20. Rumblings of Discontent

Together we can prosper and achieve unity. Fiji is home to us all. Here, with compassion, understanding and goodwill, we can live together in happiness.

Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau

During the first half of the 20th century, Fiji was relatively free of serious crime. There were rare cases of murder or assault. Car theft was unheard of. Breaking and entry was a rare event. Rape was seldom mentioned. Official corruption and white-collar crime just didn’t happen. There are some good reasons for this happy state of affairs. The colonial government had very strict ethical standards and these were enforced on the local people. They had strong disciplinary procedures and no hesitation about applying them. The police force was small but very efficient. The chiefly system dominated within Fijian society and maintained order and discipline within the Fijian structure. Indian communities were committed to work and improvement in the quality of their lives. Crime was not a consideration. Fortunately, most people lived in rural areas and the urban population was fully employed and reasonably housed. Another factor was that Fiji remained isolated from the outside world. There was no TV and few cinemas. Radio broadcast only informative programmes. Not many local people travelled overseas or read about crime.

All this began to change in the third quarter of the century. Significantly, it coincided with independence, although it would no doubt have occurred even if Fiji had remained a dominion. Pressures were mounting as the Fijian communal system began to collapse. Respect for their chiefs began to wane and young people drifted into the cities seeking a more glamorous life. They became exposed to Hollywood crime movies. They saw how the more affluent lived and they wanted the same, but didn’t have enough money. Jobs were hard to get without proper training. The police force was localised and short of resources. The gap between the rich and the poor widened. People lost trust and respect for leaders in civil society, parliament, business, and the professions. Racism reared its ugly head.

When we lived on Taveuni, nothing was locked up. The doors and windows of our house were left open whenever we went out. Nothing was ever stolen. When I brought my family to live in Suva in 1968, we moved into the exclusive Tamavua area. There was no fence around the compound nor bars on the doors and windows. I thought we would be just as secure. I was wrong. Within two years we had ten burglaries. We lost jewelry, money, cameras and radios and, of course, liquor. Once I caught a young man in the act and grappled with him.
But he was too tough and slippery for me to hold and he got away. On another occasion, much later, we were having dinner with guests and heard someone trying to force one of the doors in our bedroom. Quietly, I crept to the window beside the door, pointed my .22 rifle out of the window and fired a round into the ground. The man got such a fright that he yelled and ran. I fired another round at his heels and think he ran on for a long time. We then got a vicious dog and constructed a 10-foot fence around the compound. Someone poisoned the dog. Later I was forced by the insurance company to put iron bars on all my doors and windows. It was a horrible way to have to live and I later replaced these bars with heavy armour glass.

In the same street as us lived former District Officer Dennis Williams. He retired from the Colonial Service and set himself up as a real estate agent and property developer. The thieves must have taken a particular dislike to Dennis, because he had over 30 break-ins over a 24-month period. At that time he was building one of the first multi-storied office buildings in Suva and he modified it to provide for a penthouse on the 12th floor. When it was finished, he moved into the penthouse and hoped that would be the end of burglaries. He was right, but they occurred in ever increasing numbers elsewhere.

Fijian people are traditionally rural and seaside dwellers. Living in cities and big towns away from the customary communal life style is not natural, and those unemployed youth who left their villages found adjustment difficult. It didn’t help that the authorities decided to provide a form of low cost housing that simply copied what was done in urban areas in other parts of the world. They put up high-rise tenements in suburbs instead of utilising the vast areas of unused land on the fringes of the urban areas to build modest homes surrounded by small areas of land that could be cultivated. These low cost urban areas became the breeding ground for crime.

One of the targets of criminals was the small corner store owned by Chinese or Indians. At one time, a buyer could walk into the store, select an item, pay at the counter and leave. But with the rise in shop break-ins, owners had to put up iron grills across the front of the store and the buyer had to stand outside, look in through the grill and identify an item, which the shopkeeper would get for him. Needless to say, thieves found other ways to break into shops.

Going to jail was no real deterrent. In fact, for some, jail meant a place to sleep with food and clothing. One of the ironies of prison life in Fiji was that many of the prison gangs worked outside, clearing land or planting crops. It was a common sight to see a jail warden leading a group of prisoners out to work. He would be holding a wooden baton while ten or 12 prisoners would each have
razor sharp cane knives and digging forks. I never heard of a warden being attacked. Often prisoners tried to escape if they wanted to spend some time with their family.

