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George Speight's putsch improbable¹

Chiefs and thieves and other people besides.

— George Speight²

George Speight's improbable intervention in Fijian politics through an attempted putsch opened fresh wounds in Fiji's body politic. Ostensibly carried out to depose a government headed by an Indo-Fijian prime minister, it had other causes with deep roots in traditional Fijian politics and hidden political agendas. The country was held to ransom for 57 days and the siege finally ended with the intervention of the Fijian military. Speight was not the principal instigator of the crisis but the figurehead for other individuals and interests. Speculation about the actual masterminds of the putsch continues while Speight languishes in jail unlikely ever to taste freedom again. The putsch now seems like a bad dream but, at the time, it unleashed much fear and confusion that threatened to damage the country irreparably.

Around 10 am on 19 May 2000, seven armed gunmen, led by George Speight, stormed the Fiji Parliament taking Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his ill-fated government hostage. May 19 marked the government's first anniversary in office. The seizure of parliament followed a series of protest

1 Originally appeared as 'Chiefs and thieves and other people besides: The making of George Speight's coup', in *The Journal of Pacific History* 36(3) (2000): 281–93.

2 Words spoken by George Speight in a radio interview when asked who was being his attempted putsch.

marches by a variety of Fijian nationalist groups variously opposed to the People's Coalition Government and committed to its overthrow. Still, the hostage crisis seemed improbable. Speight, a part-Fijian failed businessman due to be arraigned in court on a bankruptcy charge, was a little-known player on the local scene. And, unlike 1987, no recognisable group or institution claimed immediate responsibility for the deed, including the recently revived Taukei Movement headed by the perennial dissident Mohammed Apisai Tora. In 1987, the Royal Fiji Military Forces, under then Lt Col Sitiveni Rabuka, took responsibility for the coup and he was, in turn, held accountable for it. The May 1987 Coup, it can be argued, was carried out on behalf of, and blessed by, the Fijian establishment.³ In 2000, Speight and his men carried out a coup against the Fijian establishment. If 1987 was about shoring up indigenous Fijian power and preserving Fijian political unity, this later coup has had the effect of fostering Fijian political fragmentation on an unprecedented scale. Speight's dramatic intervention has altered the fundamental dynamics of Fiji—and indigenous Fijian—politics.

The hostage crisis left in its wake an impressive list of casualties. The 1997 Constitution, approved unanimously by a parliament dominated by indigenous Fijians, blessed by the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) and warmly welcomed by the international community, had been abrogated.⁴ Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, President of the Republic of Fiji, a central figure in contemporary Fijian public life and a paramount chief in his own right, was asked by the army to step aside, while the Republic of Fiji Military Forces assumed executive control of the country. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was sent to his home province of Lau, after the presentation of a customary forgiveness-seeking *tabua* (whale's tooth), under the cover of darkness, guarded by soldiers, on a patrol boat heading towards the Lau Sea. It was a sad end to a distinguished though not uncontroversial career, marking the final eclipse of the long reign in Fiji politics of powerful paramount chiefs tutored for national leadership by the colonial government in the years following World War II.⁵ The democratically elected government headed

3 The literature on the 1987 coups is vast, but for two accessible interpretative essays, see Stewart Firth, 'The contemporary history of Fiji: A review article', *The Journal of Pacific History* 24 (1989): 242–46, doi.org/10.1080/00223348908572619; and Barrie Macdonald, 'The literature of the Fiji Coups', *The Contemporary Pacific* 2(1) (1990): 198–207.

4 The making of the 1997 Constitution is covered in Brij V. Lal, *Another Way: The Politics of Constitutional Review in Post-Coup Fiji* (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 1998).

5 The four great chiefs of the latter half of the twentieth century groomed for leadership by the British were Ratu George Cakobau, Ratu Edward Cakobau, Ratu Penaia Ganilau and Ratu Kamisese Mara.

by Mahendra Chaudhry was unceremoniously and unconstitutionally dismissed, the prime minister endured the longest period of captivity in modern Pacific Islands history, his freedom—or unfreedom—curiously overshadowed by other struggles for power taking place in Fijian society.

The crisis also tainted the reputation of once sacred institutions of Fijian society in previously unthinkable ways. Among them was the military, with a proud record of service in the jungles of the Solomons in World War II, in Malaya against the Chinese communist insurgents in the 1950s, and as peacekeepers in the Middle East in the 1970s. In the face of the coup, the army stood divided and confused, unable or, worse still, unwilling to uphold the constitution or protect the security of the state. The security forces were shown to be infected by the viruses of provincialism and regionalism.⁶ Had martial law not been declared when it was, the army might well have fragmented into factions, each defending their own *vanua* (land, province) and chiefs. The GCC, seeking in recent years to enlarge its role and status as the guardian of national, not only indigenous Fijian, interests, failed the test of *national* leadership. They sympathised with Speight's ambition for the Fijian people, but then backed President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara to lead the country out of the crisis. They vacillated while the country awaited their wise counsel, which never came. Their deliberations got embroiled in traditional confederacy and provincial politics, their proceedings dominated by younger, more assertive chiefs wanting their own place in the Fijian sun, leading to further division and fragmentation. As army spokesman Col Filipe Tarakinikini put it, the chiefs 'are riddled with personal agendas'⁷ and incapable of impartial, decisive action.

However it is looked at, the hostage crisis-cum-coup was a disaster for Fiji. The economy, which was just beginning to recover from the downturn of the 1990s, was once again poised on the precipice.⁸ The crisis cost the government millions in lost revenue, and the government's Microfinance Unit, in a paper prepared for the military, predicted a trade deficit of \$400 million. With trade bans in force, the gross domestic product (GDP) was predicted to suffer a reversal of 13 per cent, exports decline

6 See Army spokesman Col Filipe Tarakinikini's statement on *fjilive*, 14 June 2000: 'The army is just a reflection of society, so what is happening there [fragmentation] is happening in the army as well; you can't deny that.'

7 Interview with Col Filipe Tarakinikini, in the *Australian*, 14 June 2000. See also the *Daily Post*, 9 June 2000 for a similar view from Marika Qarikau, manager of the Native Land Trust Board.

