapons, inadequate plastic ties to secure their targets, and no food and refreshments. No detailed plan had been drawn up, no rehearsals undertaken, no duty rosters produced and, once the small team burst into parliament and declared their intentions at 10.45 am, they seemed not to know what to do next.<sup>49</sup> They constrained an IndoFijian cleaner mistaking him for Chaudhry's bodyguard, who wisely used the confusion to slip out of parliament with a group of visiting students.<sup>50</sup> Observers witnessed no clear command structure. They believed the unidentified men were waiting for instructions from someone; who that

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46 *Fiji Sun*, 27 October 2005. Browne claims that a member of the NVTLP approached him on the Thursday, requesting a written undertaking that Mara would receive the petition in person (*fjilive*, 3 June 2001). Fiji still technically refers to the former colonial governors' building as Government House. But it has become the Presidential Palace in all but name since 1987.

47 *Bol*, p. T655.

48 *Bol*, pp. F24; T655, testimony of Sikivou; T397, testimony of Speight; Bainimarama statement (*Fiji Sun*, 22 March 2006). Savu argues instead that there were seven CRWU soldiers and five NVTLP members who entered parliament (*Fiji Sun*, 20 September 2005).

49 *Bol*, p. T919, testimony of Adi Kikau.

50 *Bol*, p. F41.

might have been produced much press speculation.<sup>51</sup> Poseci Bune, leader of the VLV and the man who had dashed Speight's corporate aspirations, recalled Speight telling his captives between phone calls (to Duvuloco, then leading his 50,000 strong march to the Presidential Palace)<sup>52</sup> that 'we would be surprised' when the real leader arrived. Finally, at the end of one call, he suddenly turned and said, 'I think he is going to be late. Well, I'll have to take over from here'.<sup>53</sup>

Between them, Ligairi and Speight would recast this hastily planned and clumsy coup into a revolution designed to send shock waves through the very community it purported to serve. Indigenous Fijians, they argued, were weary of marginalisation by Indians, one of whose sons – for the first time in Fiji's history – now headed the country's government. Consequently, Ligairi assumed that Fijians would readily accept Chaudhry's departure from office. But, after Ligairi arrived at the Queen Elizabeth Barracks (QEB) in Nabua to rally support, he quickly discovered that assumption flawed.

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51 Police Commissioner Isikia Savua became the favourite (*fijilive*, 24 August 2000), in part because he was deemed missing in action at the time and because the police had developed no action plan for the rally. Wadan Narsey later reported a would-be prime minister backing out prior to the swearing in of the new rebel government when his brother rang to say, 'Get the hell out of there; the army is no longer with you'. He reportedly told the Speight group he was going home to freshen up and never returned ('Fiji's cancerous conspiracies of silence', [narseyonfiji.wordpress.com/2012/03/18/fjjs-cancerous-conspiracies-of-silence-5-november-2011-on-blogs/](http://narseyonfiji.wordpress.com/2012/03/18/fjjs-cancerous-conspiracies-of-silence-5-november-2011-on-blogs/), 5 November 2011). After Savua resigned in 2003 to become Fiji's ambassador to the United Nations, his successor, Andrew Hughes, believed he had enough evidence to charge Savua with treason (*Fiji Times*, 8 June 2004). No charges were ever laid. Chief Justice Tuivaga investigated Savua's involvement later in the year and cleared him. But the report was never made public. A letter from Speight to that inquiry did surface; in it he denied Savua's involvement (*fijilive*, 17 May 2001). Navakasuasua claimed instead that former Col Savenaca Draunidalo, then Public Service Commissioner, had been the intended leader and was waiting in the nearby Holiday Inn but backed out after the march degenerated into looting (Graham Davis, 'The camera doesn't lie', 15 June 2011, [www.grubsheet.com.au/the-camera-doesnt-lie/](http://www.grubsheet.com.au/the-camera-doesnt-lie/)). Lt Col Meli Saubulinayau told the board of inquiry that Draunidalo had warned Tarakinikini of the coup the night before it occurred (which perhaps accounts for the latter's unexplained frantic calls to the CRWU the next morning). Draunidalo rang the acting commander, Col Alfred Tuatoko, the next day to say that he was returning to the RFMF barracks. Tuatoko ordered the gates shut, fearing that Draunidalo might try to assume command (*BoI*, p. T889).

52 Vodafone later revealed that Speight was in constant contact with journalist and FAP member Jo Nata and Silatolu on 19 May (*Fiji Times*, 12 December 2002). Prosecutor Peter Ridgway claimed Speight called Duvuloco, Nata and Silatolu constantly from the early hours of 19 May, and frantically used his mobile in the final 10 minutes before 11 am (*fijilive*, 11 March 2003).

53 [scoop.co.nz](http://scoop.co.nz) (NZ parliamentary website), 18 Aug 2000. According to Savu, at this point the whole scenario changed. Speight made the mistake of taking control and deviated from the plan. At this stage they still believed that they had full military backing (*Fiji Sun*, 20 September 2005).

To begin with, most senior officers who met with him did not understand what had happened. They suggested using the CRWU to put down the coup, but Ligairi told the Land Force Commander and acting RFMF Commander, Col Alfred Tuatoko, ‘We are there’.

‘What do you mean, “We are there?”’ Tuatoko responded.

‘I and some of the boys’, Ligairi replied.

‘The sad thing was,’ Tuatoko’s chief of staff Lt Col Samueli Raduva later recalled, ‘the very unit that was planned to take the counter security measures [necessary for such an eventuality] ... was the unit that carried out or used the events of May 19th’.<sup>54</sup>

Ligairi had now to buy time. ‘We don’t want a confrontation,’ he stressed, telling Tuatoko that he had only intervened two hours earlier to control the situation. And he quickly volunteered to accompany Tuatoko to brief President Mara, who obligingly directed them not to escalate the situation with confrontation.<sup>55</sup> But, by then, the situation itself had escalated. Duvuloco’s march had morphed into a \$30 million orgy of looting and violence in downtown Suva in the early afternoon. On his return from visiting the President, Tuatoko briefed his officers: ‘These are the pillars that we are going to work on: no confrontation, no bloodshed, everything within the law, solidarity for the RFMF.’<sup>56</sup>

But the pillars provided little guidance for officers wanting to know if the CRWU should be allowed to continue drawing on weapons and food from the barracks, or indeed whether CRWU troops should be allowed to join their colleagues in the parliament. Tuatoko clearly did not want the military to turn on itself. Yet, from the very beginning, it did. On the evening of 19 May, at the same time as Mara declared a state of emergency, Seruvakula intervened to prevent soldiers burning down the CRWU HQ. And he worked with Captain Shane Stevens to hide the remaining CRWU weapons and set up checkpoints around their complex. But his efforts to cordon off the parliament on 20 May in preparation for a counterattack were frustrated. During an emergency meeting of senior officers that same day, Lt Col Filipo Tarakinikini – the Logistics Unit’s chief staff officer – and Raduva ‘lectured’ him about the plight of Fijians and told him that

54 *BoI*, p. T846.

55 *BoI*, p. T935, testimony of Tuatoko.

56 *BoI*, p. T847, testimony of Raduva.

regarding the crisis as a hostage situation was a Western perspective.<sup>57</sup> Such views echoed those held by the rebels for obvious reasons. Lt Col Metuisela Mua, formerly head of the Fiji Intelligence Service, told the board of inquiry that the army relied on imported principles. It sought to apply a military solution to a political problem. He believed it should have used Fiji's indigenous protocols, which he called the best reconciliation system in the world.<sup>58</sup> Obviously Tuatoko's pillars could not hold for long, but they held long enough for Ligairi and Speight – now bereft of military support – to re-engineer their coup into a very different beast, one which sought to remove Fijian leaders whose preparedness to deal with Indians as equals had – they believed – cost Fijians political leadership.

What began as a simple copy of Rabuka's first coup<sup>59</sup> also had a second striking feature: the stunned and confused responses of Fiji's main ruling institutions. Many of Fiji's leaders were deeply implicated in various plots to bring down the new Labour Prime Minister following his election or at least sympathised with that goal. In addition, the President, the GCC, and the Fiji military forces, among others, were all willing participants in and beneficiaries of the 1987 coups. Having acquiesced once, their hands were tied. 'We approve of the cause, but not the means,' they nervously and frequently intoned,<sup>60</sup> a mantra that all too often implied support. Col Savenaca Draunidalo certainly believed so, telling the board of inquiry that, when the Commander said 'We support the cause', he meant that the military should develop strategies to make it happen.<sup>61</sup> So too Speight: the military would say 'we support what you have done, we support the reason but we can't say much about the method; apart from that we are behind you'.<sup>62</sup>

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57 *BoI*, p. T946, testimony of Seruvakula. At his later court martial, Stevens claimed that Tuatoko, Raduva and Tarakinikini had permitted the continued transfer of CRWU weapons and ammunition to parliament on 19 May. When Bainimarama returned, he directed that they be brought back. Altogether 309 weapons went to parliament (*fijilive*, 26 September 2002).

58 *BoI*, p. T376, testimony of Mua.

59 When Rabuka arrived at parliament on 19 May hoping to act as a mediator, he asked Speight why he did it. Speight responded, 'What do you mean asking me that question; only two people here did this thing, only you and me. You did not complete it; I will complete it' (*BoI*, p. T739, testimony of Volavola).

60 This section draws on R Robertson, 'A house built on sand', *Time* (Sydney), 24 July 2000, p. 16; and Robertson & Sutherland, *Government by the Gun*, 2001, pp. 1–4. The latter contains a detailed account of the coup in 'Mayhem & mutiny – the 2000 crisis', pp. 1–49.

61 *BoI*, p. T862.

62 *BoI*, p. T402.

In May 1987, Rabuka had launched his coup to remove ‘an Indian dominated’ Labour government that had won office from the long-serving Ratu Mara just one month before. Mara rushed immediately to Rabuka’s side and was restored – eventually – to the prime ministership. Fijian paramountcy returned and with it the dominance of an eastern chiefly elite. Thirteen years on, the 80-year-old Mara was halfway through his second five-year term as president. Rabuka, the commoner who had succeeded him as prime minister for seven years until defeated by Chaudhry, now headed the GCC, ostensibly in order to maintain control.<sup>63</sup> This supreme Fijian institution had also rushed to endorse Rabuka’s coups in 1987, bestowing on the commoner life membership of the chiefly council. In return a new Constitution in 1990 bestowed on the GCC the power to appoint members of the Senate and to choose Fiji’s president. Later it was rewarded with a secretariat of its own. In addition, the Council’s main investment company, Fijian Holdings Ltd, profited greatly from Rabuka’s affirmative action policies, as did many of its individual shareholders.

Rabuka’s own former institution, the military, also benefited from the coups. Its official size had nearly doubled since 1987<sup>64</sup> and, during most of the 1990s, the country’s leaders turned a blind eye to successive blowouts in the annual military budget. Now members of one of its more highly politicised units were holed up in parliament with over 43 hostages. Thus compromised, the military found it difficult to resolve the situation decisively. It did not storm parliament; nor did it cordon parliament off. ‘Let us not use the universal template of the army coming in to restore order,’ Rabuka advised: ‘There are friends and relatives in there. The army would think twice about going in.’<sup>65</sup> Draunidalo warned the officers’ think tank advising the Commander that even setting up checkpoints around the parliament could endanger life. That its officers may not have supported either the Chaudhry government or Speight counted for little when there was no one prepared to take control and end the situation.<sup>66</sup> This generated an ‘atmosphere of distrust’ in which

63 *BoI*, p. T954, testimony of Rabuka.

64 Stewart Firth and Jon Fraenkel note that, by 2005, the RFMF comprised 3,137 staff and 767 reservists, the latter down from nearly 2,000 prior to the 1987 coups (‘The Fiji military and ethno-nationalism: analysing the paradox’, in J Fraenkel, S Firth & BV Lal (eds), *The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji: A Coup to End All Coups*. Canberra: ANU E Press, 2009, p. 120).

65 *Age* (Melbourne), 23 May 2000, p. 14.

66 *BoI*, pp. T952–3, testimony of Rabuka.

many soldiers found it useful 'to hedge their bets', as Tarakinikini put it.<sup>67</sup> Thus officers who proposed action were often viewed with suspicion, an outcome not lost on the rebels holed up in parliament. They constantly rang them at the QEB, offering inducements for their support or threats if it failed to be forthcoming. And they sought to divide the military. Tarakinikini (a founding officer of the CRWU) and Col Ulaiasi Vatu (Strategic HQ) – both supportive of the cause but not the method – were publically promoted as new heads of the RFMF by the rebels and found their loyalties suspected as a consequence. In the long term, their military careers suffered.<sup>68</sup> Lt Col Jone Baledrokadroka, chief staff officer Operations at Land Force Command, believed that, had Speight alone headed the coup, there might have been less contention and military uncertainty. He was seen as a nobody, a part-European businessperson and beneficiary of Rabuka's cronyism. But the military had no such doubts about Ligairi and, if alleged backers such as Draunidalo had actually come forward, the coup would have gained much more credibility.<sup>69</sup>

A kind of psychological warfare now began, its goal to divide and paralyse the RFMF, and its effects on trust between officers would be long-lasting. The ambitious and frustrated Tarakinikini became an easy target. His efforts to promote the reorganisation of the RFMF in the 1990s had achieved little. Bainimarama had denied him leadership of the CRWU in 1999 and of security for the ACP conference in 2000. He was on leave and sitting an MBA exam at the University of the South Pacific (USP) when the coup took place, but quickly volunteered to act as a negotiator. 'I could see through these guys,' Tarakinikini told the board of inquiry, 'I could see the lies they were spinning in the name of the indigenous Fijian cause and especially George Speight when he came on, I could see the line he was coming on, I had to match him ... if I did not step in ... the situation was going to deteriorate not by design but by inactions.' As a spokesperson for the RFMF, the highly personable and articulate

67 *Fiji Times*, 16 April 2005.

68 *Fiji Times*, 16 April 2006. In 2003, the military claimed that Tarakinikini met with the Police Commissioner and a senator at a Nadi eatery one month before the coup (*fjilive*, 9 February 2003). During the later mutiny trial, one CRWU soldier claimed the Naitasiri chief and future senator, Ratu Inoke Takiveikata, believed that both Tarakinikini and Baledrokadroka had been assigned tasks by the rebels on 19 May that they had not executed (Evidence of Sgt Manoa Bonafasio, *fjilive*, 4 July 2003). Col Vatu died in 2004, still distressed at the aspersions cast on his character. Tarakinikini, who resigned from the military in 2001 and left Fiji with government approval for a UN peacekeeping role, never cleared his name. The military declared him a deserter in 2003.

69 Jone Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief: The role of the military in Fiji politics', PhD Thesis, The Australian National University, Canberra, 2012, pp. 147–48.

Tarakinikini proved effective. Although his goal was to establish rapport with the rebels in order to prevent bloodshed, he also became dangerously effective as an official counter to Speight: 'I knew all along what they were trying to do, they were really trying to undermine me and when they knew that it was not going to work then they came out and started accusing me of being with them ... in order to ... pull the rug under my feet.' Once the rebels knew that the army would not support them, 'their tactics then was to try and put in the Trojan horse inside the RFMF to try and break us from within'.<sup>70</sup> To some extent it worked. Bainimarama allegedly told Tuatoko not to trust Tarakinikini and Raduva.<sup>71</sup>

Complicating matters also were divisions between serving officers and reservists. The presence of many reserve officers, particularly Rabuka, created discomfort among some serving officers. But this discomfort paled in comparison with the army's physical inability to act. Despite Rabuka's largesse while in office, the RFMF lacked equipment, weapons and vehicles to support domestic operations.<sup>72</sup> Even the weapons it possessed were poorly managed. The CRWU kept its own armoury but the RFMF possessed no master register. What records it did keep were woefully inadequate.<sup>73</sup> When the police belatedly requested its assistance to deal with the rioting and looting that broke out in downtown Suva at 1 pm following the NVTLP march, the military lacked sufficient vehicles to send its soldiers into the city. It tried to hire buses, but most of the city's buses were busy taking children from their rapidly closing schools. Hence soldiers did not arrive on Suva's streets until 6 pm, three hours after the initial request and well past the time when they could be most effective. If the intention of the riot had been to stretch Fiji's forces during the coup, the rebels did not have to try too hard.

That both the Commander and chief operations officer were overseas probably did not assist the RFMF either, but without contingency planning and training to deal with a national crisis, it is doubtful that their presence could have made much difference.<sup>74</sup> Of course many officers

70 *BoI*, pp. T869–871, testimony of Tarakinikini.

71 *BoI*, p. T1003, testimony of Captain Shane Stevens.

72 *BoI*, p. F51.

73 *BoI*, p. F58. This probably accounts for the discrepancy between RFMF records of weapons missing after the coup and CRWU claims. The CRWU claimed it took 131 weapons from its armoury and returned them. The RFMF maintained that 25 were missing, but it is possible that the CRWU never possessed these weapons; the difference being explained by poor records (*BoI*, pp. F58, 67). By 2002 the number of weapons missing had been officially reduced to 13 (*Fiji Times*, 14 March 2002).

74 *BoI*, p. T886, testimony of Lt Col Meli Saubulinayau.

had long been aware of the RFMF's deficiencies but felt constrained by the vision of their leaders. Plans to reorganise the institution had lain dormant for years with the result that its many parts such as HQ FME, HQ Land Force and Strategic HQ were disconnected, although restructuring in late 1998 brought these together as Strategic HQ and Land Forces HQ.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, too many rapid promotions in the past conspired to create tensions over how the institution was run, and much of this came to the fore after 19 May<sup>76</sup> and focused on the Commander himself.

Commodore Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama had served with the Fiji Naval Squadron since its inception in 1975 and replaced Ratu Epeli Ganilau as commander in March 1999, when the latter left – unsuccessfully – to enter politics as part of Mara's VLV challenge to the SVT. Many senior officers, perhaps feeling that they were more deserving, resented that their commander was a naval officer; moreover an officer who lacked the combat experience and Sandhurst training of the colonels. One even argued, 'That is where the whole thing starts'.<sup>77</sup> Bainimarama had not taken kindly to this reception and posted perceived dissidents to the military's Strategic Headquarters in Suva, away from the QEB in Nabua suburb.<sup>78</sup> 'We now operate [more] like a gang than a military force,' Tarakinikini told the board of inquiry.

Rent by internal division and constrained by its ethnic identity, the RFMF dithered as the coup evolved. Many of its officers refused to commit, leaving their troops confused.<sup>79</sup> Fijians confronted Fijians as never before. Their leaders no longer acted as a united political force. Mara and Rabuka had never trusted each other and their differences

75 A Defence white paper proposed restructuring in 1997 but, with the SVT in turmoil, in its final year and the Labour Party disinterested once in office, little came of it (Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, pp. 92–94).

76 *BoI*, pp. T833–4, testimony of Co JM Waqanisau; T875, testimony of Tarakinikini.

77 *BoI*, p. T834, testimony of Waqanisau. Baledrokadroka suggests that the Tovata Ganilau sought a malleable commander not linked with the rival Bauan dynasty such as Colonel Administration Quartermaster, Lt Ratu George Kadavulevu (Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, pp. 229–30), who Col Dr Senilagakali claimed had approached him two months before the coup to ask Mara to step down as President (*BoI*, p. T839). Lt Col Etueni Caucau claimed that there were rumours of an internal coup against Bainimarama in April 2000, resulting in his security being strengthened (*BoI*, p. T898).

78 Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, p. 247.

79 *BoI*, p. T946, testimony of Seruvakula.

now resurfaced.<sup>80</sup> Given how quickly events unfolded, Mara possibly believed that the military's slow reaction meant that it was colluding with the coup-makers.<sup>81</sup> Certainly, many provincial chiefs saw the attempted coup as an opportunity to redress long-perceived inequalities within the community; others saw it as a chance to consolidate a new and more radicalised Fijian leadership. Ligairi played to all these divisions.

