

# 8

## George Speight's coup

Around 10am 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 marches by a variety of aggrieved Fijian nationalist groups and defeated politicians opposed to the People's Coalition government and committed to its overthrow. Still, the hostage crisis seemed improbable. Speight, a part-Fijian failed businessmen, 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 was, in turn, held accountable for it. A case could be made that the 1987 coup was carried out on behalf of, and blessed by, the Fijian establishment, including the Methodist Church and sections of the Great Council of Chiefs. In 2000, George Speight and his men carried out a coup against the Fijian establishment, or at least without their overt blessing. If 1987 was about shoring up indigenous Fijian power and preserving Fijian political unity, Speight's intervention had the effect of fostering Fijian political fragmentation on an unprecedented scale. George Speight's dramatic intervention 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 and warmly welcomed by the international community, was abrogated, albeit briefly. One of the coup supporters' demands was that the constitution be revised to entrench Fijian political supremacy. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, president of the republic, 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. After he was presented with a customary forgiveness-seeking *tabua* (whale's tooth), Mara was sent 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. The democratically elected government headed by Mahendra Chaudhry was unceremoniously and unconstitutionally dismissed. While the prime minister endured the longest period of captivity in modern Pacific islands history, his freedom—or lack of it—was curiously overshadowed by other struggles for power taking place in Fijian society.

The crisis also ruined 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 virus of provincialism and regionalism.<sup>1</sup> It took a great deal of personal courage on the part of its leaders, in particular Commodore Bainimarama, to restore a semblance of order and professionalism in the army, but this came at great cost. The sight of Fijian soldiers shedding Fijian blood during the attempted mutiny of November 2000 has left deep scars in the collective memory of the nation.

The Great Council of Chiefs, who had sought in recent years to enlarge its role and status as the guardian of national, and not only indigenous Fijian interests, failed the test of national leadership. They sympathised with Speight's self-defined 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, or came too late. Their deliberations were 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 were 'riddled with personal agendas', and were incapable of impartial, decisive action (*The Australian*, 4 June 2000).

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 at the precipice. Investment ceased, factories closed and hundreds of workers, often at the bottom of the economic ladder and therefore the most vulnerable, were been laid off, especially in the handicraft, garment and tourism industries. Investment in the improvement of essential services—health, education, water supply, electricity—stopped, and thousands of Fiji citizens queued up at foreign embassies to migrate, taking with them skills the country could ill-afford to lose.

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 George Speight himself admitted that 'the race issue between Fijians and Indians is just one piece of the jigsaw puzzle that has many pieces' (*Fiji Sun*, 10 June 2000). In this respect, it was 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 now there was outright condemnation.<sup>2</sup> Some have argued that 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 George Speight, as they pillaged its premises and killed a policeman on duty.

Then, as the crisis dragged on, the western chiefs, long aggrieved about their absence from the national centre of power threatened—yet again—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*. The west, they said, drove the engine of the national economy. Sugar, pine, gold and tourism are produced from its soil, and they wanted representation in national councils proportionate to their contribution to the national economy. The east–west divide exists, but it is not a sharp, clear line, extensively criss-crossed now by marriage and kinship ties that blur distinction of old. The threatened secession of western Viti Levu was followed by a declaration of partial autonomy by the province of Cakaudrove proposing to set up a separate Tovata state, but the declaration lacked conviction or authority (*Sunday Times*, 11 June 2000). The declaration was probably a stunt, but it did indicate the willingness of the Fijian people to contemplate ideas that would have been unthinkable in the twentieth century.

Race relations were severely strained just at the point when things looked to be on the mend in the wake of the successful review of the constitution. The wounds of the 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 the neighbourhoods around the parliamentary complex—would take a long time to heal. The attempted coup raised deeper questions than I can deal with here, 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 who must always be aware of whose house it is (*New York Times*, 8 June 2000). Even the chiefs of western Fiji who opposed Speight, and had—or should have had—a better understanding of Indo-Fijian fears and aspirations, wanted Fiji to be declared a Christian

state so that Hindus, Muslims and Christians could all solve their problems in the proper Christian way. They blamed Australia and Britain for introducing Indians into Fiji; this revealed a lack of appreciation of the Indians' role in Fiji's economic development—without their labour Fijians might have shared the fate of some dispossessed and marginalised people in parts of the Pacific. Indo-Fijians, now fourth or fifth generation, were hurt to be still regarded as outsiders in the land of their birth, threatened with the denial of equal citizenship and equal protection under the law.