8 For more discussion, see *Pacnews*, 9 June 2000; and the *Sunday Sun*, 4 June 2000.

by 22 per cent and imports by 20 per cent. Already, hundreds of workers, often those at the bottom of the economic ladder and, therefore, the most vulnerable had been laid off, especially in the handicraft, garment and tourism industries—and more would follow. Even if no trade bans were imposed, unemployment was expected to rise by 6 per cent, and some 7,000 workers were likely to be retrenched. Local investors would flee the country in the wake of riots that ravaged the commercial district of Suva, and their foreign counterparts would be equally hesitant investors.

Some costs, though, were less easily measured. Within the indigenous Fijian society, for instance, old assumptions about the traditional structure of power were questioned in novel and potentially significant ways. It is almost a truism now to say that this crisis, as it unfolded, became more about intra-Fijian rivalries than about race. Even Speight himself admitted that ‘the race issue between Fijians and Indians is just one piece of the jigsaw puzzle that has many pieces’.⁹ In this respect, it is unlike the crisis of 1987, which was seen largely as an ethnic conflict between Fijians and Indo-Fijians. Then, there was much sympathy for the Fijian ‘cause’ across the Pacific, whereas after the May 2000 Coup there was condemnation.¹⁰ Some argued that Mr Speight represented the interests of the Kubuna Confederacy against the long ascendancy of the traditional hierarchies of the Koro Sea. Fijian political analyst Jone Dakuvula’s claim to this effect brought upon the local television station broadcasting his remarks the wrath of the Fijian mob allied to Speight.¹¹ Then, as the crisis dragged on, the western chiefs, long aggrieved about their absence from the national centre of power, threatened to secede from the state of Fiji, failing which they promised to settle for a much-cherished and long-demanded fourth confederacy, the Yasayasa Vaka Ra.¹² The west, they said, drove the engine of the national economy. Sugar, pine, gold and tourism were produced from its soil, and they wanted representation in national councils proportionate to their contribution to the national economy. The east–west divide existed, but it was not a sharp, clear line.

9 Interview with George Speight in the *Fiji Sun*, 10 June 2000.

10 There are some notable exceptions, though, including Cook Islands’ Geoffrey Henry (*Cook Island News*, 27 May 2000) and New Zealand Māori lawyer Anthony Sinclair (*fijilive*, 3 June 2000), who declared, without irony: ‘We believe that revolution is a legitimate part of the democratic process’.

11 Information such as this is a part of the public record, broadcast by *fijilive*, hence it is not necessary to provide documentation. A copy of the transcript is at the Centre for the Contemporary Pacific, The Australian National University.

12 This is discussed at length in Simione Durutalo, ‘Internal colonialism and unequal regional development: The case of Western Viti Levu’, MA thesis (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1985).

Instead, it was extensively crisscrossed by marriage and kinship ties that blurred distinctions of old.¹³ The threatened secession of Western Viti Levu was followed by a declaration of partial autonomy by the province of Cakaudrove, which proposed to set up a separate Tovata State, but the declaration lacked conviction or authority.¹⁴ What it did indicate, however, was the willingness of the Fijian people to consider options unthinkable in the twentieth century.

Race relations were severely strained just when things looked to be on the mend following the successful review of the constitution: the scars of the present crisis—reflected in the images of looting and violence on the streets of Suva; the fleeing of terrorised Indo-Fijians from parts of the Rewa Delta to safe havens in Western Viti Levu; the destruction of schools and desecration of places of worship; the unruly Fijian mob roaming neighbourhoods around the parliamentary complex. Those scars would take a generation to heal. There are also deeper questions here than I can deal with; questions about culture and history and identity. The Fijian, the *taukei*, the indigenous owner of the land, who has lived side by side with his/her Indo-Fijian neighbour, still regards him/her as a *vulagi*, a foreigner, welcome to stay and enjoy the hospitality of the host but knowing full well whose house it is.¹⁵ Even the chiefs of Western Fiji, who have—or should have—a better understanding of Indo-Fijian fears and aspirations and who oppose Speight, want Fiji to be declared a Christian state so that Hindus, Muslims and Christians can all solve their problems in the proper Christian way. They blame Australia and Britain for introducing Indians to Fiji, without appreciating the purpose for which they were brought. Indo-Fijians, now fourth or fifth generation, are hurt to be still regarded as outsiders in the land of their birth, threatened with the denial of equal citizenship and equal protection of the law. Sometimes, those who applaud the indigenous Fijians for maintaining their culture and tradition ask the Indo-Fijians to subjugate theirs in the cause of assimilation. Salman Rushdie, writing about the Fiji crisis makes a telling point. ‘Migrant people do not remain visitors forever,’ he has written. ‘In the end, their new land owns them as their old land did, and they have a right to own it in their turn.’¹⁶

13 *Fiji Times*, 10 June 2000.

14 *Sunday Times*, 11 June 2000.

15 For more discussion of this concept, see Asesela Ravuvu, *The Facade of Democracy: Fijian Struggles for Political Control, 1830–1987* (Suva: Reader Publishing House, 1991).

16 Salman Rushdie, in an article in the *New York Times*, 8 June 2000.

The 2000 crisis was far worse than its 1987 counterpart in terms of violence and damage to property. In 1987, the army was held responsible for the maintenance of law and order. To its credit, it did manage to contain the mobs. In 2000 the mobs had a free hand, directed, if they were directed at all, by invisible hands in the parliamentary complex, armed and energised by Speight's racial rhetoric, terrorising the rural Indian countryside for food and fun, as they had done in the hinterland of Nausori. The main targets were Indo-Fijians in outlying rural areas; their cattle slaughtered and root crops stolen. After 1987, some 70,000–80,000 people migrated from Fiji, most of them Indo-Fijians. They now live in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. It is often said that there is hardly an Indo-Fijian family in Fiji that does not have at least one member outside. Kinship has become a multinational or transnational corporation, sustaining those left behind on money remitted from abroad. After 2000, many more would leave—the doctors, the computer technicians, mechanics, the accountants. In short, virtually anyone who was accepted outside would go, draining the country of skills it could ill-afford to lose. 'I would rather be a dog in America than an Indian in Fiji,' said a man whose house had been demolished and his possessions taken by Fijian mobs. He was not alone in holding that thought.