Hundreds of supporters flocked to the parliament to act as human shields in case the military decided to attack. Ligairi organised them into fighting units. By threatening to stir the rumblings of commoners, Ligairi sent a strong message to all chiefs: commoners would take over if necessary. Ligairi's transformation of the forces within the parliamentary complex, however, created tensions that he found difficult to control, although this was not always obvious to outsiders at the time. He headed the military wing, which – with the addition of more CRWU soldiers and reservists – soon comprised over 56 soldiers. By the end of May he had established an intelligence and operations centre, a logistics cell, as well as duty and weapons rosters.

Speight headed the political wing, a fluid group that grew strongly due to the army's failure to blockade the parliament. Politicians, former soldiers, public servants, Methodist ministers<sup>82</sup> and chiefs assembled at the parliament, ostensibly to find out what was happening but in many cases to participate in what they undoubtedly viewed as a transformative event. The former intelligence chief, Metuisela Mua, provides a useful example. He went into parliament within hours of the coup, joined in an early

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80 In April 2001, Mara somewhat belatedly revealed that he found Rabuka's 1987 coups 'disgusting'. He added that in his seven years in government, Rabuka showed that 'he couldn't run an office' (Mara, interview, *Closeup*, Fiji TV, unofficial transcript on [pcgovt.org.fj](http://pcgovt.org.fj), accessed 29 April 2001). Sir Vijay Singh later revealed that Mara had told him both Rabuka and Savua were behind the coup (*fjivillage*, 18 August 2006). It did not help that when Rabuka first visited Mara on 19 May, he requested that Mara appoint him as commander (*Fiji Times*, 8 July 2004).

81 Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, pp. 148–49.

82 Methodist President Rev. Tomasi Kanailagi wrote to Speight on 16 June: 'we must not let Fijians fight among themselves or the Indians will have the last laugh'. He promised them a divine pardon for their actions (*Fiji Times*, 20 June 2004).

meeting, and eventually became part of Speight's team.<sup>83</sup> Negotiations were a key activity for this wing and a special negotiating room was established alongside the ops room, symbolically located above where the bulk of hostages were held.<sup>84</sup>

But the key innovation remained the *vanua* wing; its formation was a direct result of military inaction, in particular its failure to storm parliament during the first weekend of the crisis. That failure enabled the rebels to encourage hundreds of ordinary Fijians to flock to parliament and organise them loosely into provincial groups that provided a veneer of traditional legitimacy. Such groups were publicly marched around the parliamentary complex and sometimes sent out to attack police or soldiers. Ligairi bragged that his new soldiers would soon be better than the military.<sup>85</sup> They got one opportunity to prove themselves on Sunday 28 May. Led by CRWU soldiers, over 500 rebels slipped into Suva, firing at the Presidential Palace en route. There they trashed the offices of Fiji TV, which had aired a program ridiculing the rebels, in particular Speight and Duvuloco. During the rampage, a ricocheting bullet killed a police officer. A security officer also died from heart failure. Both deaths destroyed the notion that the rebels opposed confrontation. Indeed, they secretly plotted to escalate violence by destroying both the Presidential Palace and Suva in order 'to show Ratu Mara that even though he was the head of government and in total command of the Army, Police and Civil Service ... the *vanua* was much stronger than him'. A group of hymn-singing women would lead the *vanua* and rebel soldiers on a destructive march to the capital. However, rain thwarted their plans.<sup>86</sup> But the events of 27 May were not the first foray outside parliament.

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83 *BoI*, p. T370, testimony of Mua. Others, like Simione Kaitani, would later claim that they were only volunteering their skills to assist Fiji in a difficult situation. Kaitani claimed his skills lay in conflict management (Wansolwara, August 2005) although, in 2003 on FTV's *Closeup*, he admitted sedition and inciting people with hate speech (Thakar Ranjit Singh, 'Shame on our banana republic', *Fiji Sun*, 18 April 2006). Many others would make similar claims when later charged. The future Tui Cakau, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, used his chiefly status to justify his presence at the rebel takeover of the Sukanaivalu Barracks in Labasa while Ratu Josefa Dimuri claimed he wanted only to facilitate talks between rebels and loyalists (*Fiji Times*, 29 January 2005).

84 *BoI*, p. T754, testimony of Lt Ratu George Cakobau.

85 *BoI*, p. T754, testimony of Lt Col VS Volavola.

86 *BoI*, pp. T736, T738, testimony of Volavola. Maika Qarikau, the NLTB head who shortly began circulating a 'Deed of Sovereignty' to entrust Fiji to the rebels, allegedly concocted the plan.

Early Sunday morning, 21 May, CRWU personnel in two vehicles journeyed across Viti Levu on the Queens Road to snatch Bainimarama as he returned from Norway. Alert to their intentions, Seruvakula sent 30 troops to meet their commander and they prevented the would-be kidnapers gaining access to Nadi airport, quickly spiriting Bainimarama along the longer northern and eastern Kings Road route to Suva instead.<sup>87</sup> On Friday 26 May, Speight and 20 armed men strode out of parliament and confronted troops who had replaced police outside the parliamentary complex. The next day 200 rebels and supporters challenged 10 soldiers in a shootout at a checkpoint that injured three soldiers, one rebel and a British journalist.<sup>88</sup>

The rebels' descent into violence and death made many CRWU soldiers uneasy; some even contemplated returning to their barracks.<sup>89</sup> But the *vanua* felt emboldened. They demanded their own weapons and swore at Ligairi when he refused.<sup>90</sup> Leadership of the *vanua* now became difficult. Speight and Duvuloco clashed over who should head it; Speight wanted only chiefs in such a role, Duvuloco believed he was best suited.<sup>91</sup> Difficulties over *vanua* leadership, Silatolu claimed, 'distracted us from resolving the issue with the military'.<sup>92</sup> Those difficulties, however, went far beyond leadership. The *vanua* was unruly. Looting, drunken parties, gang rapes and orgies conflicted with the disciplined order Ligairi wished to project.<sup>93</sup> But it had its uses also; across Fiji, isolated IndoFijian communities were terrorised or their homes looted and razed. The military 'won't rise up against its own people', Speight taunted.<sup>94</sup>

Speight played his part, too, holding court in the parliamentary complex with his supporters and engaging with international and local media. Unlike most politicians in Fiji and the rarely seen Commander, he was articulate and comfortable with the media – too comfortable, according to some journalists. They felt that their presence 'aided the rebel leader's

87 *BoI*, pp. T940, T888, testimony of Seruvakula and Saubulinayau.

88 *fijilive*, 09 February 2003; Tikotani was tried in 2003 for the shooting.

89 *BoI*, p. T467, testimony of Warrant Officer A. Waqaniboro.

90 *BoI*, p. T852, testimony of Raduva.

91 *BoI*, p. T395, testimony of Speight. There were other divisions among the rebels. Navakasuasua claims that Nata was never trusted because he was Lauan. The coup was by and for Viti Levu. Hence their later support for Samanunu as prime minister rather than Qarase (*fijilive*, 7 March 2003). Of course this view disregards Ligairi's central role and goals.

92 *BoI*, p. T392.

93 *BoI*, p. T736, testimony of Volavola.

94 *Fiji Times*, 2 June 2000.

propaganda fire ... gave him political fuel'.<sup>95</sup> They were not alone. Many Fijian leaders who flocked to parliament were concerned to promote their particular Fijian brand; none wished victory to accrue solely to the political outsider.

Rabuka, ever eager to demonstrate that he was still the man for the moment, called for a meeting of the GCC on 23 May, hoping to seek independent resolution of the crisis. He had not supported the rebels as they hoped, but at least seemed prepared to negotiate, and negotiations kept the situation fluid. Hence the nervous rebels released 11 of their hostages hoping to maintain the initiative and reduce the risk that Bainimarama might launch an attack. They were buoyed by the independent visits of GCC members and their messages of support. An emboldened Speight declared Bauan chief Ratu Jope Seniloli president, with Silatolu his prime minister, and swore in a raft of ministers.<sup>96</sup> On Ligairi's recommendation, he mischievously selected Vatu as his military commander and Tarakinikini his chief of staff. When the GCC met, it clearly wished to side with Speight but could not overlook Mara's opposition. As a compromise it endorsed Mara as president but called for an advisory council of rebel leaders and chiefs to oversee constitutional changes. Rabuka's attempt at a resolution through the GCC had failed.<sup>97</sup> 'Democracy, we have always stated, [is] a foreign flower,' Rabuka reflected. It should be amended to suit local circumstances.<sup>98</sup> The rhetoric of 1987, however, did not now sit well with the remade statesman. Although he had never fully apologised for his coups, he began to find comparisons between his and Speight's actions difficult to stomach. Rebel confidante Simione Kaitani declared that they

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95 David Robie, 'Coup Coup Land: The press and the putsch in Fiji', paper presented to the Journalism Education Association Conference, Queensland, 5–8 December 2000, p. 9. Some even wondered 'how much of the coup and its twists and turns was the product of the media itself' (Michael Field, 'Farewell to Coup-Coup Land', *Fiji Times*, 8 August 2000).

96 Speight contacted Seniloli at 4 am on 19 May and invited him to watch the action from the parliamentary gallery. He didn't but, the next day, Speight invited him to be president (*Fiji Times*, 8 July 2004). Ratu Tu'a'akitau Cakanautu advised his FAP colleagues not to accept these cabinet posts because the 'whole thing's illegal'. 'I will not lead you down the road that I can't lead you out of,' he told them to no avail (*Fiji Times*, 1 July 2004).

97 Robert Norton believes that Rabuka's hand may have been weakened by his need to keep Deputy Chair Adi Litia Cakobau – a strong Speight supporter – onside ('The changing role of the Great Council of Chiefs', in Fraenkel, Firth & Lal, *The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji*, 2009, p. 105).

98 *fijilive*, 25 May 2000.

wanted immunity from prosecution ‘like Rabuka got in 1987’. ‘There is no other way,’ Speight mocked.<sup>99</sup> ‘It is unfortunate, but ... the present [coup], just as mine, can probably never be justified,’ Rabuka admitted.<sup>100</sup>

Mara quickly acted on the GCC’s recommendations, dismissing both the Coalition government and parliament, but refused to place any rebels on a council of advisors or discuss amnesty until all hostages had been released and weapons returned.<sup>101</sup> Speight immediately upped the ante, calling for both Mara and the Constitution to go. He was buoyed by the arrival of a small group of reservists under Major Joseva Savua, the Police Commissioner’s brother. Other soldiers continued to slip into the parliamentary complex to lend their support to the soldiers already there.<sup>102</sup> Speight felt more confident than at any time during the previous weeks; hence the forays outside the complex and the traditional Fijian welcome given to the GCC’s negotiating delegation. Its leader, Ratu Epeli Kanaimawi, told the rebels:

From now on, Fiji should be ours; we should lead so that other races can be safeguarded. [S]urely they will be happy. But Leadership should be in the hands of indigenous Fijians; [there’s] no difference from what you have done from what the Council desires.<sup>103</sup>

It was a different story when the Military Advisory Group’s Col Jeremaia Waqanisau arrived in parliament as part of a military *vanua* ‘to cool things down’ and prepare for negotiations to release the hostages. At that meeting Kanaimawi allegedly took the opportunity to berate the army.<sup>104</sup> Not surprisingly these early discussions went nowhere. Despite initially agreeing to the GCC’s compromise, the rebels denied they had done so when they next met formally with the military. ‘I have never seen people who can lie in your face,’ Tarakinikini observed; ‘it is unbelievable.’<sup>105</sup>

Speight’s attack on the Presidential Palace that weekend clearly demonstrated where his focus now lay. That he held Mara’s daughter, Adi Koila Nailatikau, as a hostage added to the pressure he felt able to

99 Mary-Louise O’Callaghan, ‘Rabuka legacy: Rule by the gun’, *Australian*, 26 May 2000, p. 1. *No Other Way* was the title of Rabuka’s 1988 biography.

100 Interview with Jana Wendt, *Dateline*, SBS, 31 May 2000.

101 *fijilive*, 28 May 2000.

102 The board of inquiry estimated that at least 67 soldiers were stationed in the parliamentary complex (*Bol*, p. F66).

103 *Fiji TV*, 18 December 2006.

104 *Bol*, p. T827, testimony of Col Waqanisau; pp. T879–880, testimony of Tarakinikini.

105 *Bol*, p. T879.

exert. And he announced a new march on the Palace. The military feared inaction. With the situation rapidly deteriorating, a mob poised to storm the Presidential Palace and capture the President, and negotiations going nowhere, it desperately needed to force Speight to release the hostages and return its weapons. It feared anarchy. 'Our role changed when the then Commissioner of Police declared that the police could no longer contain the upheaval,' Bainimarama later argued.<sup>106</sup> Necessity now demanded that the military produce a 'situation-saving' device<sup>107</sup> to replace 'non-confrontation' with 'tightening the noose' in order to 'unhinge' the rebels.<sup>108</sup>

That device proved also to be the military's default position – a coup. On Monday 29 May at 9 am, Mara held a meeting with Ganilau, Rabuka, Bainimarama and Special Branch Director Berenado Daveta (standing in for Savua) to discuss who might act as prime minister in a council of advisors.<sup>109</sup> The lack of adequate security at the Presidential Palace deeply troubled Mara's secretary Joe Browne. He rang Seruvakula and they discussed an option to take Mara to safety on a naval vessel in Walu Bay. Only the next day did Browne learn that, shortly after his hasty evacuation, Mara had been visited by another delegation comprising Bainimarama, Rabuka, Ganilau and Savua. They asked him to step aside as president in order to allow the military to assume control. Mara felt betrayed. The military were meant to support him. He informed them that he would never return as president.<sup>110</sup> The military eventually took him to his Lakeba home in the Lau islands, although not before rebels

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106 *Fiji Times*, 1 February 2004. In 2006, Bainimarama restated the importance of Savua's position: 'when the coup happened, the police were helpless and could not do much. And that was when the military stepped in to take over' (*Fiji Times*, 4 December 2006).

107 *Bol*, p. T849, testimony of Raduva.

108 *Bol*, p. T862, testimony of Draunidalo. Tarakinikini regarded the military takeover as a way to 'unhinge' the Speight Group (*Bol*, p. T872). On 29 May, he was part of a delegation that told Speight that since the military had now 'fulfilled what we want', the hostages should be released (*Bol*, p. T349).

109 *Fiji Times*, 16 November 2006. Browne claims that Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi had been offered the position but refused to accept an unelected position. Rabuka volunteered to be prime minister instead. Dr Senilagakali also claims to have been approached for the role but recommended Qarase (*fijivillage*, 7 December 2006).

110 Joe Browne, interview, *fijilive*, 1 May 2001. Sir Vijay Singh later wrote that Mara confided in him that he stepped down from office for fear of the fate of his daughter if he did not (*fijilive*, 17 August 2006). Family members believe that Mara's health deteriorated after his removal. Both he and his wife died within three months of each other in 2004.

allegedly attempted to assassinate him on the vessel.<sup>111</sup> Later that evening, Bainimarama told the nation he had taken over and abrogated the Constitution because it did not permit a framework to resolve the crisis and encourage Speight to release the hostages. The subsequent board of inquiry thought this action wrong. The RFMF had again failed in its role and mission to preserve the sovereignty and stability of Fiji.<sup>112</sup> The future Attorney-General, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, later observed that the military's 'erroneous' belief that removing the President temporarily could help it re-establish law and order led to the tragic departure of 'one of the very few people who could have provided true national leadership'.<sup>113</sup>

Many senior officers concurred. The military's sudden takeover did not prevent hundreds of supporters continuing to stream into parliament or members of the rebel *vanua* committing random acts of violence with impunity. Nor did Bainimarama's promise to include rebels in an interim government win Speight's endorsement.<sup>114</sup> He wanted his own Taukei civilian government in power instead. In desperation Bainimarama sent a large army delegation to parliament buildings on 31 May to explain his intentions. But the very next day, when he met Speight for the first time, he compromised. The GCC would decide if the government should be a military one or Speight's. When Bainimarama told his officers what he

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111 There remains much confusion over this event. Ratu George Kadavulevu claims that initially Rabuka was sent to advise Mara of the military plans and request that he not accept the plan in order to save face (*BoI*, p. T857). Saubulinayau claims that Mara feared he was under arrest when he was moved to the vessel (*BoI*, p. T890, testimony of Saubulinayau). Later, confronting Bainimarama, Savua and Rabuka, Mara told them that they had just given Speight what he wanted ([pegovt.org.fj](http://pegovt.org.fj), accessed 1 May 2000). At the board of inquiry Tikotani denied leading an assassination attempt (*BoI*, p. T339) and Mua alleged that Special Branch invented the threat to Mara and his family in order to give the military an excuse to remove them (*BoI*, p. T380).

112 *BoI*, p. F51. Tarakinikini claims that they should have got better advice (*BoI*, p. T879), advice that apparently came from Alipate Qetaki, according to the director of the Army Legal Service, Lt Col Erueni Caucau (*BoI*, p. T896). But two judges and Chief Justice Sir Timoci Tuivaga drafted the decree that abrogated the Constitution. Col Dr Jona Senilagakali believed the military should have invoked the Public Emergency Regulations instead and put the Constitution aside (*BoI*, p. T842).

113 A Sayed-Khaiyum, 'Political support and the law', *Fiji Times*, 13 January 2005. Sayed-Khaiyum argued that the military action did not amount to treason. The President agreed to step aside and did not formally resign until 15 December 2000. Although the Commander had no authority to abrogate the Constitution (it was formally reinstated) and the legal advice he received was unsound, the courts accepted that other military actions were justified in law and that it had acted solely to preserve national security. As Justice Gates argued on 15 November 2000, Mara did not resign on 29 May and the Constitution stayed in place. Bainimarama had acted on the basis of the doctrine of necessity to secure the safety of the state but had no genuine desire to remove the Constitution. Hence the decree abrogating it was unconstitutional (Verenaisi Raicola, 'Doctrine of necessity', *Fiji Times*, 29 March 2006).

114 'I'm telling the military to back off,' Speight retorted, 'The military came in at the twelfth hour. They have effectively performed a coup and I find that quite ironic' ([bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk), 31 May 2000).

had done, they objected. They were not prepared to place the country's future in the hands of an institution already tainted by close links with Speight. They would not surrender the military's role as guardian of the nation and they would not give in to a terrorist.<sup>115</sup> 'What is now happening to us is a moral recession,' Tarakinikini told the nation that evening, 'the very core of our existence is being challenged.' The rebels 'will threaten and they will try and destabilise and fragment our community so that we become vulnerable, and we will play into their hands if we succumb to tactics of fear'.<sup>116</sup>

Intervention by the colonels, however, did not produce the certainty they craved. If anything it confirmed to the rebels the success of their tactics. After increasingly violent *vanua* attacks on both the military and civilians in early June, and with IndoFijian refugees fleeing marauding gangs roaming across Tailevu and Naitasiri, former intelligence boss, Metuisela Mua, warned that they had plans to target the military across the country if it did not cave in.<sup>117</sup> Support for the rebels seemed to be building; the President of the Methodist church even assured them of a divine pardon.<sup>118</sup>

A desperate and disillusioned military now accepted an offer by Ratu Josefa Iloilo, the Tui Vuda and Mara's former Vice President, to host talks between the rebels and the military at his Muanikau suburban residence. But the talks dragged on, with the rebels constantly changing their demands. An initial agreement collapsed when they demanded they keep their weapons for future protection. Not surprisingly, the army wearied but, short of launching an attack on parliament, could do little. 'The paucity of leadership in the country is staggering,' the *Australian* journalist Christopher Dore observed. Mara had vanished, Rabuka sulked in his office, and Bainimarama had not spoken publicly for two weeks. His Military Council, dominated by two former commanders

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115 *BoI*, pp. T829–830, testimony of Waqanisau. The colonel believed that these negotiations were not well handled. The army had no fall-back position and gave too much away. And Bainimarama should not have been directly involved. Ratu Tevita Mara later alleged that Bainimarama only changed his stance when Waqanisau challenged him at the meeting and called Speight a terrorist. The officers present clapped (Mara, 'Fiji's dictator Frank Bainimarama's truth revealed', 2011, p. 14).