One of the most notorious criminals of the 20th century was Sairusi Nabogibogi. In the 1960s he was convicted of burglary and it was suspected that he had shot the Commissioner Western. The greatest manhunt Fiji has ever known was mounted, but Nabogibogi remained at large for 12 months. The Governor eventually asked Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau to take charge of the matter. I recorded Ratu Penaia’s account of this incident in my biography of him and it says a great deal about the Fijian way of doing things. At Lautoka, Ratu Penaia was met by Apisai Tora, who that said Nabogibogi wanted to see him. Arrangements were made to transport Ratu Penaia to Nabogibogi’s hideout in a lorry at the dead of night. At the end of the road, they walked for some time through cane fields and bush before they came to a lonely hut. There in the dark hut, illuminated by a benzene light, sat Nabogibogi. Ratu Penaia said he quickly realised that this was not to be a meeting between a hardened escaped criminal and an officer of government, but between a Fijian and his Chief. Permission was sought to prepare yaqona and present whales tooth. This was done and Ratu Penaia asked why Nabogibogi wanted to see him. Nabogibogi claimed that his trial was unfair and that if the judiciary agreed to a re-trial he would come out of hiding. Ratu Penaia said he could not give such an undertaking, but asked Nabogibogi to go with him so that he would take the matter up with the authorities. Nabogibogi thanked him for the suggestion, but said he would prefer to remain in the bush until he heard what the authorities had to say. They had a meal, drank some more yaqona, and Ratu Penaia returned to Lautoka. It was six months before Nabogibogi was seen again.

The kind of leadership that Ratu Penaia and a number of other chiefs provided ensured stability in Fiji for most of the century. But when they died, chiefly authority began to decline and the influences of the common man became stronger. This was apparent when Dr Bavadra was elected the first non-chief Prime Minister, and when Sitiveni Rabuka mounted his coup and took control of the islands. As leader of the army, Rabuka imposed a different kind of authority and was still able to control the rumblings among Fijians who felt that they were beginning to lose control of Fiji. But the genie was out of the bottle and 12 years later Speight gave it complete freedom.

But it wasn’t just the need for political control that had agitated the Fijian genie. It was the fact that the economy, the real wealth, was in the hands of others. Fijians owned most of the land, but they made no money out of it. They believed, quite wrongly, that Indians had become rich on Fijian cane land, and as soon as the cane leases expired they wanted the land back. Most of the successful business enterprises were owned by Indians or expatriate companies. The large
tourism plant was owned by foreigners, though it was on Fijian land. There was the threat of roadblocks and demands for payments by tourists going diving on reefs. The hydro plant was on Fijian land and even though Ratu Penaia had negotiated a lease agreement for the catchment area, there were further demands for huge sums of compensation.

Throughout my years in the sugar industry, I had been impressed by the way in which rural Fijians and Indians had lived and worked together in apparent harmony. I felt sure that there was a great depth of good will between them and that they would go on helping each other. But when I saw the brutal way Indian farmers were treated when their leases expired, I realised that I was wrong. The underlying feelings of envy and animosity were more dominant than brotherly love. Tragically, those who tried to force out the Indian farmer triggered the demise of the sugar industry. Production of cane fell dramatically. Indian farmers, feeling insecure, stopped working the land efficiently and refused to agree to changes to the industry that would make it more efficient and able to survive into the 21st century.

The surge of Fijian nationalism that the events of May 2000 triggered had massive implications for the economy. At that stage, Fiji was poised to take significant strides forward. The garment industry was booming, providing thousands of jobs. A number of huge new tourism developments were about to start. Small businesses throughout the country were growing. But overseas investors are fickle people, and at the first hint of instability they re-think their plans. Garment manufacturers moved to China, Thailand or Vietnam. Developers put their plans on hold. As confidence waned, spending ceased and small businesses stuttered to a halt. Aid donors stopped their grants and building contractors closed down. A massive cloud of doom descended upon the islands of Fiji. People of all races, even Fijians, began to re-examine their future. Should they stay in Fiji in the hope that things would get better? Should they apply for visas to Australia, New Zealand, Canada or the United States, and move their families to a safer place with greater opportunity? Should they hedge their bets and keep a foot in both places? Many of my friends and business associates, particularly Indians and Europeans, decided to go.

‘Fiji—the way the world should be.’ That was the official tourist slogan of Fiji before May 1987. It wasn’t an idle boast, for Fiji is one of nature’s loveliest creations and its people appeared to have come up with a political formula that took adequate account of racial diversity. There was peace, progress and harmony. The economy was growing steadily. Inflation was being contained. Unemployment was at acceptable levels. There was a free and outspoken press. The judiciary was quite independent. A rather unique political system was working. Political leaders were respected throughout the world.
Visiting tourists, businessmen, foreign diplomats, and World Bank advisers saw Fiji as one of the few successful third world countries. But there was a dormant malignancy.

Few foreigners would have been aware of the deep rooted frustration and resentment that was simmering in many Fijian hearts, for the Fijian conceals such feelings. Fijians placidly accepted the changes that had taken place in their islands over 150 years, for that was apparently what their chiefs desired. But that didn’t mean they were satisfied. For over a century, foreigners, particularly British, Indians and Australians, had provided political, economic and social leadership. These people had imposed their customs and traditions, some of which were deeply offensive to Fijians.

Some foreigners are often brash, pushy and insensitive, and when there was no voice of opposition, they assumed they were doing the right thing. But they failed to take into account the excessive politeness of the Fijian. Fijians have an inherent reluctance to speak out unless invited to, a characteristic that represents a respect for their chiefs.

Although the Fiji formula appeared to be working, for a long time there had been a simmering undercurrent of Fijian resentment and a desire to re-assert Fijian influence. Rabuka gave the Fijians the opportunity to voice their feelings, and reassert themselves.