The public face, though not perhaps the principal instigator, of the crisis was Speight. He was a businessman with a career littered with failures in Australia and Fiji (and possibly elsewhere as well)—I called him a failed businessman and that description stuck. The 45-year-old Speight was wandering on the fringes of the local commercial circles on the eve of the coup.¹⁷ He had been sacked by Agriculture Minister Poseci Bune as Chairman of the Fiji Pine Commission and the Hardwood Corporation. Shortly before he stormed parliament, he had been negotiating on behalf of the American company Trans Resources Management to win a tender for harvesting the country's massive mahogany forests valued at over \$300 million.¹⁸ The government chose instead the Commonwealth Development Corporation, with a proven record in the exploitation of natural resources. Speight was declared an undischarged bankrupt and was about to face court proceedings when he launched his assault on parliament. Clearly, Speight had his own private grievances, which he carefully hid behind a fiercely nationalist rhetoric. Like Sitiveni Rabuka in 1987, Speight portrayed himself as a faithful servant of the Fijian cause,

17 For a profile of Speight, see the *Fiji Times*, 23 May 2000.

18 See the *Sunday Times*, 11 June 2000.

an anointed saviour of the Fijian 'race'. Speight, however, is no Rabuka, as even his most ardent supporters admit. Indeed, an important reason why the international community—as seen in Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer's reaction—had been so severe in its condemnation of Fiji was because of Speight as the face of indigenous Fijian nationalism. A part-European of Fijian descent, Speight, with head shaved, was articulate, engaging, bantering with the international media; still, he was an unconvincing Fijian hero.

But it would be a grave mistake to see Speight as acting all on his own. If he were, the crisis would have had a limited and inconsequential life. Behind him, in the shadows, were individuals and groups, writing his speeches, devising position papers, building up the mass support base and orchestrating the crowds—people who had little to lose but everything to gain from the overthrow of the Chaudhry Government. Among them were politicians defeated at the last elections or otherwise excluded from power, who were seeking redress and probably revenge. Apisai Tora and Berenado Vunibobo come readily to mind. The Fijian Opposition Leader, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, was there as well, and so, strangely enough, were factional leaders of Fijian political parties in coalition with Chaudhry's Labour Party. The Fijian Association Party's Adi Kuini Vuikaba Speed was deputy prime minister, but Ratu Cokanauto Tua'akitau was with Speight's group. Apisai Tora, the founder of the spectacularly misnamed Party of National Unity, wanted Chaudhry's head, but three members of his party were in the Cabinet.

Speight was also supported by people like himself, young businessmen on the make, who rode the gravy train of the 1990s, benefited from opportunistic access to power, secured large, unsecured loans from the National Bank of Fiji, but then found their prospects for continued prosperity dimming upon the election of a new government. Prominent local businessmen-cum-politicians in the previous Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) government supported the destabilisation campaign.¹⁹ For them, the Chaudhry Government had to go before it managed to entrench itself. In this group of the ambitious and, upwardly mobile, I would also include what one might call the 'Children of 1987'. This group included those who benefited from the post-1987 racially based affirmative action programs—sanctioned by the 1990 Constitution—in

19 In the papers, Fiji businessmen Kanti Punja and Jim Ah Koy, among others, have been identified, but both have denied involvement.

the award of scholarships, promotions in the civil service and training opportunities. They were the children of privilege, sons and daughters of the well connected. Many of them had come of age in the mid-1990s, at the height of the SVT Government's reign.²⁰ This new generation of fast-tracked Fijian middle class had a narrow, limited experience of multiculturalism, and little taste or patience for it. They contrasted starkly with an earlier postindependence generation of the 1970s, which grew up working in a multicultural environment, dedicated to professionalism and the principles of good governance, under governments publicly committed to a unifying vision.²¹ The 'Children of 1987' did not understand or approve of the spirit of the 1997 Constitution.

While the indigenous Fijian middle class, or at least sections of it, provided the brains for Speight's agenda, the Fijian social underclass provided the brawn. The bedraggled unemployed, unskilled Fijian youth armed with sticks, knives, bamboo spears, stones and some with guns, who looted, burned and trashed Suva, terrorised the countryside and acted as a human shield for Speight and his men, had little understanding of the larger, hidden personal agendas and complex forces at work. They were in some sense the human casualties of globalisation and economic rationalism and, more immediately, the victims of the structural reform policies pursued by the Rabuka Government in the 1990s. They could not understand why they remained behind, mired in poverty and destitution, while others had moved on. Without hope and without a future, they fell easy prey to Speight's mesmeric rhetoric and easy solutions: get rid of the Indians, revert to tradition, put Fijians in political control, and all would be well. Speight gave them a purpose, an explanation, a mission and a brief spot in the Fijian sun. They in turn responded enthusiastically to his clarion call of racial solidarity.

How did this crisis come to a head? To understand this, it is necessary to look at events over the previous 12 months, beginning with the 1999 General Elections, which took place under the revised 1997 Constitution.²² Chaudhry's Labour Party won 37 of the 71 seats in

20 Good representatives of this cohort would include Speight's legal advisor Ratu Raquita Vakalalabure, Ro Filipe Tuisawau, Saimone Kaitani, and Ratu Timoci Silatolu, among others.