116 Murray Mottram, 'Speight meets his match', *Age*, 5 June 2000, p. 15.

117 David Hardaker, interview, *7.30 Report*, ABC, 12 June 2000. That police vehicles were allegedly used to transport cattle and produce from IndoFijian farms at Muaniweni, Nausori, further weakened public faith in its police.

118 Rev. Tomasi Kanailagi wrote on 16 June 2000: 'we must not let Fijians fight among themselves or the Indians will have the last laugh', *Fiji Times*, 20 June 2004.

(Rabuka and Ganilau) had ‘never emerged from the shadows’. Even the GCC seemed to have vanished from sight, its liaison committee mired in conspiracies with the rebels. And, in the parliament, the scheming continued, with rebel leaders bickering over ‘whose coup it really is’. ‘No-one in Fiji,’ Dore wrote, ‘has the slightest clue about how to end the political crisis.’<sup>119</sup>

But all was not as it seemed. Behind the scenes Bainimarama attempted to regain the confidence of his officers. On Tuesday 4 July, he announced the formation of a new interim government headed by the former senator, CEO of the Fiji Development Bank and managing director of the Merchant Bank, the 59-year-old Lauan Laisenia Qarase.<sup>120</sup> He and a new 18-member, all-male cabinet would introduce a new constitution together with a new deal for Fijians, amend land leases along lines favoured by the NLTB, and return Fiji to elections within two years. The message to the rebels was clear; the Fijian bureaucratic establishment was once more in charge. It was a message they read, however, as a declaration of war. These people never ‘fought for the cause of the takeover’, Ligairi declared. They had failed Fiji in the past and would do so again.<sup>121</sup> ‘We didn’t carry out the coup to provide an opportunity for the military to come in and run the government,’ Speight pronounced: ‘[T]hat’s not the objective of the coup and they don’t seem to accept that.’<sup>122</sup> As if to drive home their point, 80 rebel soldiers under the command of Ligairi’s grandson, Lt Rupeni Vosayaco, and 500 supporters seized control of the Sukanaivalu Barracks outside Labasa, the capital of Vanua Levu. Two hours later in Suva, 200 rebels and soldiers clashed outside parliament. One rebel died.

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119 *Australian*, 29 June 2000, p. 10. The Military Council comprised Rabuka, Ganilau, Tuatoko, Vatu and Major-General Jioji Konrote.

120 Baledrokadroka claims that this outcome was forced on a reluctant Bainimarama by the colonels, in particular Tarakinikini. The Military Council had wanted the former governor of the Reserve Bank and vice chancellor of USP, Savenaca Siwatibau to be prime minister, with Nailatikau as his deputy, but Siwatibau refused. Consequently the Military Council chose Qarase ([rawfijinews.wordpress.com](http://rawfijinews.wordpress.com), 17 April 2009). In an interview in 2007, Bainimarama claimed Qarase’s appointment had been an impulsive decision: ‘I was busy with George Speight’s issues one particular morning in 2000, then somebody asked me whether I was looking for a pm. They said they have Qarase, I said OK. Well, who is Qarase, he was a banker; so let’s go for him ... We made a hell of a mistake back then’ (*fijilive*, 18 September 2007). In 2006, Dr Senilagakali claimed he had been approached to head an interim government but advised Bainimarama to appoint Qarase instead (*fijivillage*, 7 December 2006).

121 *Fiji Times*, 6 December 2000.

122 *fijilive*, 4 July 2000. Allegedly on the same day Rabuka urged Seruvakula to remove Bainimarama as commander. Seruvakula refused (*Fiji Times*, 16 November 2006).

The next day, when the army responded by finally imposing an exclusion zone around the parliamentary complex, Speight taunted its leadership. Chiefs will call on Fijians to leave the military and 'As that takes place over the next few days, I'm sure Commander Bainimarama will find himself in command of an army that has no men'.<sup>123</sup> These were not idle words. On Thursday 6 July, some 400 Naitasiri villagers marched on the military barracks at Nabua amid rumours of an uprising. In the Naitasiri highlands, rebels drugged soldiers guarding the Monasavu power station and cut power to Suva. The soldiers were taken hostage. Macuata chiefs in Vanua Levu demanded Bainimarama step down, and the paramount chief of Naitasiri – Ratu Inoke Takiveikata – demanded a president elected by the GCC who would choose his own interim administration. The military caved in, finally signing the Muanikau Accord on Sunday 9 July at Iloilo's residence in front of 500 hymn-chanting rebel supporters and a despondent Bainimarama. 'We don't want to shed blood amongst ourselves,' the Naitasiri-born Tarakinikini conceded.<sup>124</sup>

Despite promising to 'surrender' and release their hostages, the amnestied rebels were in no mood to end their campaign of civil disobedience. But they had now to convince the country's chiefs that Fiji's future lay in their hands. Roadblocks sprang up around Fiji. One hundred and fifty rebels led by one CRWU soldier seized Korovou in Tailevu. Villagers took over the Savusavu and Seaqaqa police stations in Vanua Levu, and Labasa came under attack; so too the Nadi and Vanuabalavu airports, the army base in Lautoka, the police station and fish cannery in Levuka on Ovalau, tourist resorts on Turtle and Laucala islands, and a mineral water plant in Rakiraki. Fiji Telecom workers went on strike. Landowners and disgruntled employees occupied Road Transport offices in Suva and Lautoka, and prisoners rioted at Naboro prison. The former journalist and now rebel Jo Nata bragged, 'Suva is almost under siege; the whole nation is in chaos ... is that what you call holding a gun to the chiefs' heads?'<sup>125</sup>

But not all chiefs required convincing. The deputy chair of the GCC, Adi Litia Cakobau, called a special meeting of 200 district and provincial chiefs (Bose ni Turaga) prior to the GCC's deliberations, and her sister, Adi Samanunu Cakobau, Fiji's ambassador to Malaysia, flew back

123 SBS, 5 July 2000.

124 *fijilive*, 7 July 2000.

125 *Australian*, 13 July 2000, p. 7.

to chair it. Designed to increase pressure on the GCC, the meeting recommended that Iloilo be president, the rebel 'President' Ratu Jope Seniloli his vice president, and the leader of the GCC negotiating team – Ratu Epeli Kanaimawi – prime minister of a new 22-member cabinet containing at least 11 rebels. When the GCC met on 14 July it accepted the first two demands but left it to Ratu Iloilo to determine the makeup of the new cabinet. Satisfied, the rebels released their remaining hostages. But when Iloilo announced the next day that Qarase's administration would remain intact, Ligairi unleashed his 'dogs of war' for another round of destruction. Iloilo did not turn up to swear in his new cabinet on 19 July. Ligairi and Speight took their rebels out of the shattered parliamentary complex that had been their home for the past 62 days and moved to the Kalabu Fijian School, 12 kilometres from Suva in Naitasiri territory, looting on their way. From this base they would fight for lasting influence and power.

Ligairi and Takiveikata now pressured Iloilo to accept a new set of demands that included replacing Qarase with Adi Samanunu as prime minister. Her support for the rebels can be seen as another chapter in the long struggle between the Cakobau and Mara families and between Kubuna and Tovata for ascendancy within Fiji, a struggle that introduced a useful dynamic for the rebels in the already fractious relationship between Fijian provinces and between old centres of power. Iloilo agreed to include more rebels in the cabinet but, when he met with the rebels, Speight threatened further instability if he failed to deliver.<sup>126</sup>

With the rebels out of parliament and their hostages released, Bainimarama now had more room to manoeuvre. Another initiative of the colonels (in particular Tuatoko, Tarakinikini and Baledrokadroka) assisted also. They had established a special Force Reserve Unit (FRU) or Task Force Group in late June to directly confront the rebel *vanua*. Comprising 3rd Battalion soldiers stationed in Nadi and Lautoka, as well as Suva's Engineers, it made the Engineers HQ at the QEB its base.<sup>127</sup> Securing Naboro prison, where prisoners had taken wardens hostage

126 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 July 2000. This was a confusing period of claim and counterclaim. Four paramount chiefs and one public servant apparently threatened instability if Iloilo failed to appoint Samanunu (*fijilive*, 6 April 2004). Bainimarama later alleged that six politicians met him in the FHL boardroom and requested that he overthrow Iloilo (*Fiji Times*, 25 August 2005). Poseci Bune claims that, when Iloilo looked like appointing Samanunu as prime minister, Qarase requested Bainimarama remove the President (*fijilive*, 3 August 2003).

127 Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, pp. 170–73.

under instruction from the rebels, became its first successful operation on 17 July. Thus, a much more confident Bainimarama moved to frustrate the Speight group's political manoeuvres. On 26 July, he rushed to the Presidential Palace and told Iloilo to 'get a prime minister of our choice or else lose the army'.<sup>128</sup> That same evening, the FRU quietly arrested Speight en route to Kalabu. At 6 am the next morning, Day 70 of the crisis, the FRU took the rebels at Kalabu by surprise and rounded them up. Sporadic outbreaks of violence occurred in retaliation around the country, mainly in Vanua Levu, and by the time the FRU recaptured Labasa's Sukanaivalu Barracks at the start of August and swept through the Viti Levu highlands around Monasavu, an uneasy calm had descended over the country, punctuated only by distrust, fear and loathing. 'No one is the winner here,' Raduva told the board of inquiry a month or so later, 'we are all losers.'<sup>129</sup>

Nearly 500 rebels and their supporters across the country were arrested, many of them resentful at the beatings they received from their captors. Most civilian rebels were charged only with minor offences and were quickly released on lenient bail terms, but key perpetrators like Duvuloco, Speight and Ligairi were quarantined on the small Nukulau Island near Suva. Investigations were also begun into the activities of hundreds of citizens during the crisis, among them the Police Commissioner, who was forced to stand aside pending an investigation by the Chief Justice, himself under public scrutiny for advising the military on its seizure of power. Tarakinikini lost his post as army spokesperson and soon left, disillusioned, to a UN peacekeeping post in New York.<sup>130</sup> Bainimarama also found himself under attack when he admonished chiefs for instigating division and hate among Fijians, and the High Court declared the Muanikau amnesty he had negotiated invalid. Stung, Bainimarama hit back when President Iloilo left for medical treatment in Sydney. He would never accept the rebel Seniloli as acting president and threatened a new military takeover.<sup>131</sup> In the uproar that followed, Rabuka offered to serve as president and the target of loathing shifted again.

128 Tony Parkinson, 'The rebels had military chief in their sights', *Age*, 3 November 2000.

129 *Bol*, p. T855.

130 After the mutiny Tarakinikini was suspended from duties but no evidence of collusion with the mutineers could be found. He resigned in 2001, citing mistreatment from Bainimarama (*Fiji Times*, 27 February 2002).

131 Saubulinayau observed that, while the events of 19 May helped bring the army together again, suspicions about officer loyalties always lingered, and resurfaced once things cooled down (*Bol*, p. T888).

At the QEB, the CRWU soldiers smarted at their treatment. They felt ostracised; they did not take to their new commanding officer and were convinced that the army planned to disband the CRWU, despite the fact that most of those remaining (the majority) had stayed away from parliament, unlike their intelligence operatives and raw recruits.<sup>132</sup> They were now placed within the 3rd Battalion, but were permitted to continue using CRWU offices and barracks. The rebels among them shared similar feelings. ‘We felt betrayed by Bainimarama,’ Serupepeli Dakai declared.<sup>133</sup> Bainimarama claimed to forgive them, but they were still being arrested and charged.<sup>134</sup> The return of weapons created considerable angst, in part because RFMF records were hopelessly inaccurate but also because, when soldiers did return weapons, they were promptly charged.<sup>135</sup> Yet, in many respects given the enormity of what had happened, the RFMF treated them leniently. At a special ceremony on 26 October, Captain Shane Stevens – now the CRWU’s second in command – formally sought the military’s forgiveness. Bainimarama accepted the request, and agreed to release the rebel soldiers into the custody of their families until the law took its course. A board of inquiry would be held. He even praised them for securing the safety of their hostages and containing ‘the rowdy and abusive’ *vanua*.<sup>136</sup> But he also confirmed the demise of the CRWU.<sup>137</sup> The soldiers were stunned. Revenge became the new order of the day. They hid weapons in preparation. Stevens had already been sought out twice by Takiveikata, the Naitasiri chief who wanted Bainimarama

132 *Bol*, p. T1004, testimony of Stevens.

133 *fijilive*, 3 November 2000.

134 *Bol*, p. T936, testimony of Tuatoko. Other coup conspirators felt the same. Maciu Navakasuasua, who ended up incarcerated on Nukulau with Speight, claimed that failed politicians, church ministers and corrupt businessmen who ‘talked us into taking part’ in the coup had simply used them ‘to fulfill their political agendas’; they accepted positions in the interim government and ‘turned their backs on us as we were thrown into jail’ (*Fiji Sun*, 22 August 2015).

135 *Bol*, p. T1008, testimony of Stevens. At his court martial Stevens claimed the military fabricated the non-return of weapons in order to justify their violence in pacifying rebel areas in Kalabu, Monasavu, Ra, Tailevu and Vanua Levu (*fijilive*, 26 September 2002).

136 *scoop.co.nz*, 31 October 2000.

137 Baledrokadroka, ‘Sacred king and warrior chief’, 2012, pp. 184–85. Baledrokadroka argues that discontent at Bainimarama’s leadership resurfaced with the disbandment of the CRWU. Bainimarama had already begun to move officers who potentially threatened his leadership, including those in Strategic HQ, out of the QEB. But there was also the simple fact the Bainimarama had come from naval ranks and lacked the Sandhurst training of Stevens, Vatu and Tarakinikini. Victor Lal and Russell Hunter claim that the mutiny was the CRWU’s revenge for Bainimarama’s betrayal; he had ordered them to conduct the coup in the first place (‘Details of the death of CRWU soldier Selesitino Kalounivale revealed’, [www.coupfourandahalf.com](http://www.coupfourandahalf.com), 19 March 2012).

removed for dumping the Muanikau Accord and for the military's treatment of civilian rebels at Kalabu, Monasavu and on Vanua Levu.<sup>138</sup> Now Stevens had grounds for action. Bainimarama later reflected:

I never thought they would be swayed with the lie that the RFMF had lost the trust of the *vanua* and that the *vanua* only trusted the CRWU because of what they stood for in May 2000. And so if the CRWU wanted the trust of the *vanua* to be returned to the RFMF, then they should take leadership of the army. Only then would the *vanua* be there for them.<sup>139</sup>

One week later, on Thursday, 2 November, the CRWU mutinied.

It was a bloody and confused affair.<sup>140</sup> Led by the once loyal Stevens, 40 CRWU soldiers, many reportedly intoxicated,<sup>141</sup> seized weapons and took over the Officers Mess, Bainimarama's office and administration complex, the national operations centre and the armoury in the early afternoon. They wanted hostages; above all they wanted Bainimarama. In the process they executed three unarmed loyal soldiers. Again their planning was meagre; the whole operation was designed simply as a repeat of 19 May, this time at the QEB on a day when many soldiers were out training and at a time when Bainimarama would be lunching in the Officers Mess. An unsigned fax ordered Vodafone to shut down army mobiles. A coded message over Radio Fiji told Naitasiri, Tailevu and Rewa provincial organisers to get as many human shields into the camp as possible. Two hundred men gathered at Takiveikata's Wailase farm in preparation.<sup>142</sup> The rebels planned to negotiate for the release of their colleagues on Nukulau, establish a Taukei civilian government, and replace Bainimarama.

Within hours the operation collapsed. The mutineers were unable to secure ammunition for the weapons they seized and had to make do with a more limited range of standard issue weapons. They botched the attack on Bainimarama and the senior command. Instead of employing stealth, they 'brazenly assembled at the camp ground, conspicuous in

138 *fjilive*, 17 September 2010. This was revealed in Takiveikata's trial in 2010. He was given a life sentence in 2007 but released on appeal in 2008. On retrial in 2010 he received a seven-year sentence.

139 *Fiji Times*, 14 March 2006.

140 See also 'Mayhem and mutiny' in Robertson & Sutherland, *Government by the Gun*, 2001, pp. 40–49.

141 Mara, 'Fiji's dictator Frank Bainimarama's truth revealed', 2011, p. 15.

142 Evidence presented at Takiveikata's trial, *Fiji Times*, 12 & 17 November 2004. At his trial, Stevens claimed that Takiveikata gave orders to Tarakinikini and Vatu to 'secure' the RFMF HQ on 2 November (Jone Dakuvula, 'The unresolved issues at stake over the commander controversy', *Asia-Pacific Network*, 30 January 2004).

their black T-shirts' and green pants, and fired 'warning shots as they dispersed towards their targets'.<sup>143</sup> Bainimarama and his bodyguards narrowly escaped through a nearby cassava patch. Nor did they consider how the wider army might be neutralised. In point of fact, elements of the Third Fiji Infantry Regiment returned from field exercises in Nadroga Province in the late afternoon and joined forces with Baledrokadroka who, with Raduva, Lt Col Solomone Raravula (the CO Engineers), and Lt Col Silivenusi Waqausa, rallied the FRU at the Engineers complex and merged them with raw engineer trainees. When the loyal troops learned of Takiveikata's plot to bus in human shields, they closed the camp gates. At dusk they quickly mounted a counter offensive.<sup>144</sup>

Within two hours the battle for Nabua was over. Eight soldiers lay dead, five of them CRWU soldiers arrested in Suva after the mutiny began and allegedly beaten to death while detained. In addition, 28 soldiers were injured and stray bullets hit two civilians.<sup>145</sup>

143 Shailendra Singh, 'The thin line', *Review*, December 2000, p. 15.

144 Baledrokadroka provides the best account of the mutiny currently available.

145 One of many unsolved crimes emanating from the 2000 coup, the deaths in custody, continue to haunt the military to this day. Immediately after the mutiny, the wife of one dead soldier claimed that her husband – who had not participated in the mutiny – had been taken to the barracks after the event. In March 2001, the police announced that they were investigating the five deaths as murder. All the dead soldiers had been arrested outside of the QEB and kept at the Central Police Station in Suva. They were later taken to the barracks where they died (*Fiji Times*, 26 March 2001). Nothing came of these investigations, although they were reopened again in 2005. Bainimarama has consistently denied ordering the deaths (*Fiji Times*, 8 February 2003), even of knowing about the investigation (*Fiji Times*, 2 January 2007). In April 2006, the widow of one soldier won \$24,000 in compensation under the *Workers Compensation Act*. During a civil suit against the RFMF in 2007 by three former CRWU soldiers, who had been taken by soldiers after surrendering at the Nabua police station and beaten at the Vatuuwaga rifle range, Baledrokadroka, then chief of operations, claimed that tensions raised by the mutiny probably lay behind the spontaneous assaults (*fjivlive*, 17 October 2007). Bainimarama, who had surrendered one of the CRWU soldiers from the naval base to the police, made a similar claim to journalist Graham Davis in 2007: 'I think they were just bashed up by the [loyalist] soldiers because they got pretty peeved. I think that is an understatement. You know they'd been part of the RFMF for 10, 20 years and all of a sudden one day they turned around and shot people up. Do you expect our guys to go and kiss them on the cheek? Let's be real about the situation ... These guys came to kill people. They came out to kill, so if they died in the process I'm not going to cry about it' (*Fiji Times*, 2 January 2007). In 2011, after escaping Fiji, Ratu Tevita Mara claimed that some 60 CRWU soldiers were tortured and held at Korovou prison ('Fiji's dictator Frank Bainimarama's truth revealed', 2011, p. 15). The issue never really died, despite later police claims that Bainimarama had been cleared back in 2003 and that the Police Commissioner confirmed this in 2004 and sought to mislead people by claiming to reopen the case in 2006 (*fjivillage*, 15 February 2007). The issue resurfaced yet again when pictures of the five battered bodies circulated on dissident websites after 2012 ([www.fjileaks.com/home/bloody-2-november-2000-the-day-bainimarama-wanted-mutinous-soldiers-punished-some-innocent-thirteen-years-ago-kicked-to-death-police-wanted-to-question-him-before-coup](http://www.fjileaks.com/home/bloody-2-november-2000-the-day-bainimarama-wanted-mutinous-soldiers-punished-some-innocent-thirteen-years-ago-kicked-to-death-police-wanted-to-question-him-before-coup)). Warning: this website contains graphic images.