While many Fijians welcomed this move, opposition politicians and foreign governments voiced their condemnation of the demise of democracy. Fiji was ostracised. The Western world expected, indeed demanded, that Fiji conform to the Western brand of democracy.

Few people really approve of military regimes, yet the world abounds with such governments. The West condemns communism in China but deals with the regime. Islam terrifies most Westerners, yet its people are the most devout. Right thinking people are sad at the treatment of North American Indians, Hawaiians, and Maoris. Yet Fiji is condemned when its indigenous people try to re-assert themselves in their own country and search for a system that will provide adequate safeguards for people of other races.

The orderly and rather simple world of the mid-20th century was rapidly giving way to instability, anarchy, terrorism and immense technological change. While Fiji was once considered remote from the rest of the world, able to dictate its own pace of change and development, that is no longer the case. Today, when Bainimarama blinks, the Secretary General of the United Nations phones him. The people of this little nation are inevitably caught up in the complexities and changes of the modern world. They can no longer steer their own course.
All they can hope to do is fine tune the direction and try to adhere to some fundamental principles, such as the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, and basic human rights and freedoms.

Despite these many pressures, Fijians and Indians share gifts and sympathy at weddings and funerals, chat together in each others’ tongue around a bowl of grog and help each other on cane farms. Children of all races learn and play together at school. Indian and Fijian trade union leaders work together to improve the lot of employees. At festivals all races have fun together. One could go on and on. The fundamentals are already in place. They are deeply imbedded in all levels of society, in business, NGOs, government and community organisations.

There are those who will say that unacceptable disparities have arisen between the races; that in trying to keep pace with the globalisation we have lost our way; that in trying to impose Western brands of democracy we have sacrificed traditional values; that Fijians have been in danger of losing control in the land of their ancestors. These claims contain elements of truth.

There is no doubt the coups have done a great deal of damage to our nation.

Many were hurt grievously. A great deal of harm was done to the economy. But we came through it all. In many other parts of the world the kind of trauma we experienced would have destroyed the nation. One reason why we have survived that misery is the enormous reservoir of good will that does exist between people of all races in Fiji. After the 1987 coups, Ratu Mara said, ‘the people of Fiji looked at themselves and found that there existed a store of goodwill and basic humanity.’

A question to consider is whether there is indeed a shared vision in Fiji for these diverse cultures. A man for whom I have the greatest respect, the late President Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, said, ‘Together we can prosper and achieve unity in diversity. Fiji is home to us all. Here with compassion, understanding and goodwill, we can live together in happiness.’ I am absolutely certain that the vast majority of people share that belief and that vision.

One of the most divisive issues in Fiji has been that the Fijians have always considered non-Fijians like myself or Indians or Chinese to be vulagis: visitors. For electoral or administrative purposes I have been labeled a ‘general,’ an ‘other,’ or ‘European.’

One of the boldest actions the Bainimarama government has taken has been to decree that henceforth there will be no ethnic labels, all citizens of Fiji will now be called Fijians.

It is natural for an ethnic group to want to preserve its culture, particularly a race such as the Fijians. There are but a few hundred-thousand in existence.
Fijian culture is extremely rich and old and complex. It has some wonderful characteristics and values. Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau said, 'It is the bedrock of our being.' It is no less important to humankind than ancient Indian and Chinese cultures.

One can justifiably argue that all cultures must be nurtured and preserved. But there is no reason why various cultures—the ways of life of people living in Fiji—cannot be adapted to suit the times in which we live without causing offence.

We must take account of the different groups of people who want to co-exist and provide an environment that is compatible with their expectations. What we must keep uppermost in our minds is that this generation is responsible to future generations to forge a nation of a united people. If we do not, then we will have failed in our trusteeship role. We need to develop a national ethos, call it a culture if you like, which characterises us as one people living in one nation.

Perhaps we should look to nature for a model. We have plants and trees from many parts of the world growing in our forests and gardens, as well as many native species. They all have their botanic names and individual characteristics. But they all derive the same nutrients from the same soil. They thrive on the same rainfall and temperature range. They live in harmony and give Fiji its own special, natural, exotic character.

It is too early to assess the full implications of the Bainimarama coup and his government’s actions. But what he has done is to give himself a space in which reforms can take place. Many of these could not have been implemented during a multi-party type of government. While multi-party democracy is the accepted norm in many parts of the world, it has its disadvantages. Party politics can be a destructive force. It is a costly process in which parties strive to introduce policies that win public favour and ensure re-election at a later date through one-upmanship.

A Bainimarama-type regime has the advantage of identifying changes that need to be made and implementing them without reference to party ideologies or popular opinion. Fortunately, Bainimarama is a benign type of leader and many of the changes that he has introduced needed to be made. These included public service reform, land laws, anti-corruption, and eliminating ethnicity. The list is extensive. We could all see that these changes were needed, but no party in previous governments had the courage to act. The down side is that we, the people, have had no influence in those decisions. Perhaps they could have been done more effectively if there had been a wider input of opinion.