21 Among them would be names such as Josefata Kamikamica, Mosese Qionabaravi, and Savenaca Siwatibau, among others.

22 I have discussed the elections in *A Time to Change: The Fiji General Elections of 1999* (Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Regime Change and Regime Maintenance in Asia and the Pacific, Paper no. 23, The Australian National University, 1999).

its own right. Together with his other Coalition partners, the Party of National Unity (PANU), Fijian Association Party (FAP) and Veitokani ni Levenivanua Vakaristo (VLV), the People's Coalition won altogether 58 seats. The unexpectedly large victory was due to two factors: an effective campaign against the outrages and excesses of the Rabuka Government, of which there were many, and a sharp, carefully calibrated focus on the bread-and-butter issues affecting ordinary working and middle-class people. Labour promised to roll back the unemployment-causing structural reform programs of the Rabuka Government, introduce minimum wages, lower interests on housing rates, provide social security for the elderly, and resolve the long-festered issue of expiring agricultural leases. These uncoded but electorally appealing policies were effective on the hustings, but they came to haunt the party when it came to power. The opposition National Federation Party (NFP), Fiji's oldest political party long the champion of Indo-Fijian interests, which did not win a single seat, opportunistically kept the government's heel close to the fire. To counteract criticism and keep its support base from fragmenting, the Chaudhry Government embarked on a hectic program of legislative reform, setting up commissions (Education and Human Rights), instituting inquiries (into corruption) and staffing statutory organisations with competent staff (Housing Authority).

The appearance of movement and change was impressive, but it also embroiled the government in a hugely counterproductive tussle with the media. Small things were magnified in an atmosphere already rife with suspicion and distrust about the government's motives.²³ Why did Chaudhary appoint his own son, not a civil servant, as his personal assistant on the public pay roll? Here was a man who, as long-term secretary of the Fiji Public Service Association, had been scathing of nepotism and corruption in previous governments, but, once in power, had begun to ignore his own wise counsel about transparent governance and public accountability. There was nothing illegal in the appointment: a prime minister can, of course, appoint anybody he or she wants. But the perception of the government favouring its own was created stuck, despite repeated denial. Fijian civil servants, appointed under the Rabuka Government when ethnicity and loyalty were privileged over merit and seniority, complained about being unconsulted or marginalised in important decision-making. Faced with intensifying opposition, the

23 See, for example, Eugene Bingham, 'Fiji tragedy woven from many strands', *New Zealand Herald*, 3–4 June 2000.

governed battened down the hatches. To every question and all opposition, it chanted—to its opponents with constant, arrogant regularity—the mantra of having a mandate to do what it had promised in its election manifesto. The government did have a mandate, but its mandate was one among many mandates in Fiji. The parliament is not the sole source of all power in Fiji: the Native Land Trust Board has its mandate to look after native land; the GCC has its own mandate under the constitution; the army its own. It was the failure, or perhaps the unwillingness, to balance the complex equation of competing mandates that compounded the government's problems. Chaudhry's own forceful personality, forged in the long years spent in the trade union movement, also played its part in galvanising the opposition. Chaudhry is a highly intelligent and resourceful person, tenacious and uncompromising (confrontational to his opponents), a born fighter who was a painful thorn in the side of the Rabuka Government for years. He was feared by Fijians, but not trusted. He was a strong and decisive leader of a generally weak Cabinet, and his opponents, rightly or wrongly, saw his unmistakable imprint on every policy decision of the government.

Another problem facing the government was the fractious nature of the People's Coalition itself. As mentioned, the Coalition was a loose structure made up of four parties: Labour, PANU, FAP and VLV. Some of these parties espoused philosophies directly contradictory to Labour's. The VLV, for example, wanted to make Fiji a Christian state and to have an urgent review of the 1997 Constitution to address the concerns of the Fijian people, both of which Labour repudiated.²⁴ Indeed, soon after the elections, Bune of the VLV threatened to lead a coalition of Fijian parties against Chaudhry—until he was inducted into cabinet reportedly at Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's behest. PANU had its own agenda for western Fiji, as did the FAP for south-eastern Viti Levu, its stronghold. But what they all had in common was their adamant opposition to Sitiveni Rabuka, both for who he was and what he had done. He was not forgiven for the coups of 1987 by one side, and punished by another for breaching the traditional protocol regarding the appropriate place for commoners in the traditional Fijian social hierarchy dominated by chiefs. Opposition to a common enemy, then, rather than commitment to a common agenda, brought the disparate groups together. And when that enemy (Rabuka) was defeated, the difficulties of internal cohesion came to the fore, almost

²⁴ Lal, *A Time to Change*, pp. 14–15.

immediately after the election. Chaudhry rightly took steps to become prime minister; his party had an outright majority in parliament. The FAP cried foul, accusing Labour of renegeing on a deal that a Fijian, one of its own members, would be chosen prime minister by the Coalition. Chaudhry was helped unobtrusively and opportunistically by Ratu Mara who urged the Fijian parties to rally behind Chaudhry, but Chaudhry's ascension also split the Coalition. A faction of the FAP disregarded Adi Kuini's leadership and informally aligned itself with other Fijian opposition parties, eventually going so far as to back Speight. Tora became a fierce rabble-rousing critic of the government, expressing his disgruntlement by leading a revived Taukei Movement. So the Chaudhry Government was buffeted by its opponents and hobbled by internal divisions, speaking on crucial issues with discordant voices.

The issue that united the Fijian opponents of the new government was land. Land has always been a sensitive issue in Fijian politics.²⁵ The question has always been the use rather than the ownership of land. At the time, 83 per cent of all land in Fiji—3,714,990 acres—was held in inalienable rights by indigenous Fijians, 8.2 per cent was freehold, state freehold was 3.6 per cent and crown or state land around 5 per cent.²⁶ Much of the country's agricultural activity—in particular sugar cultivation—was carried out on land leased from Fijian landowners. The country's 22,000 cane growers, the overwhelming majority of whom are Indo-Fijians, leased native land under the *Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act*. This Act, which came into existence in 1969, provided for 30-year leases whose renewal was negotiated between the tenants and landlords upon the expiry of the leases. These leases were beginning to expire and some, but by no means all, landlords wanted their land back either to cultivate the land themselves, rezone it for commercial or residential purposes, or use the threat of nonrenewal to extract more rent. They were led by the head of the Native Land Trust Board, Marika Qarikau. He was, by all accounts, a hardline, abrasive nationalist who used every means available—from addressing the provincial councils to using the network of the Methodist Church—to rally Fijian landowners behind him and against the government. The

25 See Brij V. Lal, *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), pp. 224–27.

26 For more discussion, see Josefata Kamikamica, 'Fijian native land: Issues and challenges', in *Research Papers of the Fiji Constitution Review Commission*, Vol. 1: *Fiji in Transition*, ed. Brij V. Lal, Paul Reeves and Tomasi Vakatora (Suva: Suva: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, 1997), pp. 259–90.