Sometimes, those who applauded the indigenous Fijians for maintaining their culture and tradition asked 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' (*New York Times*, 14 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 free reign, 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 did in the hinterland of Nausori. The main targets unsurprisingly were Indo-Fijians in outlying rural areas; their cattle slaughtered and root crops stolen. After 1987, some 100,000 migrated from Fiji, most of them Indo-Fijians, mostly to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. It is often said that there is hardly an Indo-Fijian family in Fiji that did not have at least one member outside the country. Kinship became a multinational or transnational corporation, sustaining those left behind on money remitted from abroad. 'I would rather be a dog in America than an Indian in Fiji', said a broken man whose house had been demolished and his possessions taken by Fijian mobs.

The public face, though not certainly the principal instigator, of this crisis was George Speight. A businessman with a career littered with failures in Australia and Fiji (and possibly elsewhere as well), the 45-year old Speight wandered on the fringes of the local commercial circles

on the eve of the coup (*Fiji Times*, 23 May 2000). 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 F\$300 million (*Sunday Times*, 11 June 2000). The government chose the Commonwealth Development Corporation, who had 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, an anointed saviour of the Fijian 'race'. Speight, however, was no Rabuka, as even his most ardent supporters admitted. Indeed, an important reason why the international community—as seen in Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer's reaction—was so severe in its condemnation of Fiji was because George Speight had presented himself as the face of indigenous Fijian nationalism. A part-European of Fijian descent, head shaved, Speight was articulate, engaging, bantering with the international media, reading emails and Fiji news on the internet before his press conferences; for all that, he remained an unconvincing Fijian hero, though probably not in his own eyes.

George Speight was not acting all on his own. If he were, the crisis would have had a limited and inconsequential life. He was the front man for others. Behind him, in the shadows, were individuals and groups, writing his speeches, drawing up position papers, building up his support base, and orchestrating the crowds—people who had little to lose but everything to gain from the overthrow of the Chaudhry government and from the mayhem that followed. Among them were politicians defeated at the last elections or otherwise excluded from power, 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. Fijian Association Party's Adi Kuini Vuikaba Speed was the deputy prime minister, but

Ratu Cokanauto Tua'akitau was seen with Speight's group. Apisai Tora, the founder of the 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 who then found their prospects for continued prosperity dimming on the election of a new government. Prominent local businessmen-cum-politicians in the previous SVT government supported the destabilisation campaign. For them, it was important that the Chaudhry government went before it managed to entrench itself. In this group of the ambitious and upwardly mobile, I would also include what I call the 'children of 1987'. This group included those who had benefited from the post-coup racially based affirmative action programs—sanctioned by the 1990 constitution—in 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 SVT government's reign.<sup>3</sup> 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 post-independence 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.<sup>4</sup> The 'children of 1987' did not understand nor 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 contributed the brawn. The bedraggled unemployed, unskilled Fijian youth—armed with sticks, knives, bamboo spears, stones and sometimes guns looted, burned and trashed Suva, terrorised the countryside, and acted as human shields 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 George Speight's mesmerising rhetoric and easy solutions: getting rid of the Indians, reverting to tradition and putting Fijians in political control would mean 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 that took place under the revised 1997 constitution. As shown before, Chaudhry's Labour Party won 37 of the 71 seats in its own right. Together with his other coalition partners, 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 convincing 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 structural reform programs of the Rabuka government that had caused massive unemployment, introduce minimum wages, lower interest-rates, provide social security for the elderly, and resolve the long-festering 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 who had long been the champion of Indo-Fijian interests, did not win a single seat, and 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), 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 issues were magnified in an atmosphere already rife with suspicion and distrust about the government's motives. Why did Chaudhry

appoint his own son, not a civil servant, as his personal assistant on the public payroll? Here was a man who, as long-term secretary of the Fiji Public Service Association, had given scathing assessments 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, which 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 governed batted 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 Great Council of Chiefs has its own mandate under the constitution, and the army has 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 was 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. But what they all had in common was their adamant opposition to Sitiveni

Rabuka. Opposition to a common enemy, then, rather than commitment to a common agenda, brought the disparate groups together. And when Rabuka was defeated, the difficulties of internal cohesion came to the fore, almost 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.<sup>5</sup> Chaudhry was helped unobtrusively and opportunistically by Ratu Mara who urged the Fijian parties to rally behind him, 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 George Speight. Tora became a fierce rabble-rousing critic of the government, expressing his disgruntlement by leading a revived Taukei Movement.

