Interlude: Reflections on Coups

On 14th May 1987, I was working in my office when my secretary came in to say something had happened in parliament. It did not take long to discover from the radio that the military had stormed parliament and removed the members of the House. Accurate details were scarce but rumors abounded. Shock turned into dismay as the full implication of this unprecedented assault on our democratic system gripped us and the nation began to fall apart.

It was fortunate that full executive power was assumed by the Governor General, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, who followed a pragmatic path in returning the country to civilian rule. Ratu Penaia, one of the most respected men in the country, became a one-man government. Raised in the chiefly tradition, trained by the British as a civil servant, a rugby player for the national team, soldier and commander of the Fiji battalion in Malaya during the insurrection, politician, Cabinet Minister; Deputy Prime Minister, and then Governor General, Ratu Penaia, more than any other, was responsible for steering the country back from the brink of chaos.

Fiji was also fortunate that coup leader Rabuka was not a power-hungry autocrat. Instead, he was an intelligent, personable man with a keen sense of humour. While ostracised by foreign governments when he first took power, he was to win their support as he began to lead Fiji back to democracy. The patriotism shown by many at that time enabled Fiji to recover.

In May 2000, all hell broke loose in Fiji again. I had been addressing a Rotary Youth Leadership Award seminar at Lautoka. My theme was the changing world in which we live and the adjustments we needed to make in order to keep pace. I ended by stressing how fortunate we were to be living in Fiji in such a free and orderly society, where we were blessed with an unpolluted environment, natural beauty and a mixed population that coexisted in peace and harmony. No one could mistake my patriotism.

As I left the seminar to return to Suva, a colleague told me that there had been a takeover in parliament. I was shocked to my very core and a deep sense of foreboding gripped me, for I sensed that this time round it would be far worse.

Speight’s coup was ugly and bloody. He surrounded himself with a dangerous bunch of heavily-armed ignorant thugs. During the two months that he held the democratically elected government hostage in the parliament buildings, he succeeded in bringing Fiji to its knees: politically, socially and economically.
Fiji became an international pariah. Aid and all kinds of assistance were cut off. Sporting contacts were severed. Thousands lost their jobs as businesses closed down and tourism collapsed.

During the height of the riots, looting and burning in Suva, I sat on the balcony of my home, which overlooked beautiful Suva harbor and the city, and watched the flames and smoke billow up into the sky. It was difficult to believe that this madness had erupted in our midst. What was worse was the frustration of watching it all happen, of seeing life as I knew it disintegrate before my eyes, and knowing that I could do nothing about it.

As I looked down on the smoke hanging ominously over the city, I tried to analyse my muddled emotions. My overpowering emotion was anger that a small group of armed men should have the arrogance to proclaim that they knew what was best for our people and our country. They apparently had neither care nor consideration for the disastrous consequences of their actions.

The other dominant emotion was one of sadness. Sadness that the hopes and aspirations of so many people, and a nation collectively, should be shattered so abruptly. Sadness about the fear and suffering that the people of Fiji would have to endure and the terrible hardships that clearly lay ahead. Sadness that law and order had given way to anarchy.

The Pacific blue flag meant a great deal to me. I remembered with poignancy that day in 1970 when it had to be unfurled for the first time in Suva’s Albert Park. The hearts of every Fiji citizen had swelled with hope and pride. I recalled that Prime Minister Ratu sir Kamisese Mara reminded us that we were not celebrating the end of British rule but the beginning of self-rule.

The flag has remained a symbol of our freedom and to me it has always represented all that is good about Fiji: the lovely islands of Lau and the Yasawas; the rich delta flats of Nadi and Ba; the lush jungles of Taveuni; the clear air that we breathe; freedom from persecution and the right to vote and speak our minds; the brotherhood of Fijians and Indians, Europeans and Chinese, Rotumans and Melanesians, Muslims and Hindus, Catholics and Protestants; hard work and thrift; freedom of assembly; tolerance, honesty, trust and understanding. That is what the flag means to me. That is what I call being patriotic.

Perhaps our very success had been the cause of our downfall, I thought. Perhaps we had been so concerned with economic growth that we had become insensitive of the rumblings of discontent that had been simmering malignantly in our bowels.

We had allowed the flag to become faded and tattered. No one cared so long as there was money in the bank and time for leisure. Patriotism was something
we need not waste time on. We treated Independence Day as a holiday rather than an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to Fiji. People only thought of Fiji collectively when we won the Hong Kong sevens.

Now, it appeared that the malignant growth that we could have treated had erupted into a suppurating sore that was poisoning the whole Fiji body. There was no pride in being a Fiji citizen, only sadness as the fabric of life crumbled and the world mocked us and wrote us off as a basket case.

I was reminded of Ratu Seru Cakobau’s statements to Sir Hercules Robinson at the signing of the Deed of Cession at Levuka in 1874. ‘What of the future?’ he asked rhetorically. ‘If things remain as they are, Fiji will become like a piece of driftwood on the sea and picked up by the first passerby.’

My other emotion was therefore fear. Fear at the way we are drifting into a sea of intrigue and turmoil. Anxiety about who would pick up the pieces and put Fiji together.