Native Lands Trust Board (NLTB) was Qarikau's power base and he, too, claimed a mandate to protect native Fijian land. Three weeks after the coup, Qarikau circulated a 20-page 'Deed of Sovereignty', which demanded, among other things, the return of all state and freehold land to native ownership.

Chaudhary did not contest the landowners' desire to reclaim their land. Nor, on other hand, could he—or any government for that matter—ignore the human plight of the tenants; unskilled, uneducated, poor, evicted from land their families had cultivated for four or five generations. The government offered the displaced tenants \$28,000 to start afresh in some other occupation, and about \$8,000 to landlords who repossessed their former leases' land to become cultivators themselves. Meanwhile, it also resuscitated the idea of a Land Use Commission (LUC), mentioned in his party's manifesto, but with a history going back nearly 40 years, to work with landowners to identify idle land and to put it to productive use, including, if possible, the resettlement of displaced tenants. With the NLTB on a warpath, the government went directly to the Fijian landlords. Early in 2000, it sent a delegation of Fijian landowning chiefs to Malaysia to familiarise themselves with the work of a similar commission there. The chiefs returned impressed, but by then Qarikau had already orchestrated a move among the provincial councils to reject the concept outright. Poseci Bune, Minister of Agriculture, recalled the malicious misinformation spread among the people. In one province, he was told, the LUC was a ploy by Chaudhry to bring Indians to Fiji. Apparently Air India had expressed an interest in opening an office in Suva. But this was a false front. The main aim behind setting up an Air India office was to bring Indians from India to settle on land identified for development by the LUC. Faced with this malicious propaganda, the government then did what it should have done earlier: it took the proposal to the GCC, which approved it in principle but asked the government and the NLTB to develop it further cooperatively. It was a hard-fought victory for the government.

Just when the government seemed to be gaining an upper hand, as shown in generally approving polls, Tora's Taukei Movement resurfaced in Western Viti Levu, fuelling and galvanising extreme Fijian opinion against the government. The Cakaudrove Provincial Council passed a vote of no confidence in the government, and others followed. Ratu Tevita Bolobolo, Tui Navitilevu, formed a landowners' council, Matabose ni Taukei ni Vanua, attacking the government and threatening nonrenewal of leases. Ratu Tevita had lost to Labour in the 1999 General Election. Taniela Tabu,

former Taukei Movement stalwart and a trade unionist with a chequered career, formed the Viti National Union of Taukei Workers and attacked the Chaudhary Government for Indianising the public service. The charge was baseless—the upper echelons of the public service, and nearly 90 per cent of the permanent heads of government departments, were dominated by indigenous Fijians—but effective among many Fijians already distrusting of the government. The Christian Democrats labelled the government—in which it was partner—anti-Fijian over its hesitation to renew the work visa of expatriate Fiji TV head Kenneth Clark, because the Fijian provinces held the majority of shares in the company headed by Clark.

The protest movement, small and disorganised at first, gained momentum and focus as May drew near. The government continued to chant the mantra of mandate and refused to acknowledge that trouble was in the offing, dismissing the marches as the work of a few miscreants and misguided people. Police Commissioner Isekia Savua's public warning to the government to raise its political antenna to catch the grumbling on the ground was ignored, and Savua was chastised for daring, as a public servant, to advise the government on questions of policy. Convinced that its policies were beginning to bear fruit and were popular with the electorate, which had learned the hard lessons of 1987, the government adopted a business-as-usual approach as tension mounted around the countryside. Ignoring all the warning signals, the government sent the Commander of the Military Forces, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, to Norway on an official trip. The police commissioner was on holiday, and the president was in Lau celebrating his 80th birthday. When the parliament met on 19 May 2000, marking the first anniversary in government, no special security precautions were taken, no special police forces were deployed around the parliamentary complex. While the police force focused on the 5,000 protest marchers heading from downtown towards Government House to present a petition to the president, Speight and his men stormed parliament around 10 am. The assault was led by 20-year SAS veteran Major Ilisoni Ligairi and members of the Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit he had set up at the request of the 1987 coup leader, Sitiveni Rabuka.

At 1:20 pm on 19 May, Speight spoke to a stunned nation:

I want to make clear that these actions set forth the foundations for change once and for all in the affairs of the country of Fiji as desired by the indigenous people of Fiji in their desire to achieve self-determination and control of their future destiny in all matters pertaining to their livelihood and the affairs of the

Republic of the Fiji Islands. We executed our actions this morning, there were a small number of us but as I speak and as I sit to make these announcements to you I speak on behalf of every individual member of the indigenous Fijian community. Through these actions I am stressing ownership, am asserting control and I am asserting executive power over Fiji. We have revoked the Constitution and have set that aside. We have revoked the powers of the President of the Republic of Fiji. The executive control of this country of ours currently resides in my hands.²⁷

Soon afterwards, he announced the make-up of his administration. All, without exception, were known nationalists, including many 'Children of 1987'. Ratu Timoci Silatolu (FAP, Rewa) was appointed Prime Minister, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu (SVT, Cakaudrove) was made Minister of Fijian Affairs, and Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure (SVT, Cakaudrove) Minister of Home Affairs. Three others had no portfolio: Simione Kaitani (SVT, Lomaiviti), Isireli Leweniqila (SVT, Tailveu) and Levani Tonitonivanua (Nationalist, Serua). Speight himself had his eye on the presidency, but that was not officially announced. A fuller list, announced two days later, demoted Silatolu to Deputy Prime Minister, but added the more recognisable names of Berenado Vunibobo, Ratu Tu'uakitau Cokanauto and Ratu Inoke Kubuabola. Whether the individuals had agreed to serve in the Speight administration is not known, but there is no doubt that they sang the same nationalist tune as the architects of the coup.