In February 2015, Opposition leader Ro Teimumu Kepa tried to reopen the issue by calling on police to complete their investigations (*Fiji Times*, 20 February 2015).

Military victory over the mutineers brought no peace. Instead it intensified recriminations. Rabuka became one of its early victims. Since 1997 Rabuka had been fêted internationally for bringing Fiji back from the abyss he had driven it to. He had been honoured with the Solomon Islands dispute to resolve. But the year 2000 proved difficult for Rabuka. Each time 'the Statesman' inserted himself into the dramas around him, he created suspicion, not respect. Mara had accused him of conspiracy; Speight and Ligairi of betrayal. Now Bainimarama charged him with treachery. During the mutiny he came to the barracks uninvited just as the military counterattack began. He threatened to put on his uniform and return as commander if the assault team did not withdraw. He criticised the Commander's leadership. He left with one of the rebels in his car. Bainimarama suspected Rabuka was trying to buy time until the human shields arrived under the cover of darkness. 'He really confuses the army, that man,' Bainimarama declared.<sup>146</sup>

Rabuka told it differently. Having flown in from Savusavu, he was lurching at a function with business executives when his personal assistant informed him of the mutiny. At 1.15 pm he first called Colonel Seruvakula of the 3FIR, and then Home Affairs before speaking to a number of people at the camp. One of the rebels asked him to mediate because he disapproved of the mutiny. Rabuka also spoke with one of the hostages. At this point he decided that he was needed. But he got there too late. Baledrokadroka refused to speak with him. The orders for a counterattack had been issued.<sup>147</sup>

Rabuka denied any part in the mutiny.<sup>148</sup> He did not approve of the rebels' goals. 'We should allow ourselves to evolve into a vibrant society of mixed races, [a] multi ethnic, multi racial, multi religious society,' he declared: 'Those who are trying to drag us back into the era of the dinosaur ... hopefully will quickly be called to their graves.' Meanwhile he would

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146 *Fiji Times*, 9 November 2000; Singh, 2000, p. 15. In 2006, Seruvakula alleged that on 2 November 2000 Rabuka tried to convince him to remove Bainimarama as commander. Both he and Bainimarama also alleged that Rabuka made a similar request earlier in July when the hostage crisis ended (*Fiji Times*, 11 November 2006).

147 *fijilive*, 7 November 2000; *Fiji Times*, 3 March 2004.

148 In late 2006, Rabuka was found not guilty of inciting mutiny, but the long police investigation cost him his appointment by the Qarase government as Fiji's ambassador to the United States.

continue to work for a new Fiji: 'I cannot let the flame that inspired me to work towards the 1997 Constitution ... burn out.'<sup>149</sup> But the knives were out for Rabuka. In March 2001, the GCC dumped him as their chairman.

Bainimarama also came under scrutiny. Although his dramatic retreat from the Battle of Nabua and alleged refuge at the naval base caused him to lose face and left him traumatised, he strongly believed that everything he had done during the course of 2000 had been designed to foster stability and reconciliation among indigenous Fijians.<sup>150</sup> He had assumed authority on 29 May to protect the President and save Fiji from descending into anarchy. He had refused to raid parliament for fear that the deaths of innocent or naive Fijians would produce an even greater backlash against the army. He had backed Qarase's interim regime because it alone promised Fijians a clearly articulated direction. And he had managed to hold the RFMF together, despite its officers' ideological differences and the lack of respect many showed to him as commander because of his naval background.

But Bainimarama's actions did not always accord with international conventions, let alone satisfy Fiji's other communities. IndoFijians in particular felt excluded; so, too, did many business people. The new Qarase regime planned to reintroduce a Taukeist Constitution, an act that potentially threatened international retaliation and the loss of important markets for Fiji's products. Its chaotic approach to land use and its support for the Taukeist demands of the NLTB additionally threatened Fiji's agricultural production and a new wave of rural refugees. Yet for many people, including Fijians, a sense of *déjà vu* left most disillusioned. Thirteen years of patience and consensus-building had seemingly come to nought. Fiji's politics lay shattered and its economy teetered on the abyss. The 2000 coup had cost Fiji well in excess of \$1 billion (equivalent to the government's total annual budget) and \$300 million in damage to infrastructure and lost government revenue alone. The parliamentary complex, which Rabuka had built in 1992 to mark a turning point in

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149 *Review*, October–November 2000, p.17.

150 Baledrokadroka believes that Bainimarama's bodyguards were sufficiently armed to have made a stand at the Officers Mess; instead, by abandoning the Officers Mess, Bainimarama lost an opportunity to boost the morale of his troops. His unprepared bodyguards told the later court martial, however that they had almost exhausted their ammunition by the time they fled (*Daily Post*, 27 February 2002). And Bainimarama did not quit the QEB. He came to the Engineers HQ prior to the final assault but was advised to go the Stanley Brown Naval Base for his safety (Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, pp. 190, 194).

Fiji's democracy, lay shattered. Over 10 per cent of the paid workforce had lost their jobs as the economy shrank an astonishing 12 per cent. Hotel occupancy rates plummeted 80 per cent, while Fiji's large garment industry lost nearly one quarter of its 20,000 workers. According to one estimate, 40 per cent more people lived in poverty than when the crisis began.<sup>151</sup> Fiji's postcolonial economic transformation – Sutherland noted in 2001 – had never been accompanied by the kind of popular economic participation that enabled political stability. Now, in the face of sharper class and rural–urban inequalities, there was every reason to believe that politicians would once more defend themselves by resorting to racial scapegoating.<sup>152</sup>

## Reclaiming the goose

Laisenia Qarase presented the grandfatherly face of Fijian nationalism. Portrayed as a neutral public servant, he was anything but disinterested. After his election as prime minister in late 2001 he boasted of his centrality in the development of affirmative action programs for Fijians since 1985 when he had returned from a study tour of Malaysia. He wanted a 20-year strategic plan for Fijian economic growth, a review of Fiji's Constitution, the transfer of state lands to the NLTB, and Fijian ownership of fishing waters. He damned existing land leases as 'statutory fraud' and claimed Fijians were subsidising the sugar industry through unfair rental agreements. His agenda would dominate Fiji politics for the next six years, and encourage many former rebels and nationalists to claim that Fiji's bureaucratic elite had at last started to make the 2000 coup a success.<sup>153</sup> Yet, instead of driving Fijians towards nirvana, it brought them back to where they had been under Rabuka in the mid-1990s, fractious and floundering. Fiji's peoples had to learn how to live together and to use their diversity as the basis for united strength.

For most of his six years in office, Qarase chose to address this need with silence, despite the fact that his reassertion of Fijian paramountcy – which he presented as the only solution available to Fiji – posed many threats,

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151 *fijilive*, 23 October 2000; 17 February 2001; *Review*, August 2000, pp. 19–20; Joseph Veramu, Fiji Community Education Association President, *scoop.co.nz*, 5 February 2001.

152 Robertson & Sutherland, *Government by the Gun*, 2001, p. 141.

153 This was the view of Tailevu CAMV MP, Samisoni Tikoinasau, Speight's brother (*fijilive*, 16 May 2002).

not least to Fijians themselves. ‘If Indians are forced to leave Fiji,’ Mara told his Lau Provincial Council in late 2000, ‘the next group of people will be islanders who have made a living in Viti Levu.’<sup>154</sup> Indeed, the more Fiji moved towards the kind of traditional *vanua* politics Mara warned of, the more divided the *vanua* became. Identity has a habit of becoming exclusive, while targets of envy shift. Rabuka noted how even moderate provincial successes created jealousy in other provinces, and encouraged self-pity.<sup>155</sup> Fijians really needed to come to terms with their own history and their modernity. The past offered no justice or direction to the thousands of Fijians who had abandoned the poverty of their villages for the poverty of urban slums. Nor did it assist them to come to terms with the reality of Fiji’s multiracialism and multiculturalism. It offered no guide for the future.

Nor did Qarase’s interim government. Its blueprint for Fijian development advantaged the Fijian middle classes, not the disaffected masses that had fuelled the CRWU rebellion. Education, which Bainimarama believed essential for Fijian development, received no boost in the first Qarase budget. Government grants to secondary schools halved and, although it set aside special funding for Fijian education, not a cent reached Fijian children if they went to multi-ethnic schools, as so many urban Fijians did.<sup>156</sup>

Although aware of these divisions, neither Bainimarama nor Qarase could suggest anything other than reconciliation to resolve internal Fijian divisions that had already created so much strife and misery. But how might reconciliation be achieved? Bainimarama conceded that Fijian unity existed only during periods of opposition to IndoFijians, but such an acknowledgement was hardly a strategy for Fijian reconciliation, let alone national healing.<sup>157</sup>

Nonetheless, Qarase created a Ministry of Reconciliation and launched a National Council for Reconciliation and Unity in late November 2000. Promisingly, it proposed the educational integration of Fiji’s communities,

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154 *fijilive*, 16 October 2000.

155 *Fiji Times*, 2 December 2000.

156 In May 2001, Qarase finally released a blueprint for Fijian education, detailing a much needed \$8.4 million injection of capital into Fijian educational infrastructure. But it was a technocratic response only and did nothing to address the concerns of the Education Commission, whose report remained hidden from public scrutiny.

157 *Fiji Times*, 12 November 2000.

racial parity in the military, and a new national identity. But no strategy ever emerged to deliver such outcomes.<sup>158</sup> For the present, Qarase could only plead that Fiji's peoples be more forgiving of each other. 'One needed to forgive unconditionally before attempting reconciliation,' Qarase told the National Tourism Forum in December 2000, 'because unity was impossible without forgiveness.'<sup>159</sup> Forgiveness included Speight. 'There are so many people with much worse records who got away free right around the world,' he declared.<sup>160</sup> Rabuka agreed. He told the Cakaudrove Provincial Council that the courts should consider reconciliation as part of the endeavour to unite the people of Fiji and give sentences accordingly.<sup>161</sup>

Qarase's permanent secretary for reconciliation, Col Jeremaia Waqanisau, who had told the board of inquiry that unity and reconciliation might prove illusory,<sup>162</sup> declared investigations into the coup an obstacle to reconciliation.<sup>163</sup> The dropping of charges 'for lack of evidence' against four rebel leaders held on Nukulau encouraged this line of action. 'If Fiji is to go forward,' declared one of the freed rebels, 'the reconciliation process must start on Nukulau' where the rebels' leaders were quarantined. Perhaps for this reason the Suva Magistrates Court permitted Speight and Ligairi to register as candidates in the August 2001 election. Reconciliation presented itself to the public service too. On the Chief Justice's recommendation, Savua was reinstated as Police Commissioner in November. In May 2003, a public service inquiry also cleared Adi Samanunu of any wrongdoing. Her sister, Adi Litia Cakobau, told the Senate in the following year that all political prisoners must be released. 'To criminalise freedom of expression is to criminalise democracy,'

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158 *Fiji Times*, 26 February 2001. It also planned a special program in 2002 to prepare young chiefs for leadership.

159 *Fiji Times*, 8 December 2000.

160 Mark Chippendale, 'Qarase sees a future of affirmative action', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 February 2001.

161 *fijilive*, 16 November 2000. Reconciliation was presented as a uniquely Fijian response and, according to one participant at a workshop convened by the Constitutional Commission in 2012, involved spending a lot of money so chiefs could say sorry, even in 2003, for the 1867 killing of Christian missionaries in Naitisiri.

162 *Bol*, p. T836. Waqanisau claimed that 'I do not think we will achieve any unity, I do not think we will achieve any reconciliation, I do not think so if we continue as we are ... Whilst there are people who actually needed to pay for whatever acts they committed, I think what we need to do now is rebuild RFMF and I do not think we can rebuild the RFMF after bashing each other up first'. Waqanisau, a former force commander of UN Forces Lebanon, resigned from the army in 1997 to become Commissioner Western and, in 2003, became permanent secretary for Home Affairs.

163 *fijilive*, 8 November 2000.

she declared, adding that the blueprint was not enough to correct the historic injustices done to Fijians; the 1997 Constitution ‘is a time bomb and must be changed before time pulls the trigger’.<sup>164</sup>

There were dangers in this ethnocentric approach to reconciliation. A disillusioned Seruvakula left the command of the Third Fiji Infantry in March 2001 and, with three other officers, began service with the New Zealand Defence Forces before heading to Afghanistan with the United Nations. New Zealand’s High Commissioner, Tia Barrett, publicly condemned Fiji’s apparent reluctance to bring to justice ‘those responsible for the upheaval ... despite the wealth of information available’.<sup>165</sup> His country offered the director of public prosecutions (DPP) legal assistance but he declined the offer. In early December, some of the hostage takers at Monasavu received suspended sentences.

Mara warned the Lau Provincial Council that ‘The reconciliation that has been undertaken today will be worthless if investigations into the coup do not reveal the truth behind [its] staging’.<sup>166</sup> Many Fijians agreed, including the army’s legal officer, Lt Ilaisa Tagitupou. ‘Justice was necessary,’ he said, ‘because reconciliation was not appreciated.’<sup>167</sup> Interim deputy prime minister Ratu Epeli Nailatikau took a more principled stand.

Unadulterated greed and the unbelievable arrogance as was shamelessly displayed by chiefs and people alike on May 19 will not bring about paramouncy in this day and age.

Justice had to come before reconciliation, he declared, contradicting Qarase.<sup>168</sup>

Nailatikau’s wife – Adi Koila – who had suffered imprisonment in the hands of the rebels in parliament, agreed. When in October 2004, Qarase attempted to draw a line under reconciliation by having two coup participants – Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu and Ratu Jope Seniloli – undertake a traditional *matanigasau* ceremony for forgiveness before himself and the President during a special Reconciliation Week, Adi Koila declared the exercise pointless given that it was directed at two main beneficiaries of the coup, one of whom she accused of having ordered

164 *fijilive*, 10 December 2003.

165 *scoop.co.nz*, 27 November 2000.

166 *Fiji Times*, 14 December 2000.

167 *Fiji Times*, 15 January 2001.

168 *scoop.co.nz*, 20 December 2000.

the burning of her father's Seaqaqa cane farm in July 2000. Why had her recently deceased parents not been so honoured? They would both be still alive were it not for the coup. Why were other coup participants like Kubuabola, Rabuka and Savua being honoured with diplomatic posts? Like her father before her, she believed reconciliation worthless if no one knew who had been behind the coup.<sup>169</sup>

Because Fijians could not agree on how to resolve the issues dividing them, the danger existed that they would simply muddle on without substantially changing anything. And that, some Fijians believed, carried the even greater risk of endless repetitions, endless violence and endless misery. 'Unless we nip it now,' one of the authors of the 1997 Constitution – Tomasi Vakatora – presciently stated, 'this mentality will continue.'<sup>170</sup>

In the wake of Speight and Ligairi, Fijians faced a dilemma that they could not resolve. Old ideas concerning paramountcy dictated that reconciliation among Fijians came before anything else. But reconciliation was never going to be possible until Fijians came to terms with their own diversity. And that meant understanding that the old politics of the *vanua* could no longer serve Fiji's multicultural *vanua* and the international context in which it now existed. It also meant understanding, as the former Labour minister Ema Tagicakibau wrote in 2004, that the 2000 coup 'did not break the rules of the *vanua* but of the law. The law must take its course, not for vengeance, but to set a high standard of behaviour to which everyone must aspire'. This, she believed, was the only way to stop Fiji's coup culture.<sup>171</sup>

To many chiefs, however, such an understanding amounted to capitulation. When they met again in late April 2001, they signalled that they wanted more chiefs in a future parliament and the level of debate in such a parliament to reflect the status due to them as chiefs. Further, they wanted Fijian representation (nominated in the first instance by chiefs) restricted to provincial representation.<sup>172</sup> The ghost of 1990 was still clearly present, but now faced a more fraught environment. Vanua Levu

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169 *Fiji Times*, 23 October 2004. The former Speaker of the House, Militoni Leweniqila, also believed that all the hostages should be compensated (*Fiji Times*, 6 May 2005). The intention had been for the apology to be given also to FLP members but the party refused to attend, fearing ulterior political motives (*Fiji Sun*, 12 February 2005).

170 *Fiji Sun*, 1 September 2000.

171 'The politics of forgiving', *Fiji Times*, 23 October 2004.

172 *fijilive*, 27 April 2001.

rebel Ratu Jo Dimuri signalled where opposition might lead. Provincial councils were captive to the Fijian chiefly elite, he argued. They had long suppressed the voices of ordinary Fijians and 'were to blame for the outbursts of Fijians'. Provincial councils should be replaced by *mataqali* (clan) and *yavusa* (district) meetings instead.<sup>173</sup>

Qarase, who desperately wanted to plug the gap left by Mara's departure and Rabuka's loss of power, had no time for such nonsense. Democracy, he warned, could be dangerous if it undermined the very communal values that defined Fijian identity. Instead he proposed strengthening the chiefly system and granted \$20 million to make the GCC financially independent, drafted constitutional changes to place it under presidential rather than parliamentary control, and planned a new administration complex for the GCC.<sup>174</sup> But his responses came too late. The events of 2000 effectively placed the chiefly system on trial and, over the next 10 years, its political role would be destroyed.

This was a surprising outcome for those who believed that the events of 2000 had least reasserted Fijian paramountcy. But paramountcy derived from too many interests and too many power manoeuvres to enable the emergence of stable political consensus. From the very moment of the coup, disunity generated its own self-serving momentum and rationalisations. It drove the Chief Justice to accept the army's abrogation of the Constitution and to deny legitimacy to anyone who questioned his judgement. It drove the Constitutional Review chairman, Asesela Ravuvu, to declare that 'Politics must come before the law and legalities'. It drove Qarase to argue that the treason that succeeds is not treason.<sup>175</sup> And it drove Bainimarama to defend his abrogation, even when the High Court in November 2000 ruled it illegal and called for the reinstatement of the dismissed parliament. 'It's no use moving towards democracy if we can't settle the security problem,' he warned.<sup>176</sup> But, as Vakatora acknowledged, without democracy there is only dictatorship.<sup>177</sup>

173 *Fiji Times*, 4 May 2001. Leweniqila later declared them unelected representatives not qualified to speak on politics (*Fiji Times*, 6 May 2005).

174 *Fiji Times*, 23 October 2004. Ro Pateresia Vonakua, the paramount chief of Naitasiri's Waimaro district and Ratu Jope Seniloli's sister-in-law, declared that no one could break the law with impunity, regardless of the cause they held dearly or their rank.

175 Charles Sampford, 'Dare to call it treason', *Overhere.com*, May 2001.

176 Singh, 2000, p. 15. In Lautoka, Justice Anthony Gates first declared the abrogation of the Constitution illegal, condemned the actions of senior judges who assisted the military commit illegal acts, and resisted the Chief Justice's efforts to transfer constitutional cases to Suva.

177 *Fiji Times*, 1 September 2000.