The issue that united the Fijians was land. Land, as I have said before, has always been a sensitive issue in Fijian politics. The question always has been the use rather than the ownership of land. Now, 83 per cent of all land in Fiji—3,714,990 acres—is held in inalienable rights by indigenous Fijians, 8.2 per cent is freehold, 3.6 per cent is state freehold and 5 per cent is crown or state. Much of the country's agricultural activity—in particular sugar cultivation—is carried out on land leased from Fijian landowners. The country's 22,000 cane growers, the overwhelming majority of whom are Indo-Fijians, lease 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 on the expiry of the leases. These leases were beginning to expire, and some, but by no means all, landlords want their land back—either to cultivate the land themselves, rezone it for commercial or residential purposes, or use the threat of non-renewal 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 has used every means available to push his agenda, from addressing the provincial councils to using the network of the Methodist Church, to rallying Fijian landowners behind him and against the government. The 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.

Chaudhry did not contest the landowners' desire to reclaim their land. Nor, on other hand, could he—or any other 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 F\$28,000 to start afresh in some other occupation, and about F\$8,000 to the landlords who repossessed their former leasees' land to become cultivators themselves. Meanwhile, it also resuscitated the idea of a Land Use Commission, mentioned in his party's manifesto but with a history going back nearly forty years, to work with landowners to identify idle land and to put it to productive use, including, if possible, for resettlement of the 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, the agriculture minister, recalled the malicious misinformation spread among the people. In one province, he was told the Land Use Commission 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 Land Use Commission. Faced with this malicious propaganda, the government then did what it should have done in the first place: it took the proposal to the Great Council of Chiefs, 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 the upper hand, as shown by approval levels in the 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 non-renewal 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 Chaudhry 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 proved effective among many Fijians already distrustful 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 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 repeat the refrain 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. The police commissioner Isekia Savua's public warning to the government to raise its political antenna to catch the grumbling on the ground was ignored, so he claimed, 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, who had learned the hard lessons of 1987, the government adopted a business-as-usual approach as tension mounted around the country. Ignoring all the warning signals, it 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 eightieth birthday. When the parliament met on 19 May, marking the first anniversary in government, no special security precautions were taken; no special police forces were deployed around the parliamentary complex. The police force focused on the protest marchers downtown heading towards Government House to present a petition to the president. At 10am Speight and his men stormed parliament, 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 1.20pm that day Speight spoke to a stunned nation.

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 (*FijiLive*, 19 May 2003).

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 for Fijian affairs, Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure (SVT, Cakaudrove), minister for home affairs. Three others had no portfolio: Simione Kaitani (SVT Lomaiviti), Isireli Leweniqila (SVT, Tailveu), 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 these individuals had agreed to serve in the Speight administration was not known, but there was 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 Great Council of Chiefs 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 power 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, guilty of colluding with Speight’s supporters.

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’s 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 active support in the May uprising became clearer; outwardly, he was almost a bystander in the unfolding drama. Of all the major players on the Fijian side, he was the only one then 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 the Great Council of Chiefs backed that demand. 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’. But while refusing dialogue under duress, in a nationally televised address Mara gave Speight and his supporters 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’.

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 Mahendra 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’ (*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. Unwittingly or otherwise, 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 transporting in hundreds of supporters from southeastern Viti Levu—men, women and children. 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 and 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 Great Council of Chiefs 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 Great Council of Chiefs to seek forgiveness for George 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, endorsing 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 all stolen arms to be 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 *tankei* 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 (Council of Chiefs, press release 23 June 2000).

Speight had got most of what he wanted, but he was still unsatisfied. He had not wanted a pardon but complete amnesty; 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 to his council of advisors people personally loyal to him.

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' (*Fijilive* 29 May 2000). 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 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'. Mara's action was constitutionally flawed. The constitution, following the normal Westminster convention, severely limited the power of the president to act without ministerial advice. The constitution did 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 stated

[t]he 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 of Representatives—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 had advised him.<sup>6</sup>

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 were 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 the Administration of Justice Decree, a decree that abolished the highest court in the land, the Supreme Court, and made the chief justice a judge of the Court of Appeal of which he was previously not a member and where he would now take precedence when the court sat, was 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’.<sup>7</sup> The chief justice remained unmoved.