Speight had hoped for a speedy acceptance of the proposals. A meeting of the GCC would be convened, the proposed list of names presented and endorsed, the hostages released, and the country run by a *taukei* civilian administration. But events took a different, perhaps unexpected turn. Late in the afternoon of 19 May, as a rampaging mob burned and looted Suva, President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara declared a State of Emergency. 'There are democratically recognised avenues for airing grievances in accordance with the laws and the Constitution,' Mara told an anxious national television audience. 'I urge all those who lay claim to be leaders of this dissenting group to follow lawful means in raising their dissent.' His words fell on deaf ears. The president lacked the resources to enforce his will. The army was still in the barracks, divided in its loyalty, and the police force was confused, under-resourced and effectively leaderless and, in the view of some, silently colluding with Speight's supporters.

27 This quote is from an extract on the internet site, *fjilive*.

After being persuaded that Rabuka did not have foreknowledge of the coup, Ratu Mara engaged him as his mediator with Speight. Rabuka was an occasional golfing partner of Speight and the hijackers had reportedly trained on his estate in Vanua Levu. Some of them were from his own province of Cakaudrove. As events unfolded, Rabuka's lack of involvement in the May uprising became clearer; he was almost a bystander in the unfolding drama. Of all the major players on the Fijian side, he was the only one who stood uncompromisingly by the constitution. Mara suggested, through Rabuka, that Chaudhry should voluntarily step down in favour of an indigenous Fijian. Deputy Prime Minister Tupeni Baba was the name Mara had in mind as the Fijian replacement. Speight welcomed the suggestion, but asked Mara to step down as well. When Rabuka conveyed that demand to Mara, the president agreed to oblige, but only if that was the decision of the GCC. Speight also wanted to meet the president but Mara refused unless the hostages were released first. As Mara recalled:

He was going to tell me that if I don't follow what he says, he will start executing hostages one-by-one and when I said what does he really want I was told that he wants me to step down and allow his group to run the country. I said I will not be able to oblige.²⁸

But while refusing dialogue under duress, Mara gave Speight and his supporters in a nationally televised address his 'personal guarantee as executive head of the Republic that the issues you have raised will be dealt with fully and your position as the indigenous community will be protected and enhanced'.²⁹ This was an important victory for Speight; the president had conceded the need to amend the constitution to 'protect and enhance' Fijian interests. But Mara wanted to achieve that goal through constitutional means. More was still to come. Mara also hinted that Chaudhry might not be reinstated as prime minister.

I can't say that I will put back the government that caused all these problems ... What I intend to do is to talk to them (government members) and say 'you've seen what has happened' so what's your possible solution.³⁰

28 Radio Fiji transcript, n.d.

29 *fijilive*; a hardcopy of the release is in my possession.

30 See the *Fiji Sun*, 23 May 2000.

Whatever Mara's motives, his public doubts about Chaudhry's return to government served to strengthen the hostage takers' resolve that their goal was now within reach. Wittingly or unwittingly, the president had shown his hand. He was—or was seen to be—essentially on the same side as the broad spectrum of Fijian nationalists; they differed only in their methods.

While Mara sought to assert his executive authority, Speight began to build a human fortress around him by busing in hundreds of supporters from south-eastern Fiji, men, women and youth. They sang and danced and cooked food on the grounds of the parliamentary complex; food (cattle and root crops) stolen from Indo-Fijian farmers in the Rewa Delta were brought to Suva in police vans. The carnival atmosphere kept up the spirit of the gradually increasing crowd, but their presence in large numbers also ruled out a hostage-rescue operation. When the police force sought to control the crowd at the parliamentary complex, they were chased away by armed youths. The crowd gave the impression of a growing groundswell of support for Speight, especially to the international community; Speight himself emerged as an articulate and effective manipulator of the media.

With the deadlock between Mara and Speight, all attention shifted to the meeting of the GCC convened on 23 June. What transpired in that deeply emotional meeting is not known, although it was later reported that the Tailevu chiefs presented a *tabua* to the GCC to seek forgiveness for Speight's insulting remarks about them; Speight wanted the chiefs to justify their decisions, saying they had lost touch with the grassroots whom he now claimed to represent. After two days of talk, Ratu Mara was able to sway them to his side. He assured the chiefs that he would return the country to normalcy but would address the concerns that Speight and his supporters had raised with him, though by what authority he did not say. The chiefs agreed. They expressed full confidence in the president and the vice-president, endorsed Mara as the leader of his proposed interim administration but asked that his proposed council of advisors include some of Speight's group. The chiefs asked for the hostages to be released immediately and stolen arms surrendered to the army. They also recommended a pardon for all those involved in the hostage takeover. And finally, they urged Mara to:

give full and urgent attention to the grievances as raised by the various Taukei groups during the recent protest marches with special attention given to ensuring that the position of President and Prime Minister together with other senior government positions (unspecified) shall always be held by indigenous Fijians and Rotumans.³¹

Speight had got most of what he wanted, but he was still unsatisfied. He wanted not pardon but complete amnesty. And there was always the hint that he expected to hold office in a new government. Mara agreed to consider it, but only after a proper trial. Speight was not satisfied with an amendment to the 1997 Constitution as the chiefs had recommended; he wanted it abrogated. And, knowing Mara's political cunning, he wanted the president to step down as well, fearing that he might appoint people who were personally loyal to him to his council of advisors.

Mara proceeded with his plan to assume executive control. With Chaudhry incarcerated, the Labour Coalition had elected Ratu Tevita Momoedonu as its interim leader and spokesman. Mara swore him in as acting prime minister 'solely to enable me to take three steps'.³² The first was to advise the president under Section 99 (1) of the constitution to dismiss all Cabinet ministers, paving the way for him to appoint a caretaker prime minister and other advisors. The second was to advise the president to prorogue parliament, buying him time to 'set things in order'. And the third was for the acting prime minister to tender his resignation, handing over the executive authority to the president to run the country in the absence of a prime minister, a Cabinet and a sitting parliament. Ostensibly to save the constitution, the president sacrificed the prime minister and his duly elected government. Chaudhry, Mara said, 'is not only absent from duty but also he's unable to perform the functions of that office'. He invoked Section 106 of the Constitution:

The President may appoint a minister to act in office of another minister, including the Prime Minister, during any period or during all period when the minister is absent from duty, or is for any other reason unable to perform the functions of the office.