By March 2001 Bainimarama had changed his mind. He accepted the High Court's ruling that his actions in abrogating the Constitution had been illegal;<sup>178</sup> so too – reluctantly – did a divided GCC. It reappointed Iloilo president and advised him to hold fresh elections under the 1997 Constitution. Having ended the threat of a commoner revolt in 2000, Fiji's elite had no wish to surrender to the old parliament the power it had since gained. By one account Bainimarama had not wanted Chaudhry back for fear that he might frustrate confirmation of a general amnesty for military misdeeds committed during 2000.<sup>179</sup> Hence he reluctantly accepted the court's decision, and Iloilo dismissed Chaudhry and his government and dissolved parliament. Qarase now returned as caretaker prime minister with the same cabinet as before. So too Ravuvu's Constitutional Review Committee, pursuing – according to the Citizens' Constitutional Forum's (CCF) director, Rev. Akuila Yabaki – the same 'illegal objective of George Speight'.<sup>180</sup> Nothing it seemed had changed, except that all parties – including Labour – now agreed to an early election.<sup>181</sup> Both Qarase and Bainimarama urged Fijians to unite behind one party. Only by this means could Fijian paramountcy be assured, meaning that the Fijian establishment would not lose out as they had in 1999. This concern lay behind Qarase's focus on Fijian reconciliation and unity throughout his years in office. 'Calling for unity only among Fijians makes a mockery of national reconciliation and national unity,' the Catholic Archbishop

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178 At the start of 2001, Bainimarama and Colonel Ratu George Kadavulevu allegedly told Iloilo in the presence of Qarase and some of his cabinet that the military would support a government of national unity drawn from the former parliament if the Court of Appeal upheld the High Court ruling (*Fiji Times*, 20 January 2001). In March, Qarase told the Court of Appeal that he would respect its ruling and help return Fiji to constitutional government, but engineered the GCC decision that retained his incumbency (Dakuvula, 'The unresolved issues', 2004).

179 Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, p. 214. In 2003, Bainimarama declared that the military did not reinstate Chaudhry because 'there would have been physical casualties, mayhem and strife; things would have gone straight downhill' (Sandra Gebhart, 'The role of the military in a democracy: civil–military relations in Fiji', in *Background Paper on the RFMF and Fiji's Defence Policy*, CCF papers submitted to the Defence Review Committee, October 2003, p. 63). From a defence perspective this is the more likely reason for Bainimarama's decision. Of course Chaudhry had also advised the President to hold fresh elections although not all his party agreed with his advice. An amnesty bill was eventually tabled in parliament in 2004 but the government's coalition partner, the Conservative Alliance, refused to ratify it, claiming that the interests of the military's victims also needed protection (Dakuvula, 'The unresolved issues', 2004).

180 *fijilive*, 3 May 2001.

181 Tupeni Baba claims that after the High Court ruling, the Labour Party did want the old parliament recalled and Chaudhry knew he no longer had party support as leader. Hence he advised the President to dissolve the interim government and hold elections (*fijilive*, 22 April 2006).

Petero Mataca wrote: 'Instead it speaks loudly and clearly of Fijian nationalism and discrimination against non-Fijians ... We need leaders who can rise above racial politics and work for the common good of all.'<sup>182</sup>

Yet, by mid-2001, as Qarase feared, the fallout from the coup left Fiji more divided politically than before. Indeed, it appeared as if the divisions of 1999 were repeating themselves. At the same time that the GCC formally abandoned the SVT as its official party, rebel Macuata and Cakaudrove supporters split from the SVT to form a new Conservative Alliance Matanitu Vanua (CAMV). Poseci Bune left the VLV to join PANU, which itself split, with Apisai Tora forming a rival Ba Kei Viti (BKV). In May, former Deputy Prime Minister Tupeni Baba left the Labour Party to form his own party and join a preference sharing Moderate Fijian Coalition with Vuikaba's FAP faction, Mick Beddoes' United Generals Party, and Rabuka, who had also abandoned the SVT. Even the precocious NVTLP split, its rump reuniting with its one-time rival – the New National Party – as a Taukei Civilian Forum. Melanesian members deserted the United Generals Party, declaring themselves unhappy with their leader's support for the restoration of democracy.

Meanwhile several provinces formed their own parties (Naitasiri offered a Citizen's United Party) or proposed their chiefs as provincial candidates, in both instances arguing that no Fijian candidates should challenge them. Lau put its weight behind Qarase who, in May, launched his own Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL or People's United Party), backed it was alleged by Fijian Holdings Limited<sup>183</sup> and supported by the Tailevu faction of the Fijian Association Party. Naitasiri's Turaga ni Qaranivalu, Takiveikata, became its vice president. Certainly 12 caretaker ministers and Qarase hoped that the SDL would be their vehicle to electoral success. Even before the formation of his party, Qarase was on the campaign trail dispensing funds for villages, roads and schools across the country. But, like other Fijian leaders, Qarase understood that success also depended on how voting preferences were distributed. A government analysis of the 1999 election claimed that the SVT would have won if Fijian parties had directed preferences to it instead of the Labour Party.<sup>184</sup> Hence the rash of umbrella organisations formed – the Moderate Fijian

182 P Mataca, 'Churches must preach unity', *Fiji Times*, 9 February 2005.

183 [pcgovt.org.fj](http://pcgovt.org.fj), accessed 18 May 2001.

184 *fijilive*, 21 May 2001.

Coalition, the Nationalists' Taukei Civilian Forum, and the SVT's Fijian Political Forum. In mid-May, the Methodist Church tried to bring the rival coalitions together and have all major Fijian parties share preferences.

Despite efforts to unite all Fijian parties under a single political umbrella, Fijians remained deeply divided over the meaning and the legality of the events of 2000: 'We have tried the illegal and unjust route on many occasions and we, the indigenous people, continue to pay the price for our recklessness,' lawyer Tupou Draunidalo warned towards the end of 2000. The ball, she believed, was now firmly in the hands of the military: 'Fiji will emerge from this mess when the FMF takes its role as the ultimate guardian of the State and Constitution more seriously ... You reap what you sow'.<sup>185</sup> The Citizens' Constitutional Forum (CCF) agreed. In May 2001, it legally challenged the President's failure to recall parliament.<sup>186</sup> Qarase dismissed its members as 'zealots of constitutionality' and declared that 'the welfare of people come before the rule of law'.<sup>187</sup> But the pressure told on the Chief Justice and he resigned.

As Sutherland and I noted that year, the August 2001 elections fell too much under the shadow of the 2000 coup to enable dispassionate debate on strategies and outcomes.<sup>188</sup> The Labour Party fought for the restoration of its government, the SDL for the continuation of its interim administration and policies, and the Conservative Alliance for the legitimisation of the 2000 coup. The results reflected that polarisation. Former People's Coalition partners like PANU, FAP and VLV were routed. So too the new BKV and the once dominant SVT. Fijians rallied behind Qarase's SDL which won nearly all Fijian seats, except for five in Vanua Levu and one in Tailevu (Speight's) that were taken by the Conservative Alliance.<sup>189</sup>

185 *Fiji Times*, 15 December 2000. Her stepfather, Dr Timoci Bavadra, had been one of the May 1987 coup's first victims, while her father – Col Savenaca Draunidalo – had been implicated in the 2000 coup.

186 Eventually justices Ward and Barker ruled that, while the CCF's case was valid, the President had had no alternative given the Labour Party's divisions and the lack of a government-in-waiting. Elections had already been held. They could not turn back the clock.

187 *fijilive*, 14 May 2001. The Qarase regime also pressured the CCF by deregistering it as a charitable trust (*fijilive*, 23 April 2001).

188 Robertson & Sutherland, *Government by the Gun*, 2001, pp. 141–42. The analysis in the next five paragraphs also draws on Sutherland's 'Postscript' in that volume.

189 Additionally, the NLUP won two seats, the GVP one, the NFP one (later lost on a recount to the FLP), and independents two. Although in custody, Speight was permitted to contest the seat in Tailevu but was expelled from parliament for non-attendance in December 2001. He remained incarcerated on Nukulau Island. His brother, Samisoni Tikoinasau, assumed his place instead.

With 31 seats and 51 per cent of the Fijian vote, Qarase was the clear winner and he immediately set about forming government in partnership with CAMV.

By heralding a third period of post-independence Fijian political domination and segregated economic development, rather than the start of a new era of multiracial cooperation, Qarase – like Mara and Rabuka before him – portrayed elite Fijian interests as synonymous with those of ordinary Fijians and declared their primacy above all other interests. For that reason Sutherland and I concluded our study of the 2000 coup and its aftermath by stating that ‘it was too early to forecast an end to government by the gun in Fiji in the long term’.<sup>190</sup>

But we also detailed what we believed Fijians could do to put the indigenous question behind them and take Fiji forward.<sup>191</sup> First, we argued that Fijians needed to understand that the causes of their disaffection lay within their own communities. The notion of Fijian paramountcy made this task more difficult; it enabled a Fijian elite to dominate on their behalf and reject the kind of open environment that might assist Fijians to achieve their potential. Unfortunately, pursuing the idea of Fijian political unity has always produced its opposite, not to mention marginality, victimhood and eventually dictatorship.

Second, we believed that indigenous identity should not be claimed at the expense of national identity; ‘calling everybody by the same name is a first step in overcoming legacies of colonialism and moving forward’.<sup>192</sup> We recommended that everyone be accepted as Fijian<sup>193</sup> after the name of the nation, and that those who up until then had claimed the national name for themselves be called the Taukei. But we also recommended recognition of people’s multiple identities and heritages as a way of discouraging the stereotyping associated with exclusive identities.

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190 Robertson & Sutherland, *Government by the Gun*, 2001, p. 142.

191 ‘Addressing the indigenous question’ and ‘Building the nation’, Robertson & Sutherland, *Government by the Gun*, 2001, pp. 132–39.

192 Robertson & Sutherland, *Government by the Gun*, 2001, p.133.

193 Adi Litia Cakobau would clearly not have agreed. In 2003, she attacked IndoFijians at USP who used the journal *Fijian Studies* to include ‘Indian’ matters, calling their action an insidious form of ‘ethnic violence’, even ‘an act of ethnocide’ (*fijilive*, 10 December 2003).

Third, we urged that indigenous institutions be transparent and accountable, that they be democratised and work to empower their people, not act like fiefdoms above the law. Such fiefdoms were among the root causes of Fiji's contemporary misadventure.

Fourth, we contended that affirmative action had done little to assist Fijians not already in advantaged positions; had it been otherwise then the *vanua* of 2000 might never have presented as Ligairi's 'dogs of war'.

We ended our study by arguing that the challenge facing Fiji was not the absence of indigenous paramountcy as so many Fijian nationalists asserted. Fijians were politically dominant but such dominance brought them neither wealth nor unity.

Similarly, the challenge is not to do with the incompatibility of democracy with tradition. Democracy is needed more than ever to ensure indigenous wellbeing. Nor is it even the impossibility of harmony in plural societies. Pluralism takes many forms and is just as capable of enriching societies as creating the basis for division.<sup>194</sup>

Instead the real challenge lay – as the authors of Fiji's 1997 Constitution had earlier recognised – in citizens understanding 'that what is good for their neighbours must ultimately be good for them as well, when difference and diversity are seen not as sources of division and distrust but of strength and inspiration'.<sup>195</sup> Ligairi and Speight had demonstrated for a second time what could happen when that challenge was denied. Unfortunately, Qarase would now demonstrate how much harder the challenge would become each time it is rejected.

The post-2000 regime of Laisenia Qarase rebuilt the Fijian establishment party that both Mara and Rabuka had lost before him and, like the government under them, did little for ordinary Fijians. Its much-vaunted affirmative action policies in education benefited only Fijians who attended Fijian-run schools. For the majority, who increasingly dominated the rolls of non Fijian-run primary and secondary schools, there was no assistance.<sup>196</sup> Many of these students were among the most disadvantaged Fijians, residing in squatter settlements and poor households. Of course Fijians

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194 Robertson & Sutherland, *Government by the Gun*, 2001, pp. 138–39.

195 Reeves, Vakatora & Lal, *The Fiji Islands*, 1996, p. xix.

196 *Fiji Times*, 22 February 2007. The remainder of this section draws on Robbie Robertson, 'Coups & development: the more things change, the more they stay the same', in BV Lal & G Chand (eds), *1987 and All That: Fiji Twenty Years Later*. Lautoka: FIAS, 2008, pp. 27–41.

were not the only ones in this situation. Despite government attempts to argue that Fijians represented the most disadvantaged population in the country, increased IndoFijian depopulation of the countryside after 2000, the greater presence of IndoFijian beggars on the main streets of urban centres, the growth of IndoFijian peri-urban squatter settlements, and official statistics all suggested a more complex story.<sup>197</sup> Poverty and disadvantage afflicted every community.

Although the maintenance of ethnic forms of discrimination as the basis for affirmative action became increasingly tenuous, the rationale for all Fijian-first policies pursued since independence never varied. Too much had been invested in them for Fijian parties to simply disown them, a fact that Speight knew only too well in 2000. 'I've stepped in to stop the Indians or any other migrant culture achieving in this country what the Europeans have achieved in Australia and New Zealand,' he declared.<sup>198</sup> Prime Minister Mara had similarly promoted the primacy of Fijian interests and employed the racial card. In 1987, he put loyalty to the Fijian cause ahead of democracy and the law, and had been reinstated as prime minister and gone on to become president as a result. Although in 2000 he declared that 'armed intervention and attempted coups are not the way to reach political and economic goals,' his willingness to sack Prime Minister Chaudhry said otherwise. This was not lost on many soldiers in the RFMF. In July 2000, the Labasa mutineers declared themselves 'soldiers of the *vanua* first and Government later'.<sup>199</sup> The legal support offered to both the President and military commander by members of the judiciary to circumvent constitutional procedures, and the subsequent actions of

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197 Even the SDL's *Strategic Development Plan (SDP) 2007–2011* concedes this; about 36 per cent of Indians lived in poverty, 33 per cent of Fijians. The more significant difference lay in the nature of employment: 26 per cent of Indians were engaged in subsistence activities compared with 43 per cent of Fijians (*SDL Government Paper to the National Economic Summit*. Suva, 2006, pp. 6–7). Demographic changes also made sustaining the Indian dominance argument difficult. In 1976, Indians made up 49 per cent of the population. In 2006, they most likely comprised only 37 per cent. If current emigration trends continued, by 2022 Indians might comprise only 25 per cent of the population.

198 The former Constitutional Review Committee chair, New Zealander Sir Paul Reeves replied: 'I keep hearing again and again that they must not allow what happened to the Maori in New Zealand to happen to us. My response to that is this. Maori lost land and social structures but at the same time the Maori today are showing much more creativity and real effort to rectify their situation than I detect what Fijians are doing' (*Fiji Times*, 23 September 2000, p. 2).

199 *fijilive*, 30 January 2003.

the military all suggested the viability of extra-legal actions for the Fijian cause. If institutions do not observe the rule of law, Draunidalo observed, 'there is nothing to ground the citizen to observe the rule of law'.<sup>200</sup>

Chiefs and Christian leaders were similarly swayed by the Fijian cause, among them Takiveikata, the paramount chief of Naitasiri, one of two provinces that were deeply implicated in both the coup and subsequent military mutiny. 'Fijians do not know much about democracy and free living,' the SDL Vice President declared: 'They need to work with laws and regulations to keep them in order. Fijians would be better off if colonial rules were activated. This would keep Fijians in their villages.'<sup>201</sup>

Qarase expressed the same sentiments when he laid forth his blueprint in July 2000 to revamp the colonial Fijian Administration and to make the GCC more independent of government. In the following years, he delivered on his promises. By 2006 a massive multimillion-dollar headquarters for the GCC took shape on the Nasese foreshore, close to the scene of the 2000 coup, and built with funds originally set aside for Fijian development projects. Qarase's assurance that the government would henceforth pay the operating costs of the NLTB similarly promised more income for the chiefs. His conversion of Rabuka's earlier \$20 million loan to Fijian Holdings Ltd into a grant secured the privatised wealth of its principal beneficiaries.

In order to appease the nationalists behind the coup, Qarase (like Chaudhry before him in 1999) rejected the constitutional power-sharing requirement to bring Labour into a multi-party cabinet (parties with over 10 per cent of seats were entitled to a similar proportion of cabinet seats). That Labour did not contest his decision probably indicated the extent to which both parties saw non-cooperation in the more ethnically

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200 *Fiji Times*, 15 December 2000, p. 7. The problem, however – as Madraiwiwi later noted – is that many Fijians see the rule of law as a foreign concept that subverts their way of life. Hence indigenous rights 'can only be secured by force'; 'However, the problem with this state of affairs is that force and political power are notoriously fickle instruments. They are subject to whim and fancy and are dependent on the inclinations of those who wield authority. In comparison the rule of law in its reliance on systems, laws and regulations is a far more reliable instrument and shield' (Madraiwiwi, 'Ethnic tensions and the law', 2004).

201 *Fiji Times*, 26 August 2000, p. 2.

polarised post-coup political environment as in their long-term interest. Hence Qarase formed a coalition with the CAMV in 2001, the party that supported the coup's perpetrators and their goals.<sup>202</sup>

Qarase's nationalist credentials were similarly enhanced by determined support for ministers charged with criminal offences during the coup,<sup>203</sup> his continued backing of the rebel Seniloli as vice president, by his dogged pursuance of a constitutional review twice declared illegal by the courts, and by his presentation to parliament in 2005 of a Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity (RTU) Bill that, among other things, held out the promise of amnesty for persons involved in the 2000 coup, if not an end to all coup prosecutions. In the final year of his first government, Qarase introduced a Qoliqoli Bill to enable coastal villagers to earn revenue from the sea, just as they did from the land. Later he also promised an indigenous claims tribunal and a review of the foundational colonial document, the Deed of Cession. Some critics believed that the latter intention amounted to a rewriting of history to suit his nationalist agenda.<sup>204</sup>

Qarase's SDL government clearly saw itself as a government working in the interests of Fijians rather than that of the whole nation. Its Foreign Minister, Kaliopate Tavola, declared in 2002 that 'Democracy is a foreign imposition [that] does not sit well with traditional hierarchies,'<sup>205</sup> echoing the claim by nationalists in 1987 that democracy was a foreign flower unsuited to Fiji's soils. Democracy here meant a system of transparent governance open to the equal participation of all citizens and working in the interests of all citizens, as Qarase recognised back in 2000.

We all welcome democracy in laying importance on the equal rights of individuals, their equality before the law, and a system of government and leadership based on the consent of the people, and not on divine right or status at birth. But in the long run, it will also serve to undermine chiefly status and authority in our traditional society. And the collective value systems that bind us together.<sup>206</sup>

202 In early 2006, CAMV was merged into the SDL to better maintain Fijian political unity ahead of fresh elections.

203 These included Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, Simione Kaitani, Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure and Isireli Leweniqila.

204 S Shameem, 'The assumption of executive authority on December 5 2006 by Commodore JV Bainimarama, Commander of the RFMF: legal, constitutional and human rights issues', Fiji Human Rights Commission, Suva, 3 January 2007, p. 12.

205 *Daily Post*, 16 August 2002.

206 *Fiji Times*, 12 October 2000.