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 wishes 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 position, and, as in the past, he wanted to be where his people were. As Mara so often said, a chief without his or her people’s support was not a chief. In 1982, Mara had behaved in a similar manner, refraining from condemning a

motion passed by the Great Council of Chiefs demanding Fijian control of parliament. Be that as it may, Mara's action dismayed many, among them the United Nation's Special Envoy Sergio Vieira de Mellor and Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon who were reportedly 'stunned by Mara's endorsement of Speight's nationalist views' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 May 2000). And Pratap Chand, the minister for education, reminded Mara that the effect of his intervention would be to 'legitimise the overthrow of a constitutional and democratically elected government by terrorists' (*Fijilive*, 29 May 2000). But Mara was determined to pursue his course of action 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 that ran a program drawing attention to the partial, provincial base of Speight's support. And in the melee that followed, a police officer was shot dead and shots were fired at the president's residence. The following day, Speight's supporters planned to march from the parliamentary complex to the president's house demanding his resignation; the march called off at the last minute on the advice of the army which feared a violent conflict after hearing rumours of Lauans gathering in Suva in support of their paramount chief. Despite his public pronouncements, the president's authority was weak. The police were outgunned; the army was divided and unwilling to back the president fully.

Part of the reason, according to Commodore Frank Bainimarama, was that emotionally many soldiers were in Speight's camp but did not support the methods he had used. Many were not prepared to risk their lives for 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' (*Fiji Sun*, 10 June 2000). 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 a part of the problem not a part of the solution; he had to go. When that decision had been reached, four senior army personnel, lead by the commander as well as

Ratu Mara's son-in-law and former army commander Ratu Epeli Ganilau, approached Mara late on 29 June in the traditional Fijian way, presented him a *tabua* in forgiveness, and asked him to step aside.

Commodore Bainimarama assumed executive leadership and imposed martial law at 6pm 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 would be held under it. The army named former commander and Mara's son-in-law Ratu Epeli Nailatikau as its choice for prime minister. But it was a poor choice that added fuel to 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 understands 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 ended, 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. George Speight himself did not find a place in the civilian administration although his supporters did. But Speight had made other achievements: most significantly, the acceptance by a broad cross-section of the indigenous Fijians that the 1997 constitution, and the spirit that underwrote it—the spirit of multiethnic cooperation, of equal rights under the law, of equal citizenship, of enlarging the common space through representative democracy—could not be sustained 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 the indigenous Fijians, but they had had autonomy—and veto power in parliament—over matters of internal governance since independence. They had their traditional chiefly institutions intact, including the Great Council of Chiefs, 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. The clear inference from them was that at the national level, the political and other rights of indigenous peoples are on exactly the same footing as those of other members of society. These conventions saw the special rights of indigenous peoples as distinct communities as supplementing the fundamental human rights and freedoms they already enjoy and share with other citizens. Nothing in these conventions gave an indigenous people superior or paramount rights in taking part in the government of the country. Fijian nationalists want 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 be 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 Fijian government. Rabuka’s government fell in 1993 because of political fragmentation among indigenous Fijians, and it fell for a similar reasons in 1999.

The army imposed martial law and returned the country to a semblance of normalcy. Power was handed to an interim administration. The rebels were rounded up.

George Speight was tried for treason and received life sentence. Many of his co-conspirators were also sent to prison for varying lengths of time. Soldiers who participated in the mutiny have also been punished but there is a lingering suspicion in Fiji that many people who worked behind the scenes, even some of the masterminds, have escaped punishment and are enjoying the fruits of Speight’s handiwork. In April

2004, the chiefs sentenced to imprisonment for their role in the mutiny of November 2000 were released on compulsory supervision order after serving a only week in jail. And the government proposed a new legislation, 'Outside Dispute Resolution', which would absolve chiefs from criminal prosecution if they were deemed to have intervened to resolve a dispute, even if their participation was illegal. Creating two sets of laws, one for the chiefs and one all others, was myopic and dangerous, as was the proposal to increase the powers of the Great Council of Chiefs from its currently advisory role. They would one day return to haunt Fiji.

## Notes

- 1 See Col. Filipe Tarakinini's statement on *Fijilive*, 4 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'.
- 2 With some eccentric exceptions as the Maori lawyer Anthony Sinclair who said, without irony, 'we believe that revolution is a legitimate part of the democratic process' (*Fijilive*, 3 June 2000).
- 3 Representatives of this group would include Rakuita Vakalalabure, Saimone Kaitani, Timoci Silatolu and Filipe Tuisawau.
- 4 This group would include Josefa Kamikamica, Savenaca Siwatibau and Mosese Qionabaravi.
- 5 This is confirmed by Chaudhry's deputy Tupeni Baba who thought the party had agreed to have him (an indigenous Fijian) as prime minister. See his book, Tupeni, Unaisi and Field 2005).
- 6 The quote is from the Chief Justice's letter to Peter Knight, President of the Fiji Law Society, 14 June 2000.
- 7 A copy of this letter dated 9 June is in the author's possession.