31 Press release, George Speight Group (GST), Suva, n.d. A copy in my possession.

32 Mara's Press conference of 27 May is reported on *fijilive*, 29 May 2000.

Mara's action was constitutionally flawed.³³ The constitution, following the normal Westminster convention, severely limits the power of the president to act without ministerial advice. The constitution does prescribe the circumstances in which the president may act in his or her own deliberate judgement, but as far as the dismissal of a prime minister is concerned, Section 109 (1) of the Constitution explicitly states:

The President may not dismiss a Prime Minister unless the Government fails to get or loses the confidence of the House of Representatives and the Prime Minister does not resign or get a dissolution of Parliament.

Chaudhry was a hostage; he had not vacated his office, and he still enjoyed the confidence of the House. He was still prime minister. But Mara had assumed otherwise 'as a matter of political reality', to use the fateful words of Chief Justice Sir Timoci Tuivaga who advised him.³⁴ In hindsight, it seems that Chaudhry's fate was sealed the moment Speight and his gunmen entered parliament. Sadly for him, neither the president nor the chief justice was prepared to stand by the constitution or the democratically elected government. The chief justice's behaviour invited the wrath of the Fiji Law Society, which accused him of acting hastily in assuming that the 1997 Constitution was in fact abrogated. His authorship of a decree—Administration of Justice Decree—that abolished the highest court in the land, the Supreme Court, made Timoci Tuivaga a judge of the Court of Appeal of which he was previously not a member and where he would now take precedence when they sat, were severely criticised by the society. 'The eyes of the profession, the nation and the world are upon the judiciary,' Peter Knight, the President of the Law Society, reminded the chief justice.

It cannot be seen to openly condone criminal activity. It should as a matter of record [note] that it will continue to occupy and function in its judicial role in the same uncompromising manner as it had done prior to 19 May.³⁵

The chief justice remained unmoved.

33 For the advice of three eminent Australian constitutional lawyers (George Williams, The Australian National University, Cheryl Saunders, the University of Melbourne and Dennis O'Brien, who drafted the constitution), see *fjilive*, 26 May 2000.

34 Chief Justice Sir Timoci Tuivaga to Peter Knight, President, Fiji Law Society, 14 June 2000. The letter has not been published.

35 Fiji Law Society to Chief Justice, 9 June 2000. A copy of the unpublished letter is in my possession.

Ratu Mara's action was equally controversial, having decided on his own, shortly after the takeover of the parliament, that the 1997 Constitution needed to be amended to accommodate the views of the Fijian nationalists. Yet, two years before, the president had praised the constitution as a fair and just charter for the nation. Perhaps Mara sensed that the Fijian opinion generally supported Speight's revolution and, as in the past, he wanted to be where his people were. As Mara had said so often, a chief without his or her people's support is not a chief. In 1982, Mara had behaved in a similar manner, refraining from condemning a motion passed by the GCC demanding Fijian control of parliament.³⁶ Be that as it may, Mara's action dismayed many, among them the United Nation's Special Envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello and Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon, who were reportedly 'stunned by Mara's endorsement of Speight's nationalist views'.³⁷ And Minister of Education Pratap Chand reminded Mara that the effect of his intervention would be to 'legitimise the overthrow of a constitutional and democratically elected Government by terrorists'.³⁸ But Mara was determined to pursue a course of action from which he would not be deterred while the world speculated on his motives.

On the streets, where Speight's men marauded freely, these constitutional manoeuvres mattered little. On 28 May, they trashed the local TV station, which ran a program drawing attention to the partial, provincial base of Speight's support. In the melee that followed, a police officer was shot dead and shots were fired at the president's residence. It was a night of nightmares. The following day, Speight's supporters planned to march from the parliamentary complex to the president's house demanding his resignation. The march was called off at the last minute on the advice of the army, which feared a violent conflict with rumours of Lauans in Suva gathering in support of their paramount chief. Despite his public pronouncements, the president's authority was weak. The police were outgunned. And the army was divided and unwilling to back the president fully. Part of the reason, according to Commodore Bainimarama, was that emotionally many soldiers were in Speight's camp but did not support the methods he had used. And many were not prepared to risk their lives for

36 Discussed at length in Lal, *Broken Waves*, p. 250.

37 This is from a Suva-based Australian Federal Police report, forwarded to me by Sarah Creighton of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, on 25 May 2000. See also Gwynne Dyer, 'Democracy vs ethnicity in Fiji', *Japanese Times*, 1 June 2000.

38 Letter written on 27 May 2000, and published on *fijilive*, 29 May 2000.

a man, Ratu Mara, whom they distrusted for a variety of reasons. They regarded Mara as the man who stood between them and the goal of Fijian paramountcy; an autocratic leader who, in Speight's words, was 'imposing his will and controlling the Great Council of Chiefs through fear as he has done to the Cabinet, the civil service, the *vanua* over the years, despite the will of the people'.³⁹ Speight, like many others in Fiji, suspected that the president harboured dynastic ambitions, that he supported the Chaudhry Government because his own family members were in it. Mara, for them, was part of the problem, not part of the solution. He had to go. When that decision had been reached, four senior army people, led by Commodore Bainimarama as well as Ratu Mara's son-in-law and former army Commander Ratu Epeli Ganilau, approached Mara late at night on 29 May in the traditional Fijian way, presented him with a *tabua* in forgiveness and asked him to step aside.

Commodore Frank Bainimarama assumed executive leadership and imposed martial law at 6 pm on 29 May. An immediate curfew was imposed. A new military council was appointed to run the country for up to three years, during which a new constitution would be drawn up and elections held under it. The army named Ratu Epeli Nailatikau as its choice for prime minister. But it was a poor choice that added fuel to the fire. Speight and his supporters saw in his nomination the continuation of the Mara dynasty and the Fijian establishment, although Nailatikau himself came from a high-ranking chiefly family of Bau. Speight's group had at first welcomed the military's intervention. 'I suppose for the maintenance of law and order and for the safety of the lives of the public that was the only option for the military to take,' Ratu Timoci Silatolu told Radio Fiji on 30 May. 'And we are keen to negotiate with them, someone who understand the hostage situation—an institution that is totally Fijian.'