The SDL believed such governance impossible as long as Fijians were disadvantaged.<sup>207</sup> Disadvantage had generated political and economic instability in the past and, until it was addressed, no 'Western'-type democracy could be possible. Rather, government had to be first and foremost composed of Fijians because, as Qarase reminded voters ahead of the 2006 election, only Fijians could be depended upon to secure Fijian interests.<sup>208</sup>

But, if Qarase believed that he had inherited the mantle of Mara and Rabuka, he was tragically mistaken. The post-coup environment after 2000 certainly shared many features with that pertaining after 1987. Fijian paramountcy had been reasserted. Politically Fijians appeared to be united although, until 2006, the SDL's hold on majority Fijian support remained tenuous. But the crucial difference lay with the military and, in particular, with its Commander, the importance of which seemed constantly to elude the Prime Minister. Given the country's history of military intervention, this response is puzzling but can possibly be explained by Qarase's belief that Bainimarama – lacking Rabuka's charisma and public profile – would be malleable and that, ultimately, his interpretation of Fijian paramountcy would make the difference. In the end, however, his faith in paramountcy as the primary driver of Fiji politics proved his undoing, just as it had for Mara and Rabuka before him. This time the trigger was not an adverse electoral result but Bainimarama's anger at Qarase's unwavering support for individuals involved in the 2000 coup and his clumsy attempts to remove the Commander from office in 2003 and after. That anger was slow in manifesting itself publicly. Until then, as one journalist noted, Bainimarama 'rarely encroached on the political arena'.<sup>209</sup>

Some military officers believed that they only ever intended Qarase to lead a group of public-spirited individuals until such time as elections could be called. Thus Baledrokadroka described the interim government as a creature of the military, albeit a military traumatised by and divided over

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207 This view is reflected also in its *Strategic Development Plan 2007–2011* (p. 2), and in press comments by Qarase and investor Ballu Khan that 'the widening wealth divide between Indians and Fijians had given rise to a coup culture' (*Fiji Times*, 25 & 26 February 2007).

208 Such thinking also pervaded his handling of relations with the military later in the year. Qarase insisted that his dispute with the military was 'an indigenous problem', not a national one, and that it should be dealt with by the GCC as the paramount indigenous body (*fjilive*, 9 November 2006). That body promptly claimed it was a Tailevu problem, and unsuccessfully asked Bainimarama's province to deal with it. National issues, Bainimarama argued, should be addressed through proper parliamentary and democratic channels, not the Fijian administrative system (*fjilive*, 1 November 2006).

209 *fjilive*, 9 April 2003.

the events of 2000. Nonetheless, the military did provide a mandate to the interim government to improve Fijian wellbeing and tied its survival to the military as the guarantor of national security.<sup>210</sup> Hence Bainimarama began to see himself as a kingmaker. By winning an election is his own right, however, Qarase believed that he had trumped the power Bainimarama held and began acting independently of the military's goals. In itself this was unproblematic but, with former rebels and their supporters having charges dropped, given reduced sentences or released early from jail, with Qoriniasi Bale – a disbarred lawyer and former senator – now a powerful attorney-general, and with revelations emerging of vote-buying from Ministry of Agriculture funds during the 2001 election, a cold war – as Brij Lal has termed it<sup>211</sup> – between Bainimarama and Qarase gradually unfolded late in 2001 and became increasingly public, especially between 2003 and 2006 when many coup prosecutions were finalised and the networks of conspiracies that lay behind the 2000 coup were momentarily exposed to light.<sup>212</sup>

With the exception of Speight, who was sentenced to death in 2002 but had his sentence immediately commuted to life, most of the coup conspirators received light sentences. Stevens also received life but his CRWU comrades (including Tikotani) were more fortunate and served six years; Nata, Silatolu, Savu, Ligairi and Jim Speight served only three years, Vuniwai and Navakasuasua two years, and Duvuloco 1.5 years.<sup>213</sup> Takiveikata went through a number of trials and appeals from 2004 and eventually received a seven-year sentence.<sup>214</sup> But their fellow travellers generated more controversy, particularly those with the political and chiefly associations that epitomised the shadowy forces at work behind the scenes. They were seemingly protected. Kubuabola and Savua were posted overseas. Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure, who had appeared to serve

210 Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, pp. 212–13.

211 BV Lal, 'Anxiety, uncertainty and fear in our land: Fiji's road to military coup', in Fraenkel, Firth & Lal, *The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji*, 2009, p. 22. The Agricultural Assistance scam came to light in 2002 and involved \$25 million used mostly for vote buying. Permanent Secretary for Agriculture Peniasi Kunatuba, and three of his staff, were eventually jailed, the former for four years in 2006. At his trial Kunatuba claimed that the purpose of the scheme was to assist the interim government establish itself as a credible government and gain popular confidence (*Fiji Times*, 12 October 2006). After 2009 he allegedly became Commissioner of Corporate Services as part of a Yellow Ribbon rehabilitation program ([www.coupfourandahalf.com](http://www.coupfourandahalf.com), 22 July 2012).

212 In a Legend FM radio interview in late 2007, Bainimarama indicated that he had considered a coup against Qarase in 2001 (exactly when he did not say). It did not happen because the military decided to give Qarase a chance 'to mend his ways' (*Fiji Times*, 6 December 2007).

213 [www.coupfourandahalf.com](http://www.coupfourandahalf.com), 20 February 2002, 19 February 2003.

214 [www.coupfourandahalf.com](http://www.coupfourandahalf.com), 25 November 2004.

as one of Speight's legal advisors, became Deputy Speaker and remained in office until a four-year sentence made his role untenable. Qarase pointedly refused also to take action against colleagues such as Lands Minister Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu and Sports Minister Isireli Leweniqila when they were charged, on the grounds that they were innocent until found guilty.<sup>215</sup> All had participated in the parliamentary drama. The same reasoning applied to Seniloli, the Vice President, who accepted a presidential role under Speight. Although eventually jailed for four years in 2004, he remained Vice President. Seniloli had offered to resign, but his offer had been refused for fear of weakening the position of Qarase's other ministers. In the end, Seniloli served only three months of his sentence before being released for health reasons on a compulsory supervision order and allowed to resign.<sup>216</sup> Such orders invited suspicion or derision. Vakalabure was similarly released early in 2006. Lalabalavu served only 10 days in 2005 and returned to a ministerial post. Kaitani, who publically admitted sedition in 2003,<sup>217</sup> became Minister for Information shortly after. The Methodist Tomasi Kanailagi, who had pledged support for the coup, became a senator; so, too, did Apisai Tora, although he was jailed for eight months in 2005.

Clearly such leniency helped maintain the SDL and CAMV alliance, but it also flowed from Qarase's belief that forgiveness assisted reconciliation between Fijians and would make possible stronger racial unity ahead of future elections. His party also held that a blanket pardon would most help Fiji move closer to reconciliation with IndoFijians. 'Let bygones be bygones' became the new mantra.<sup>218</sup> Bainimarama opposed such leniency, seeing it as a recipe for further instability. 'Fijians only respond to the stick from us,' he reputedly told the Police Commissioner.<sup>219</sup> Aware that Bainimarama's hard line most jeopardised his plans, Qarase looked for ways to remove the Bainimarama thorn during 2002. In March, he nominated him to become the UN force commander in Kuwait, promoting him to rear admiral in order to boost his prospects. But despite a November interview in New York, Bainimarama was unsuccessful in being appointed. Next Qarase offered him a diplomatic posting but, by now, Bainimarama

215 *fijilive*, 12 June 2003.

216 *Fiji Times*, 23 June 2004. The lawyer and former High Court judge, the Bauan Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, replaced him at the start of 2005.

217 He was later acquitted on a technicality.

218 Dakuvula, 'The unresolved issues', 2004.

219 Victor Lal, 'Bainimarama's behind-the-scenes backers were in the judiciary', [www.coupfourandahalf.com](http://www.coupfourandahalf.com), 24 May 2012.

had tired of manipulation and resolved to make his concerns public. In March 2003, incensed that the Attorney-General had approached the President to reduce sentences or pardon CRWU rebels, he very publically warned that some politicians wanted to destabilise Fiji.<sup>220</sup>

The two former allies in the reconstruction of Fiji in 2000 were now increasingly determined to pursue contradictory goals. Qarase, through his RTU amnesty proposals, planned greater leniency for coup perpetrators and their fellow travellers. He and his party saw the RTU Bill as a litmus test of their support for indigenous causes.<sup>221</sup> Qarase believed that customary obligations entangled most Fijians in the events of 2000.<sup>222</sup> They should not be treated as criminals but as political actors. Accordingly, he would create a commission, whose members he would appoint, to conduct hearings, sometimes in secret. This commission would have power to grant reparations (funded by the state) and recommend amnesty to individuals, even if they refused to acknowledge guilt and were prepared to reoffend. In addition, an amnesty committee could direct courts to end prosecutions and wipe criminal records clean. CCF's Jone Dakuvula believed its sole intent was to allow certain individuals to stand for parliament. 'Deep down, contrary to his words,' Dakuvula added, 'the PM [Prime Minister] and his colleagues still believe that the overthrow of the Coalition government in 2000 was justified.'<sup>223</sup> Lawyer Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum declared the proposed RTU Bill unconstitutional. It would duplicate the work of the police. It would strip power from the DPP. It was not in Fiji's long-term political and economic interests. It would weaken social stability and national security.<sup>224</sup> Graham Leung, President of the Fiji Law Society, maintained also that it threatened the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary and would undermine military discipline. Wadan Narsey added investor confidence to that long list of weaknesses in Qarase's legislation, noting that it would do nothing to discourage future crime.<sup>225</sup>

220 Dakuvula, 'The unresolved issues', 2004; *Fiji Sun*, 14 April 2005.

221 Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, 'Making the right choices', keynote address to the 34th Annual Congress of the Fiji Institute of Accountants, Sofitel Resort Spa, 23 June 2006. '[Is] there any purpose served by the Bill in light of the divisions it has caused?' he asked.

222 *Fiji Times*, 5 May 2005.

223 *Fiji Sun*, 28 August 2005.

224 *Fiji Times*, 1 June 2005.

225 Wadan Narsey, 'Great concept, bad reality', *Fiji Times*, 31 May 2005.

Despite all the jargon about restorative justice and the uniqueness of the Fijian condition, Fiji had ample experience of reconciliation and its pitfalls, as Edwina Kotoisuva of the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre noted in early 2006.

Reconciliation is a great thing and ideally if reconciliation does take place the offence should never be repeated. But the reality is that the offence is likely to occur again without proper intervention that is targeted at changing the man's behaviour ... [R]econciliation, as it exists within the cycle of abuse, is almost meaningless because it is supported by most people and structures in society who are willing to place the lives of women and children on the line for a mythical concept of family life.<sup>226</sup>

For a patriarchal elite this was a comparison too far, and soon the debate degenerated into personal attacks.

Commissioner of Police Andrew Hughes, who had been drafted in from the Australian Federal Police to reprofessionalise the police force after Savua's departure in 2003, opposed amnesty on the understandable grounds that it would interfere with ongoing police investigations and prosecutions. Earlier he called the rebels 'domestic terrorists'; now he wanted his own commission, one that would inquire into their activities. 'How can you reconcile something when you don't know what occurred,' he argued; 'who do you forgive and what are you forgiving them for?' But Qarase refused. If investigations are ongoing, why have an inquiry?<sup>227</sup> Many of Qarase's colleagues were blunter. Senator Mitieli Bulanauca declared that people who do not want to be part of the reconciliation process should leave Fiji.<sup>228</sup> When Bainimarama attacked the RTU Bill's amnesty proposals, claiming that they were designed to promote the ethnic cleansing of Indians and to garner rural Fijian votes, Tora taunted him brutally: step down and let 'a real army man take over to restore military honour'.<sup>229</sup>

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226 Edwina Kotoisuva, 'When reconciliation is unjust', *Fiji Times*, 11 January 2006.

227 *Fiji Sun*, 25 August 2004; 25 & 26 August 2006. But, in mid-2005, he made that task more difficult by refusing to extend the contract of the expatriate public prosecutor, Peter Ridgway, who had been most involved in the post-coup cases.

228 *Fiji Times*, 23 October 2004. The Minister for Lands expressed similar sentiments on introducing the Qoliqoli Bill: if hoteliers did not like it they could invest in another country (*fjivillage*, 13 August 2006).

229 *Fiji Sun*, 2 July 2005; *Fiji Times*, 25 August 2005.

## The military spoiler

Bainimarama's opposition generated increasingly personal attacks. Jioji Kotobalavu, the long-serving CEO of the Prime Minister's office, later reminded him that the 2000 coup involved not only the illegal takeover of an elected government but the removal of a president. Bainimarama concentrated on one aspect of the coup alone, he warned, not 'total justice', not 'the illegal abrogation of the Constitution, which he was responsible for'.<sup>230</sup> The message was clear. Everyone had skeletons in their cupboards, including the Commander, who knew only too well that parliament had failed to approve amnesty for the military and that the police continued to investigate the deaths associated with the mutiny. The government was not going to bow easily to the military. Bainimarama 'is a person who suffers from insecurity', Kotobalavu declared in 2004, 'and has a tendency to behave like an autocratic dictator'.<sup>231</sup>

Certainly, government now faced a much more pugnacious Bainimarama, one prepared to purge his senior officers in order to stay on top and to challenge political leaders who disregarded his authority or who failed to give him and his military the respect that he believed they deserved. It helped of course that Bainimarama's vision for the military placed it at the very centre of Fiji, obliged to uphold the wellbeing of the country in addition to its defence and security duties. That this vision, inserted into the Taukeist 1990 Constitution, had been repealed in 1997 did not trouble him given that Qarase's Government had also brushed aside so much of the 1997 Constitution. The events of 2000 and Bainimarama's growing distrust of Fijian communal and political leaders quickly transformed the military 'into an agent of partisan national politics'.<sup>232</sup>

Surprisingly, Qarase appeared to take the loyalty of the military for granted. He sought to reduce the court martial sentences of Labasa soldiers found guilty of mutiny. He even planned to halve the size of the RFMF and not renew Bainimarama's five-year contract as commander. Bainimarama became aware of these machinations and laid his own plans. He recalled all soldiers guarding state officials and asked his officers to pledge support to

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230 *Fiji Times*, 10 January 2005.

231 *Fiji Post*, 21 March 2004.

232 Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, pp. 294–95. In addition, the highly partisan Directorate of Army Legal Services probably fed Bainimarama's incorrect interpretation of the status of constitutional clauses relating to the military (Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, pp. 252–53).

him. He called on the government to resign if it did not back the military. He increased military briefings with the President. In June 2003, he announced that he wanted his contract renewed in the following February and received endorsement from opposition politicians.<sup>233</sup> But not from Permanent Secretary of Home Affairs Jeremaia Waqanisau; his very public denunciations of Bainimarama served only to make himself a target for military hatred.<sup>234</sup> Also in Bainimarama's sights were Waqanisau's two deputies, former major Dr Lesi Korovuvula and Penijamini Lomaloma. He suspected both of trying to influence the President to reduce sentences. In August, Bainimarama recommended that the three senior home affairs officials be removed from office. Nothing happened. Instead the Attorney-General allegedly sought to bypass the President by seeking legislation to establish a parole board. By this means he alone could make recommendations for pardons and reduce sentences.<sup>235</sup> Meanwhile the political attacks on coup investigations continued. In June, the GCC discussed a Tailevu proposal to close all investigations and issue a general pardon. In December, Adi Litia Cakobau called on the Senate to release all political prisoners and cease coup investigations.<sup>236</sup>

An angry Bainimarama told his officers in December 2003 to prepare to take over government if it chose not to reappoint him. They urged him to desist, sending a copy of their advice to the Home Affairs Minister. Qarase probably read this to mean that Bainimarama did not enjoy the full support of the military and that a coup was unlikely.<sup>237</sup> But, to ease tensions, he agreed in January to reappoint Bainimarama as commander for a final five-year term. Bainimarama was not mollified. He took revenge on his senior officers. Those who refused to pledge personal loyalty to him were purged at the start of 2004.<sup>238</sup> Indeed, as political scientist

233 Wainikiti Bogidrau, 'Checkmate: why the army and state went head-to-head', *Review*, 1 July 2003; Dakuvula, 'The unresolved issues', 2004; *Daily Post*, 8 May 2003; *Fiji Times*, 6 June 2003.

234 Dakuvula, 'The unresolved issues', 2004. Allegedly Waqanisau recommended that Bainimarama's contract not be renewed because the military had overspent its budget by \$20 million in 2003 (*Fiji Times*, 23 March 2003).

235 Dakuvula, 'The unresolved issues', 2004. As the chair of the Prerogative of Mercy Commission, the Attorney-General already possessed similar powers.

236 Dakuvula, 'The unresolved issues', 2004. *fijilive*, 26 September 2003.

237 Victor Lal & Russell Hunter, 'Smuggled papers show Bainimarama's lust for power', *New Zealand Herald*, 25 February 2012. The text appeared in the press in April 2004 (*Fiji Sun*, 7 April 2004).

238 They were Kadavulevu, Tuatoko, Raduva and two chief staff officers from Strategic HQ – Lt Col Akuila Buadromo and Commander Timoci Koroi. Baledrokadroka claims that Bainimarama demanded they draw up plans for a takeover, claiming that legal channels to effect his reappointment would take too long. Tuatoko argued that the Commander should not use the RFMF in this way to have his contract renewed (Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, pp. 218–23).

Jon Fraenkel later noted, 'Each subsequent spat served also as a loyalty test'.<sup>239</sup> Qarase saw an opportunity to settle the dispute once and for all. In mid-July, he successfully advised the President to hold a commission of inquiry into Bainimarama's purportedly treasonous activities but, the very next day – after a visit from Bainimarama – Iloilo suddenly reversed his agreement.<sup>240</sup> Defeated, Qarase sent Waqanisau to Beijing as an ambassador.

Bainimarama gave as good as he got; he demanded that the government transform its economic policies, educate people on the problems associated with coups, and end corruption. Much like Rabuka in 1987, he envisaged the military assuming new roles in commerce and politics and, in 2004, launched his 'Military for Life' concept, which immediately took form as a successful bid for engineer reservists to build Telecom satellite stations in 87 villages. Such initiatives, Bainimarama believed, were desperately needed for a RFMF 'on the verge of burning out as it continues to work with insufficient resources'<sup>241</sup> and as it sought to staunch the exodus of seasoned personnel. Indeed, by mid-2005, some 1,000 Fijians were serving as soldiers, guards and drivers in Iraq and Kuwait and over 2,000 were members of the British military forces.<sup>242</sup> But a lack of resources most explained the military's constant overspending of its budget. Some was due also to inadequate controls over the purchase of goods and services and to the increased roles that the army played in maintaining domestic security and assisting with disaster relief. Additionally, peacekeeping duties were a real budget killer because, as operations increased, so did the proportions of monies spent on salaries and allowances, from 51 per cent in 1977 to over 80 per cent in 2002. Dagney Fosen argues that Fiji's governments consistently failed to reimburse the military adequately for its duties, with the result that its administration, logistics and equipment

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239 Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, pp. 218–23, Jon Fraenkel, 'Fiji's December 2006 coup: Who, what, where and why?', in Fraenkel, Firth & Lal, *The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji*, 2009, p. 46.

240 *Fiji Times*, 24 July 2005. According to one account, Bainimarama used his knowledge of an attempt in late 2001 by businessmen close to Qarase to remove Iloilo from the presidency to sway the President to drop the investigation (Wainikiti Bogidrau, 'Inside a palace coup', *Fiji Times*, 25 June 2005).

241 *Fiji Sun*, 23 October 2004.

242 Nic Maclellan, 'Fiji, the war in Iraq and the privatization of Pacific Island security', *Australian Policy Forum*, Nautilus Institute, 6 April 2006. Some recruiters were of deep concern. In one instance as many as 15,000 villagers paid a recruiter a registration fee of \$150 just to be listed for work opportunities. Often this money came from church or village development funds. But, if realised, the benefits were lucrative. Remittances, valued at \$200 million in 2005, surpassed sugar and garments in earning Fiji foreign exchange.

needs suffered dramatically.<sup>243</sup> Perhaps a small country like Fiji could never afford such a comparatively large military. Since 1978 its share of the government budget had jumped from 2.8 per cent to over 7 per cent in 2000;<sup>244</sup> in post-coup years proportions were even higher. Although various reviews had been held to restructure and reform the military, most of them – like attempts to audit RFMF finances in the years after 1987 – came to nought. Only in 2006 did Fiji finally recognise that it had created a beast it could no longer control.

The warning signs had been there since 2003 and they emerged again in 2005 when the government pressed ahead with its RTU Bill, despite fresh military opposition. This time the military employed new tactics, placing ministers under surveillance and, in some instances, allegedly stalking them. When the RTU Bill was read in parliament in June 2005, military officers filled the public gallery. A leaked report suggested it planned to remove the government if the Bill passed. The government responded by docking Bainimarama's pay for exceeding the military's budget, and tit-for-tat allegations raged in the months ahead.<sup>245</sup> A furious Bainimarama threatened to relocate his HQ into the home affairs section of Government Buildings in December and challenged both Home Affairs Minister Josefa Vosanibola and his CEO Korovuvala to come to the barracks and sack him. The head of the Public Service Commission, Anare Jale, threatened police retaliation should Bainimarama move against home affairs officials, and Police Commissioner Hughes put the newly formed Police Tactical Response Unit on standby.<sup>246</sup>

Bainimarama denied threatening anyone but maintained that the military now no longer recognised the minister and was answerable to no one.<sup>247</sup> But he began preparations, allegedly telling his senior officers on Sunday

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243 Dagney Margrete Fosen, 'RFMF in Fiji's defence policy', in CCF, *Background Paper on the RFMF*, 2003, pp. 11–14. Fosen notes that the military contributed to its budgetary problems; it was over ranked by some 333 personnel (CCF, *Background Paper on the RFMF*, p. 26).

244 CCF, *Background Paper on the RFMF*, p.10.

245 Journalist Wainikiti Bogidrau argued that, because the government knew that the President would side with Bainimarama over the RTU Bill, it organised for the GCC to send a delegation to deliver a truce with the military. Nothing came of it. When the President later called Qarase to brief him and the Vice President on the Bill, he bluntly told him to drop it ('Inside a palace coup', 2005).

246 Set up in 2005 to replace the anti-terrorist functions of the CRWU on the recommendation of the 2000 Military Board of Inquiry and 2004 Security and Defence Review, it built on the foundations of the 1973 Police Mobile Force and Special Patrol Group. Based in Nasinu, it eventually comprised 138 staff and operated as a SWAT team. Bainimarama closed it down on 2 February 2007 (*Fiji Sun*, 6 February 2007).

247 Serafina Qalo, 'Champion of rights or lawbreaker?', *Fiji Times*, 16 March 2006.

8 January 2006 that he intended to take over the government. The next day he told them to rescue him if he was arrested. Jokapeci Koroi, Labour's longstanding President, informed Fiji TV on 11 January that 'I think he should do it because we are waiting, the Labour Coalition government, we are waiting to complete what we started in 1999 and 2000'.

I know a lot of people will disagree with me ... I am not saying that I support it but you don't know what kind of takeover he is going to do and I have a feeling its not going to be like in the 2000 and 1987 coup, no!<sup>248</sup>

It was a stunning performance for those of us watching it. It hinted at collusion between Labour and the military, something that only a few years ago would have seemed impossible. Here was a party that had twice been felled by military interventions apparently welcoming another.

Back at the QEB the newly appointed Acting Land Force Commander Col Jone Baledrokadroka probably drew similar conclusions. The next day he and two colleagues warned a surprised Commander that what he proposed was treason and he should resign. Instead Bainimarama rallied his officers and demanded Baledrokadroka's resignation, accusing him of plotting a mutiny.<sup>249</sup> He then escalated the tension, stationing three naval vessels in Suva Harbour purportedly to protect the President. A hastily convened National Security Council met as the police erected roadblocks in Suva. Perhaps fearing resistance, Bainimarama pulled back. Vice President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, who had replaced the convicted former Vice President Seniloli in early 2005 and increasingly acted as president due to Iloilo's worsening health, got Qarase and the Commander together in February to produce an agreement that bound Bainimarama to normal civil service processes for airing grievances. In return Qarase agreed to take on board military concerns with the RTU and Qoliqoli bills.<sup>250</sup>

248 [www.coupfourandahalf.com](http://www.coupfourandahalf.com), 28 July 2011.

249 *Fiji Times*, 16 January 2006; see also Steven Ratuva, 'Officers, gentlemen and coups', *Fiji Times*, 25 January 2006. Fearing Bainimarama would move against him, Baledrokadroka closed access to the QEB on 12 January and sent two officers to Strategic HQ to inform the Commander he would not resign. Bainimarama accused him of threatening a mutiny and stood him down, pending a court marshal. Baledrokadroka eventually fled to New Zealand, and later successfully undertook a doctorate at ANU in Canberra before joining the UN Development Program.

250 Journalist Robert Keith-Reid argued that Madraiwiwi was under pressure to get Bainimarama to moderate his anti-government rhetoric or else he would be forced to accept Qarase's request for the Commander's dismissal, an action that would not be easy. That same month Iloilo indicated he wished to retire but the military refused to countenance it ('Fiji's simmering election pot', *Island Business*, April 2006). Consequently, the GCC reappointed Iloilo and Madraiwiwi for new five-year terms.

The agreement did not survive. By March the planned fortnightly meetings between the two leaders were on hold, and Bainimarama again started issuing public statements ridiculing the government. Once more the Home Affairs Minister pressed for his removal and again the President did nothing. Bainimarama taunted the government, withdrawing the security detail for the Prime Minister and challenging the government to sack him.<sup>251</sup>

If anything, Baledrokadroka's resistance forced Bainimarama to plan more carefully the steps he might undertake should his bluff be called. In February, he had the military's legal office draft two letters in preparation for a takeover. By accident they fell into the hands of Commissioner Hughes. The first – addressed to the Vice President – detailed Bainimarama's complaints against the government. The second – citing the doctrine of necessity – outlined a legal justification for military action. Hughes allegedly showed these to the Australian High Commissioner who informed the American ambassador, Larry Dinger. Dinger thought it clear that Bainimarama would remove the government if it continued on its current course. At the end of February, Hughes met Bainimarama to dissuade him from such action. But the Commander was in no mood for turning. He reiterated his dismay at Qarase's consistent leniency towards the rebels and their supporters. The army should have retained power in 2000, not surrendered it.<sup>252</sup>

The two men met again in the following month, this time to discuss another of Bainimarama's concerns: the danger the Police Tactical Response Unit posed to the military's monopolisation of weapons in Fiji. In 2005, the unit had purchased 123 pistols and 30 submachine guns to replace obsolete weapons and enable its members to be properly equipped for peacekeeping missions. Bainimarama argued that the consignment had been for the military, while Hughes maintained that he armed the police only to meet criminal threats, not to encourage Fijians to confront Fijians. The two agreed to continue talking.<sup>253</sup> Again Bainimarama was under pressure to pull back. The Vice President had

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251 *Fiji Times*, 18 & 20 March 2006.

252 Victor Lal, 'Bainimarama's behind-the-scenes backers', 2012; evidence based on embassy correspondence obtained by Wikileaks. American cables described Bainimarama as an 'erratic, sometimes violent leader, thin-skinned, often defensive and insecure, and prone to be wildly excessive in his reaction to criticisms' (Philip Doring, 'US cables reveal the brutality of Fijian regime', *Age*, 27 August 2011).

253 *Fiji Sun*, 17 March 2006.

released legal advice that refuted the military's longstanding claim to a constitutional role in politics. The DPP was about to make a decision on police investigations into the deaths of CRWU soldiers during the 2000 mutiny. And, increasingly, civil society organisations and politicians were joining forces to condemn his destabilising actions. SDL director Jale Baba, clearly not a disinterested observer, restated his party's opposition to Labour's renewed call for an independent inquiry into the events of 2000. 'We cannot let the nation be held ransom by events of the past,' he argued: 'A commission of inquiry can be regressive in terms of nation building by opening up old wounds and scars.'<sup>254</sup> But Bainimarama would have been less prepared for the responses of some nonaligned forces. Angie Heffernan, coordinator of the Pacific Centre for Public Integrity, and Virisila Buadromo, the executive director of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, declared that it was 'now time for the military to step back and let Fiji's constitutional and democratic processes work'. One cannot 'break the law to protect the law', they pointed out.<sup>255</sup>

Elections were now due in Fiji, but the census – used for redistributing seats and last held in 1996 – had been postponed because of the elections. Normally this might not be of major concern but, since 2000, the number of IndoFijians emigrating had more than doubled. This reduced the FLP's chances of winning an election in its own right, especially in open constituency seats. Redistribution might also reduce the number of closed communal seats it could contest.<sup>256</sup> Obviously, Labour had no desire to insist on a census prior to elections, and the SDL – which believed it could win if it maintained Fijian unity – urgently sought a fresh mandate to dangle before Bainimarama.<sup>257</sup> Bainimarama, however, remained undaunted. He faulted the government for holding elections without first conducting a census and escalated his campaign against it.<sup>258</sup>

254 *Fiji Times*, 24 March 2006.

255 *Fiji Times*, 24 March 2006.

256 Estimates suggested that the IndoFijian population had fallen from 49 per cent to 38 per cent of Fiji's total population between 1986 and 2004 (20,720 citizens – mostly IndoFijians – had emigrated since 2001) while the number of registered voters had fallen nearly 10 per cent, the electoral impact of which was compounded by rapid urbanisation (*Islands Business*, April 2006).

257 Despite 13 parties fielding 270 candidates and 68 independent candidates, the potential for ethnic division remained high. With the economy slumping and western Viti Levu as fractious as ever, Qarase had no reason to suppose that he could deliver Fijian unity. Hence his desire for Fijian parties to share preferences. To this end, veteran politician Tomasi Vakatora brought together a Grand Coalition of Fijian parties in early 2006 (NAP did not join) and Qarase finalised the union of CAMV and the SDL.

258 In fact, the stronger argument for delaying the elections lay in the inadequate time that the Electoral Office had for preparation. The week-long polling got off to a chaotic start on 7 May with inadequate ballot papers at polling stations and inaccurate rolls.

Although Labour appeared to align itself with Bainimarama in January 2006, Bainimarama did not rise to the party's public bait. He had no wish to ally himself too closely with a party that he damned in the past. In any case, he had developed strong links with his former commander, Ratu Epeli Ganilau, and his new National Alliance Party (NAP) and anticipated its success in the 2006 election. In March, he told the *Fiji Times*: 'The RFMF, and I as its head, have no particular political affiliation, nor do we support a party.'<sup>259</sup>

Nonetheless, in the lead up to the May elections in 2006, Bainimarama sent his soldiers into villages as part of a Truth and Justice Campaign against the SDL.<sup>260</sup> On the same day as parliament dissolved, Bainimarama led 200 troops in camouflaged gear with military vehicles armed with machine guns through the streets of Suva. 'We have taken it upon ourselves to be the watchdog of this nation for the simple reason that the same group of people who had a hand in the events of 2000 seem to be back,' Bainimarama later argued. 'The RFMF is all powerful and it has outlived a lot of governments and people,' he warned.<sup>261</sup> In an echo of the younger Rabuka, his new Land Force Commander Colonel Pita Driti dismissively declared that 'Politicians are politicians, but we are professionals'.<sup>262</sup>

By the time of the Truth and Justice Campaign, however, Bainimarama's drive against the SDL had begun to assume different characteristics. When the scandal surrounding the SDL's agricultural policies first erupted, Chaudhry had suggested that the 2001 election might be illegitimate as a consequence. According to Baledrokadroka, a commonality of interest now drove Chaudhry and Bainimarama together, and it added a new feature to Bainimarama's rhetoric.<sup>263</sup> Qarase's affirmative action bills had always been used to demonstrate his dangerous links with former rebels. Affirmative action itself had never been questioned. Now, however,

259 *Fiji Times*, 14 March 2006. Journalist Maika Bolatiki claimed that Ganilau had formed the NAP 'as revenge for his removal as chairman of the GCC by the Government' (*Fiji Sun*, 28 February 2005).

260 That this military campaign was covertly funded from the \$1.5 million received from Telecom did not seem to jar with its anti-corruption message (Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, p. 248).

261 *Fiji Times*, 27 March & 10 October 2006. Lawyer Richard Naidu made essentially the same observation of the Rabuka government 10 years before: 'Every time I look forward, I see what I am supposed to have left behind ... In the hazy background the same movers and shakers still move, shake and fix' (A Griffen, *With Heart and Nerve and Sinew: Postcoup Writing from Fiji*. Suva: Christmas Club, 1997, pp. 358–59).

262 *fijilive*, 1 November 2006.

263 Baledrokadroka, 'Sacred king and warrior chief', 2012, p. 224.

ethno-nationalism came to be projected increasingly as denying Fiji's peoples equality. The importance of this shift would not become fully apparent until much later, but in 2006 it was sufficient to enable the military to win new allies from among the IndoFijian population and to present itself as progressive, multiracial and modern in outlook. Importantly it forced Qarase to reconsider his attitude to power-sharing, although not with immediate effect.

Brij Lal believes that the 2006 election drove the tussle for power between Qarase and Bainimarama underground.<sup>264</sup> Certainly the media blitz of campaigning smothered it, but with the sniping continuing – fuelled by lazy political rhetoric – it never strayed far from people's minds. Qarase told his party faithful that all Fiji's coups had been directed against the FLP and he could not guarantee that the same would not happen again if Labour won. Bainimarama retorted that this time his army had prepared for such eventualities.<sup>265</sup> Rabuka entered the fray, declaring that 'Fijians must unite and hold on to political leadership in their homeland'.<sup>266</sup> Qarase variously informed rallies that only a Fijian prime minister could understand the concerns of Fijians, that the prime minister must be Fijian, and – just ahead of polling – that if Labour won, Fijians would lose their lands like Maoris in New Zealand.<sup>267</sup> Tupeni Baba, formerly of the FLP and now a SDL candidate, and Viliame Savu (NTLP) both also warned of instability if a 'foreigner' was elected.<sup>268</sup> When the *Fiji Post*, partially owned by the SDL, argued on the eve of polling that the reform and downsizing of the military had to begin with Bainimarama, the military placed an advertisement in Fiji's dailies saying 'that any attempts to remove the Commander will not in any way deter or stop the RFMF as an institution promoting truth and justice and the values of good governance'.<sup>269</sup>

Nonetheless, the electoral outcome provided a fresh opportunity for contemplation. Enveloping Bainimarama's bugbear – the CAMV – within the SDL enabled Qarase to regain office with an outstanding 80 per cent

264 Lal, 'Anxiety, uncertainty and fear', 2009, p. 26.

265 *Fiji Sun*, 2 May 2006. He had earlier declared the organisers of the SDL and CAMV as 'a threat to national security' (*fijilive*, 24 February 2006). The outbreak of rioting in Honiara, capital of the Solomon Islands, in mid-April brought forth memories of Suva in 2000.

266 *Fiji Sun*, 23 February 2006.

267 *Fiji Times*, 24 March & 4 May 2006; *fijilive*, 30 April 2006.

268 *fijilive*, 29 April & 1 May 2006.

269 *Fiji Sun*, 7 May 2006.

of the Fijian vote (45 per cent of the total vote). It was, however, a one-seat majority and dependent on compliant independents for a working majority. Labour under Chaudhry similarly won 83 per cent of the IndoFijian vote (and 38 per cent of the total vote).<sup>270</sup> Thus a much more politically polarised Fiji finally emerged, despite all the intentions of the 1997 Constitution. Qarase had railed against the Constitution's power-sharing provisions during the election campaign and was expected to act as he had in 2001, shutting Labour out. But he changed tack on regaining office and offered Labour nine substantial portfolios within a multi-party cabinet. Possibly he planned to fracture the Labour Party while muting military criticism. If so, then an overly confident Qarase needlessly complicated matters by simultaneously vowing to curb the Commander. Predictably Bainimarama hit back, threatening martial law if the SDL continued to fight the army.<sup>271</sup>

The sudden emergence of multi-party governance garnered unexpected widespread support. Labour stalwart Krishna Datt told parliament that 'We must arrest the vicious cycle of adversarial conflicts that have polarised our people [if we are to] unleash the creative potential of our people and restore their dignity ... Without them we have no creativity, productivity and growth, no culture, no identity, no nation and no government in the true sense of the word'.<sup>272</sup> Vice President Madraiwiwi similarly presented multi-party cabinet as a 'unique opportunity to develop new paradigms and ways of doing things'. In contrast 'for most of the period since 1987', he declared, 'we have been governed largely by indigenous Fijians with little pretence at involving the other communities who call this place home'.<sup>273</sup>

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270 The EU considered the elections well conducted, despite some shortcomings. Of registered electors, 88 per cent turned out (compared with 78 per cent in 2001) and invalid votes stood at 9 per cent (11 per cent in 2001) (*fjilive*, 21 September 2011). A massive education program preceded the elections and registration processes were much improved. This time only 11 seats were decided on preferences compared with 29 in 2001. Two independents – Robin Irwin (NE General) and Joji Konrote (Rotuma Communal) – gave the SDL a working majority. The United People's Party (UPP) – in alliance with Labour – only gained two seats, but when Labour elected to join the multi-party cabinet, it severed its link with Labour and its leader Mick Beddoes became Leader of the Opposition. The NAP, NFP, PANU and VTLP all failed to win seats (Waden Narsey, 'Let's pull together for once', *Fiji Times*, 19 May 2006).

271 *Fiji Sun*, 20 May 2006.

272 *Fiji Times*, 10 June 2006.

273 Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, 'Making the right choices', 2006.

If the offer to respect the Constitution represented a genuine attempt by Qarase to reset Fiji's politics and move away from the bitterness of the past six years, then he needed the support of both Chaudhry and Bainimarama to ensure success. Neither showed any sign that they would oblige. Chaudhry's initial acceptance quickly became mired in party politics. The unionist Felix Anthony had entered parliament through an exchange deal that promised the sitting member, Vijay Singh, a Senate seat. But when Chaudhry handed his list of Senate nominees to the new Leader of the Opposition, Singh's name was absent. Chaudhry claimed no deal had been made, but the party's management board held a very different interpretation. It requested the list be returned, claiming that Chaudhry had no right to submit it, as he had not been endorsed as party leader.<sup>274</sup>

Fortunately for Chaudhry, his cane-farmer base dominated Labour's National Council and he used it to frustrate the management board's challenge to his authority and impose impossible conditions on Labour's participation in the multi-party cabinet. Cabinet loyalty came second to party loyalty. Chaudhry feared losing control of Labour both to internal dissidents and to the SDL. But his strategy for maintaining control was undeniably shortsighted. Gone were the days when IndoFijians comprised half the population. As a dwindling minority, albeit still a large one electorally, Labour could never hope to win future elections in its own right. Increasingly it would need to demonstrate its capacity to attract Fijians 'if it is not to remain on the sidelines', as Vice President Madraiwiwi advised in an address in June. By frustrating multi-party governance, Chaudhry risked both Labour's future and the kind of compromises that could deliver real win-win gains for Fiji's economy and its peoples. Such moments come infrequently, Madraiwiwi noted.<sup>275</sup>

But Chaudhry had little time for such advice as tension with his senior colleagues escalated. By August the National Council began proceedings against five members of the management board.<sup>276</sup> Few were surprised when two senior Labour ministers – Krishna Datt and Poseci Bune – contradicted Chaudhry's advice, affirmed cabinet solidarity and accepted the SDL's budget proposals, a key element of which – an increase in VAT

274 *fjivillage*, 29 June 2006.