The optimism of a breakthrough, however, was short lived. Speight's group wanted the new interim administration to be dominated by their followers. The opposition forced the army to delay naming its military council and withdraw Nailatikau's name. As the third week of the crisis drew to a close, the impasse continued. The military attempted to consolidate its support among the provinces by promising that their demands for political paramountcy would be accommodated in the new constitution. Speight himself might not have found a place in the civilian administration, but

39 See *fijilive*, 23 May 2000.

his supporters and most certainly his vision would. Speight had achieved much. The most significant of which was the acceptance, among a broad cross-section of indigenous Fijian opinion, that the spirit that underlay the 1997 Constitution, of the spirit of multiethnic cooperation, of equal rights under the law, of equal citizenship and of enlarging the common space through representative democracy. And this in a country divided along racial lines for so long.

Fiji had travelled that route before under the 1990 Constitution, ending up in a cul-de-sac. Speight and his supporters wanted self-determination for indigenous Fijians,⁴⁰ but they had to have autonomy—and veto power in parliament—over matters of internal governance since independence. They had to have intact their traditional chiefly institutions, including the GCC, and other separate administrative systems set up for their governance under the Fijian Affairs Act. Invoking international conventions on the rights of indigenous people was similarly unhelpful.⁴¹ The clear inference from them was that at the national level, the political and other rights of indigenous peoples were on exactly the same footing as those of other members of society. These conventions saw the special rights of indigenous peoples as distinct communities supplementing the fundamental human rights and freedoms they already enjoyed and shared with other citizens. Nothing in these conventions gave an indigenous person superior or paramount rights in taking part in the government of the country. Fijian nationalists wanted Fijian paramouncy recognised as a right, but there was no basis on which the paramouncy of Fijian interests or Fijian political paramouncy could be elevated into a right. Concepts of ‘self-determination’ and ‘sovereignty’ gave no support to that proposition. They wanted numerical dominance in a democratically elected parliament. But no constitution could guarantee political paramouncy of a particular ethnic group in a multiethnic state, unless, of course, it abandoned all claim to being democratic. The 1990 Constitution was weighted in favour of Fijians, but even it could not regulate the distribution of political power among Fijian parties. For that reason it could not ensure that Fijians would always be able to form an exclusively or predominantly

40 See his interview in the *Fiji Sun*, 10 June 2000.

41 The two conventions most commonly cited are the *ILO Convention No 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples* and the draft *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. For a discussion of their application to Fiji, see Report of the Fiji Constitution Review Commission (Sir Paul Reeves, Tomasi Rayalu Vakatora and Brij V. Lal), *The Fiji Islands: Towards a United Future* Parliamentary Paper, 34 (1996), pp. 40–48.

Fijian government. The Rabuka Government fell in 1993 because of political fragmentation among indigenous Fijians, and it fell for a similar reason in 1999. As provincial and regional sentiments were reinforced, the fragmentation would continue.

Speight lamented the 'gradual erosion of things that are important to Fijians in their own country'.⁴² This erosion had been taking place for many decades. In the early 1980s, Fijian geographer and administrator Isireli Lasaqa had sounded similar warnings about the gradual disintegration of rural Fijian society:

The weakening of Fijian social organisation and kinship ties as a means of providing some measure of social welfare to its members ... the encouragement of an enquiring mind and a willingness to question tradition, rather than a passive acceptance of fate.

The social system, Lasaqa said:

Has become increasingly coarse so that more and more elderly Fijians pass through ... and cannot derive much support and benefit from the system. In other words the kinship links have weakened and the younger generation, with their increased commercial sense, greater individual needs, and commitment to their nuclear family, are either unwilling or unable to look after their aged relatives.⁴³

Two decades later, the problems remain. The solution? Army spokesman Tarakinikini said:

The social problems facing our country cannot be solved by putting in place a constitution that guarantees 100 per cent the rights and paramountcy of indigenous Fijians in this country. It will not safeguard, it will not ensure, that indigenous Fijians will succeed. The only way we indigenous Fijians will succeed is to make sure that we make sacrifices today for the sake of our prosperity tomorrow.⁴⁴

42 See the *Fiji Sun*, 10 June 2000.

43 Quoted in Brij V. Lal, 'Rhetoric and reality: The dilemmas of contemporary Fijian politics', in *Culture and Democracy in the South Pacific*, ed. Aiono, Fanaafi Le Tagaloa and Ron Crocombe (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, 1992), pp. 97–116, at p. 111.

44 Talk on *Radio FM 96*, 4 June 2000.

Forces of social and economic change cannot be arrested by the barrel of the gun. The ultimate, inescapable truth is that Fiji is an island, but an island in the physical sense, alone.

CoupNews.com

'Some shots were fired, a man is at the gate
The rebels are led by one George Speight.'

So silently proclaims the internet,
Mother of all opinion and the elusive fact.

We all read the same text, the same lead pieces,
Policy documents and inflammatory speeches

About Christian State and Political Paramourcy,
'Fiji for Fijians': the mantra of Fijian orthodoxy

'These Indians smell different,' says Mr Speight,
Fanning the embers of racial hate.

'As coolies you came, so you must remain,
Political equality? Dream on in vain.'

Mobs dance to the music of racist beats,
Supporters celebrate on shuttered streets.

The army dithers, the police is nowhere in sight,
The looting continues well into the night.

'Family shopping,' a grinning man remarks,
Amidst damaged goods and broken glass.

Trapped, terrorised among the charred remains,
Shop owners contemplate their losses and gains.

Years of toil gone up in smoke,
Just like that, incinerating all hope.

Shops will be rebuilt, shelves restocked,
But what about lives whose dreams are dashed?

This act of madness in the month of May,
Will haunt us yet for many a long day.

Brij V. Lal

This text is taken from *Levelling Wind: Remembering Fiji*, by Brij V. Lal,
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