275 Madraiwiwi, 'Making the right choices', 2006.

276 These were ministers Bune and Datt, and backbenchers Anthony, Agni Deo Singh and former senator Atu Bain (*Fiji Sun*, 23 August 2006). They were formally expelled from the party in early 2007 (*Fiji Sun*, 10 January 2007).

from 12.5 to 15 per cent – Labour opposed. Of course the real problem facing Fiji had little to do with VAT. Its long-suffering economy had never fully recovered from the shock of 2000 and now suffered from low levels of investment due, in no small measure, to Fiji's continued dependence on an overstaffed civil service whose cost-of-living adjustments continually forced government to divert resources away from projects. It had made little progress on corporatising government agencies or divesting its shareholding in interests such as Fiji TV.<sup>277</sup> The SDL's nationalist agenda also exacerbated problems facing the sugar industry. Sugar production had fallen 36 per cent over nine years as some 6,000 sugar leases expired and the halcyon years of EU subsidies ended.<sup>278</sup>

The other once bright spot in the economy – the garment industry – had also faltered, employment halving in 10 years. Its single greatest loss came in 2005 when the end of US quotas wiped out 6,000 jobs.<sup>279</sup> Gold production was also down with the Vatukoula goldmine set to close. Little wonder that 35 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line and at least 10 per cent were squatters. The government seemed to have little to offer. GDP growth had averaged only 1.5 per cent since 2000, hardly sufficient to keep up with population growth; hence average per capita GDP growth realised negative 1 per cent over the same period. The government pinned its hopes on tourism becoming a \$1 billion industry in 2007 and growth picking up to 3.1 per cent in 2006.<sup>280</sup> The disjuncture between its election promises and the poverty of its economic strategies could not have been starker.

Possibly the state of the economy influenced Chaudhry's decision not to join the cabinet. Instead he chose to become Leader of the Opposition, a move that seemed to dash the high hopes held for the multi-party cabinet. Both he and Qarase may have believed that the arrangement, which had Labour both in and out of government, would soon collapse in any case. Under such circumstances Qarase could at least say that he had genuinely attempted multi-party government as the Constitution stipulated. And Chaudhry could turn to his supporters and say that he had refused to sup with the devil.

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277 *fjivillage*, 24 October 2006; *fjilive*, 24 September 2006.

278 *fjivillage*, 27 October 2006.

279 *Fiji Times*, 11 October & 21 September 2006.

280 *Fiji Times*, 12, 13 & 25 September 2006.

Unexpectedly for both, then, the multi-party cabinet did not collapse. Despite no ground rules for multi-party cabinet, it muddled on with growing popular support. Brij Lal believes that had Chaudhry participated (in November 2006, as Qarase faced stronger fightback from the military, he was offered posts as deputy prime minister and minister for finance), Bainimarama – the second person on whom multi-party governance depended for success – might have acted differently as the year neared its end. At first Bainimarama did pledge support for multi-party governance. ‘Given the right and congenial environment,’ he wrote in the military newsletter *Mataivula News*, ‘the concept will definitely succeed.’ He led a delegation to the Home Affairs Ministry in July and Vosanibola took one to the QEB, urging more cabinet ministers to visit.<sup>281</sup>

Unfortunately, Qarase probably also counted on Chaudhry to maintain his opposition so that he would bear the brunt of popular disapproval. In short, Qarase had embarked on a dangerous game. Outsmarting the military and dividing Labour were becoming mutually exclusive strategies. Qarase could never have his cake and eat it too, particularly once his newfound enthusiasm for multi-ethnic unity demonstrated serious limitations when – against the advice of the Vice President – he blithely returned to his election agenda and reintroduced his controversial bills.<sup>282</sup> Often, as some political commentators noted, it is not the substance of proposed legislation that is at fault but the manner of its introduction. The Qoliqoli Bill was a case in point. Undoubtedly a legal framework would ultimately benefit hoteliers but, without sensible debate and consultation, the Bill quickly became a declaration of nationalist intent. On its introduction to parliament, the Minister for Lands berated hoteliers who questioned its wisdom, telling them to get out of the country if they did not like it. Such political bullying did not auger well for multi-party governance.<sup>283</sup>

The Indigenous Lands Claim Tribunal was similarly flawed. Modelled on New Zealand’s Waitangi Tribunal, it sought to settle historic disputes. But such disputes were not always between Fijian entities and the government; they were often between Fijians themselves. As *fijivillage*’s Yellow Bucket column asked, how far back should a tribunal look?

281 *Fiji Times*, 28 July 2006.

282 Madraiwiwi had asked in June that ‘Six years after the events of May 2000 ... is there any purpose served by the [RTU] Bill in the light of the divisions it has caused?’ (‘Making the right choices’, 2006).

283 *fijivillage*, 13 August 2006.

'Does it include marauding chiefs like Ma'afu',<sup>284</sup> the Tongan chief on whose empire the Tovata confederation was built? And who should pay for the golden eggs that the goose would lay to right the wrongs of the past?

Predictably Bainimarama declared Qarase's bills racist: 'only a handful of people will benefit from these [proposals]'.<sup>285</sup> Qarase also reinstated former CAMV ministers and released a new defence white paper, which again proposed reducing the size of the military and curtailing the power of future commanders. He even offered Baledrokadroka – suspended by Bainimarama for failing to support him and facing a possible court martial – a post as Commissioner of Prisons. Most pointedly he began a police investigation into Bainimarama's anti-government activities. The investigation into his alleged involvement in the bloody suppression of the 2000 mutiny rambled on without resolution. Qarase wanted rid of Bainimarama. His government considered surcharging him for his misuse of public funds in the Truth and Justice campaign, but were only beginning to appreciate how out of control their military commander was.<sup>286</sup>

No matter how remarkable his performance, Qarase should have known that Bainimarama would react badly. In late September, Bainimarama told a group of passing-out cadets at a Fijian school in Serua that the government's nationalist bills would drive Fijians back to grass skirts and cannibalism. Soon hoteliers would be leaving the country just as cane farmers had left their farms.<sup>287</sup> Qarase could only repeat his mantra: 'This is a challenge to the legal authority and mandate of a government elected by the people to govern this country'. No political role existed for the military.<sup>288</sup> During the next month Bainimarama stepped up his activism, warning business associates of the government, such as Ballu Khan, a joint owner with the NLTB of Pacific Connex, the company that supplied software services to the Board, to be careful. Khan – a Fiji-

284 *fijivillage*, 13 August 2006.

285 C Wilson, 'Lies, lies, lies', *Fiji Sun*, 10 November 2006.

286 Lal & Hunter, 'Smuggled papers', 2012.

287 Following a chance meeting between Bainimarama and a board member for Turtle Island on a flight from Sydney in September 2005, some tourist operators set out to woo the Commander. The owner of Turtle Island, Richard Evanson, who apparently felt cheated by Qarase over the Qoliquoli Bill and went on to back Ganilau's NAP in the 2006 elections, invited Bainimarama and his family to spend Christmas at the resort where he was able to meet a special guest, US Republican senator John McCain (Rory Callinan, 'Fueling Fiji's coup', *Time Magazine*, 20 December 2006).

288 *Fiji Sun*, 23 September 2006.

born New Zealand citizen – angered the military by employing former CRWU prisoners as security guards.<sup>289</sup> Bainimarama also cast his eye over his senior officers once more for signs of disloyalty.<sup>290</sup>

In mid-October 2006, on the eve of his departure to visit troops in West Asia, Bainimarama suddenly delivered an ultimatum: the government had three weeks in which to drop its ethno-nationalist legislation or resign. Rather than maintain stoic normality, Qarase panicked and blundered from disaster to disaster. Naturally enough he declared that his government would not be resigning. And the Police Commissioner refused to release military ammunition that had arrived at the Suva Wharf. It would be ‘irresponsible to do so in the current climate’, Hughes argued. A couple of days later, on 31 October, soldiers raided the wharf ‘commando style’ in the early morning and removed 7.5 tonnes of ammunition.<sup>291</sup> Six hours later Qarase went to the President and demanded that the Commander be stood down and replaced with Col Meli Saubulinayau while police investigated his latest threat to take over government. But the President’s subsequent directive met a wall of defiance from senior officers. Acting Commander Captain Esala Teleni told over 1,000 territorials and regulars at a two-week camp in Nabua that the army was Fiji’s last bastion of law and order, not the Fiji Police.<sup>292</sup> And he released nine demands that, if Qarase complied with them, would prevent a military takeover. Secretly Qarase pleaded with Australia for military assistance only to be turned down and his pleas made public. The military will ‘not accept any foreign intervention’, Teleni warned. ‘Having another armed element is not good for the country,’ he added, pointing a finger at the police, ‘particularly if the rules of engagement are not clear.’<sup>293</sup>

In desperation, Qarase dropped the amnesty clause from the RTU Bill on 3 November and turned to the GCC for support, claiming that the longstanding impasse between the government and the military was an indigenous problem that should be addressed by the paramount body for Fijian matters. Now back in Fiji, Bainimarama would have none of it. He told the chiefs on 10 November that ‘there has never been any public declaration of those who are in government that the 2000 crisis was

289 *Fiji Sun*, 26 October 2006.

290 *Fiji Times*, 29 October 2006. In late October, Bainimarama’s longstanding head legal advisor, Col Etueni Caucau, went on leave.

291 *Fiji Times*, 30 October & 7 November 2006.

292 *Fiji Times*, 4 November 2006.

293 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 November 2006.

wrong ... [Qarase] has never educated our people in the villages about the wrongs of 2000 which has resulted in a coup mentality'. Instead he stirred 'the emotions of the common people' and released coup perpetrators under the guise of legal excuses. He had 'given up' on the government: 'Mr Prime Minister, we've had enough of your lies.'

For his part Qarase tried to place his government within historical context. He told the chiefs, 'So long as ... undercurrents of unhappiness and discontent ... continue, we can never be assured about long term stability in Fiji'. The electoral results of 1987 and 1999 were 'a harsh reminder that Fijian control of government' could no longer be guaranteed in a democracy. 'Fijians feel that they can no longer look to the government of the day for the protective role the British had established,' he concluded: 'This concern was exacerbated by what they perceive to be the anti-Fijian policies of the People's Coalition Government.'<sup>294</sup>

Bainimarama clearly viewed Qarase's performance as irrelevant; so too the GCC's meeting. He dismissed it as 'a waste of taxpayers' money'. Given that many chiefs were tainted by their support for the 2000 coup, they should not be there.<sup>295</sup> With the GCC rejected, Qarase was running out of options and the vacuum of action deafened. 'While the lawful authorities are still in office they should act,' one unidentified legal source told the press in late November: 'If the Commander is to act first, it will be too late for those in lawful authority to do anything.'<sup>296</sup> The police announced seven separate investigations, including the illegal removal of weapons, plotting the overthrow of government, illegally pressing the President to abort a commission of inquiry into Bainimarama's actions, disobeying a lawful order, and financial abuse of office. Investigations into the deaths of CRWU soldiers in 2000 continued but now a new investigation began into 10 politicians, civil servants and former military officers who were inciting Bainimarama to commit treason. On 24 November, police searched the President's office for papers incriminating Bainimarama. The Commander was not amused. 'They want to look for a minute of conversation I had with the President and that conversation was never recorded,' he thundered: 'Qarase is selling our sovereignty to an Australian ... [Hughes] should leave the country now for that action.'<sup>297</sup>

294 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 November 2006; *Fiji Sun*, 11 November 2006; *fijilive*, 11 November 2006.

295 *fijilive*, 11 November 2006.

296 Verenaisi Raicola, 'Who will prevail in the end?', *Fiji Times*, 30 November 2006.

297 *fijilive*, 25 November 2006.

Hughes became increasingly frustrated as he learned the limits to what he could achieve ‘as an expat in a country with flawed politics’.<sup>298</sup> He had requested the director of public prosecutions lay sedition charges against Bainimarama but the DPP seemed in no hurry to act. The office that had dismissed its Australian deputy DPP the previous year now refused to appoint the man slated to succeed him. But even without the speedy resolution of police cases, Hughes faced more fundamental issues with regard to Bainimarama. ‘The arrest scenario is one that is problematic because he normally accompanies himself with up to 25 fully armed military guards,’ Hughes told the press: ‘We are an unarmed police force; we are not able to effect a usual arrest.’<sup>299</sup> At the end of November, after three ambassadors from Britain, the United States and Australia visited the QEB to plead with senior officers to pull back, the military raised the stakes higher. It would conduct exercises to train its troops to repel foreign intervention. Acting Commander Esala Teleni declared the ambassadors ‘out of line’.<sup>300</sup>

The theatre was far from over. Bainimarama found time in his busy schedule to attend his granddaughter’s first communion in New Zealand. There he also found time to express to Auckland media his frustration with the Fiji police investigation into his alleged sedition. Back in Suva, Hughes spied an opportunity and asked NZ police to arrest Bainimarama for ‘perverting the course of justice in a foreign jurisdiction’. Such an action might at least avoid an armed confrontation in Fiji at a time when everyone was on edge. New Zealand had already withdrawn all but essential staff from its embassy after Bainimarama told its defence attaché that, if arrested in New Zealand, his troops would storm the High Commission.<sup>301</sup> Hughes held similar fears for his family and sent them to

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298 *Wikileaks*, 21 December 2010; comment by NZ Deputy Foreign Secretary Alan Williams, 30 November 2006.

299 *fijilive*, 28 November 2006.

300 Raicola, ‘Who will prevail in the end?’, 2006. Reports from the military suggested they had encouraged senior officers to mutiny, but US Ambassador Larry Dinger later said that they only tried to discourage a coup (*fijilive*, 5 April 2008). The meeting came, however, after Australia had sent three naval vessels to assist in the possible evacuation of Australian citizens. A Blackhawk helicopter crashed during manoeuvres, killing two crew on 29 November. The Fiji military easily escalated the Australian presence outside Fiji waters into a potential invasion threat.

301 [www.coupfourandahalf.com](http://www.coupfourandahalf.com), 25 June 2013; report based on High Commissioner Michael Green’s posthumous *Persona Non Grata, Breaking the Bond – New Zealand and Fiji 2004–2007* (Auckland: Dunmore Publishing, 2013). NZ police were quietly posted to Suva to assist with evacuation if needed.

Australia.<sup>302</sup> When New Zealand's Prime Minister Helen Clark arranged for Qarase to fly down to New Zealand early on 29 November to meet with Bainimarama for a frank discussion of their differences, Hughes joined Qarase unannounced on the flight from Nausori, Suva's airport.

His plans came to nought. New Zealand preferred a political solution. 'The challenge remains for Qarase to find an adroit way to satisfy the military without exceeding what his domestic political base will tolerate,' the deputy secretary of New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) – Alan Williams – believed.<sup>303</sup> Bainimarama and Qarase had not met in nine months. New Zealand had already warned Bainimarama that, should he launch a coup, he and his wife would be banned from entering New Zealand and from visiting their grandchildren.<sup>304</sup> MFAT held no high hopes for success but, to ease the atmosphere, it advised Bainimarama that neither New Zealand nor Australia intended to send troops to Fiji. After two hours and 25 minutes it believed progress had been made. Surreally Qarase gave in to all Bainimarama's demands although with caveats. Bills would be withdrawn *if found illegal*, charges against the Commander would be withdrawn *if the police so recommended*, the military's views on the Police Commissioner would be considered *when his contract was reviewed*, the future of the Tactical Response Unit would be reviewed, and so on. He needed to show 'flexibility while insisting on due process and constitutionality'. Privately Bainimarama agreed to delay the onset of his coup until 4 December in order to give Qarase time to show 'signs of earnest movement'. While Bainimarama headed home via a connecting flight in Auckland, New Zealand quickly returned Qarase directly to Nadi in order to give him a two-hour advantage to 'shape the public perception of the meeting and signal that he is prepared to reach out to the military, the media and civil society in ways that will give Bainimarama reason to conclude that further steps towards a coup are not warranted'.<sup>305</sup>

302 Russell Hunter & Victor Lal, 'Fiji police chief tried to get Bainimarama arrested in NZ', *New Zealand Herald*, 18 February 2012.

303 [www.coupfourandahalf.com](http://www.coupfourandahalf.com), 20 December 2010, Wikileaks report. New Zealand's Fiji-born Governor General Anand Satyanand opened the 10 am meeting, which was chaired by Foreign Minister Winston Peters.

304 *fijilive*, 22 December 2010.

305 [www.coupfourandahalf.com](http://www.coupfourandahalf.com), 20 December 2010.

New Zealand should have heeded the advice of its High Commissioner, Michael Green, who thought Bainimarama had no interest in genuine negotiations but would pocket ‘every concession with no reciprocity’,<sup>306</sup> or Dinger, who counselled Wellington that ‘Being passive with bullies only encourages them’.<sup>307</sup> Dinger also told Washington that Bainimarama:

is surrounded by a compliant officer corps that is feeding the commander’s sense of righteous grievance against the Qarase Government ... he does not care about international reactions, including the possible loss of aid money from Australia, the US and New Zealand.<sup>308</sup>

So it came to pass that Qarase returned home, Chamberlain-like, with a peace agreement, waving the agreed outcomes of their meeting. And Bainimarama returned disowning it, calling Qarase a liar. Stung, Qarase repeated his offer to review the three controversial bills and proposed a government information campaign on the 2000 coup. But he also asserted that Bainimarama was not above the law and should still be subject to investigation for the CRWU deaths and for sedition.<sup>309</sup> It was hardly surprising then that, on 30 November, Bainimarama repeated his nine demands, declaring that the police should end its investigations of the military, that the armed Police Tactical Response Unit be disbanded, that the RTU and Qoliqoli Bills be withdrawn, and that the Police Commissioner and all cabinet ministers involved in the 2000 coup should resign. Hughes knew the writing was on the wall and headed for Australia. From Cairns he described Bainimarama as ‘deranged’ and ‘unstable’, and possibly still suffering post-traumatic stress from 2000.<sup>310</sup> Bainimarama told Hughes not to return because he had caused all the problems between the army and police.<sup>311</sup>

On 1 December, with the coup’s deadline rapidly approaching, Bainimarama’s phoney war began to tell. Rumours circulated that the military had tried to capture Qarase the previous evening. Qarase took no chances. He left the capital and flew to Savusavu and later to Nadi. His cabinet similarly went to different locations, ‘effectively on the run from the military’, according to one observer.<sup>312</sup> Several state CEOs did

306 [www.coupfourandahalf.com](http://www.coupfourandahalf.com), 25 June 2013.

307 Hunter & Lal, ‘Fiji police chief’, 2012.

308 Doring, ‘US cables’, 2011.

309 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 November 2006.

310 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 December 2006.

311 *Fiji Times*, 3 December 2006.

312 Simon Kearney, ‘Army seizes control of Fiji’, *Australian*, 2 December 2006.

likewise. Iliesa Duvuloco, one of the perpetrators of the 2000 coup, thought it wise to leave the country. The *Daily Post* called on Australia to grant its staff asylum.<sup>313</sup> The Ministry of Finance hastily issued a memo reminding the military that all ministries had to comply with standard expenditure limits and that it had already overspent its 2006 budget by \$31 million.<sup>314</sup>

In contrast, Bainimarama appeared relaxed. He attended the annual rugby match between the army and police, which the police won. Later on the Friday evening he again dismissed Qarase's concessions. Qarase insisted that his government was 'still in control' and that the military's deadline had been extended until midday the following Monday.<sup>315</sup> Back in Australia, Hughes warned of dangers ahead for Bainimarama. The Commander 'doesn't have the support of the government, of the President, of the police, of the churches, of the chiefs, of the people of Fiji,' he told the BBC. Should Bainimarama push ahead, he could 'foresee a popular uprising'.<sup>316</sup> Earlier, *fjivillage* had reached a similar conclusion. Coups were only successful if they enjoyed Fijian support, as Rabuka's had in 1987 and Bainimarama's in 2000. Its Yellow Bucket column argued that the military was now in no position to execute a successful coup.<sup>317</sup>

Both were terribly wrong. On Monday 4 December 2006, Bainimarama's slow-motion coup began with checkpoints erected around Suva and the Police Tactical Response Unit's armoury seized. Eight years would pass before Fiji returned to democratic government.

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313 Malcolm Brown, 'Fiji military chief already in power', *Age*, 4 December 2006.

314 *fjilive*, 8 December 2006.

315 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 December 2006.

316 *BBC*, 5 December 2006.

317 Yellow Bucket, 'Coups, what coup?' *fjivillage*, 8 November 2006.

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