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## The pre-election ‘cold war’: the role of the Fiji military during the 2006 election

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The military’s role during the May 2006 election was largely in the form of participation in political campaigns against the incumbent Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) government for the purpose of protecting ‘national security interests’. While the 1987 and 2000 military interventions involved deployment of armed troops, the 2006 deployment largely involved public relations – and at times psychological pressure – to attempt to influence the election results. This was the first time in Fiji’s history that the military was openly involved in electioneering and associated activity. The issue of contention then is: by such involvement, to what extent did the military exceed its constitutional limits? Are the limits clearly defined – as the ruling government argued – or are they meant to be interpreted in a utilitarian way, depending on the security circumstances – as the military contended? Another pertinent question is whether or not the military’s campaign influenced the election result. Indications are that it may have – but in an unexpected way; rather than diminishing Fijian support for the SDL, it strengthened it.

The military’s election campaign was linked to its attempt to affirm its post-2000 coup ambitions to ‘cleanse’ Fiji of trouble-making ethno-nationalists. Had the SDL lost the election, it would have vindicated the military’s stance and given it the moral high ground that it wanted to occupy. There was some general public fear that if the SDL won there would be a reprise of the pre-election ‘cold war’ between the SDL and the military; yet, in fact, the post-

election formation of the multiparty cabinet quickly eased the tension, enabling the two sides to re-engage in a peaceful way. In fact the military commander pledged his support for the Prime Minister and the multi-party government. However, the post-election honeymoon period between the SDL government and the military did not last long. In September, the military commander went back on his words, started denouncing the government and demanded that two controversial bills, the Qoliqoli Bill (which was for the purpose of returning ownership of the traditional fishing grounds from the state to the indigenous landowners) and the Promotion of Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill (RTU Bill) be withdrawn. This created a new phase of hostility and tension, leading to speculations of another military coup in Fiji. This chapter examines the extent and possible impact of the pre-election 'cold war' between the military and the government. The battle for moral and political supremacy between the two institutions provided the backdrop to an otherwise peaceful and reasonably fair election.

Fiji's military plays a pivotal role in shaping the culture, configuration and dynamics of Fiji's politics. The primary role of the Fiji military since its inception in the 1870s has been that of 'internal security', although there were overseas deployments during the Boer War, World War I, World War II, the Malayan campaign and during various international peacekeeping operations since 1978.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, apart from its involvement in the 1870's colonial pacification process of coercing rebellious Fijian tribes to submit to British rule, the most direct interventions of the military in political affairs in recent times were the two coups in 1987 and when it moved to remove the coup makers and impose martial law in May 2000. Since 2000, the relationship between the civil state and the military has gone through a turbulent phase; this had a significant impact on the role of the military during the 2006 election.

### **The evolution of a fighting force**

The genesis of the Fiji military is to be found in the years prior to cession to Britain in 1874. Cakobau, a warlord from the powerful chiefdom of Bau, had an army, dubbed the 'Royal Army', that was part of his pre-cession government. The Royal Army, together with servicemen from the Royal Navy (Australian Squadron), formed part of the ceremonial guard during the deed of cession

ceremony in Levuka, the old capital of Fiji, on 10 October 1874. After cession, the Royal Army was converted into the Armed Native Constabulary (ANC). The ANC consisted largely of local Fijians under the command of British officers.<sup>2</sup> It was used extensively to suppress the anti-colonial and anti-Christian rebellion of tribal groups in the interior of Viti Levu, the main island of the Fiji archipelago, and in Seaqaqa on Vanua Levu, the second largest island, until it was abolished in 1906. A paradoxical characteristic of the ANC was the technique of using indigenous troops to suppress indigenous uprisings. This was an effective method of 'divide and rule' deployed by the British to maintain its hegemony.<sup>3</sup>

In 1897, as a result of rumours of New Zealand's intention to annex Fiji, the Governor, Sir George T.M. O'Brien, signed an ordinance providing for the establishment of an all-European Volunteer Force 'whose task would be to repel invasion [and] quell local disturbances'.<sup>4</sup> The ordinance was repealed in 1906 and was replaced by the Fiji Rifle Association Ordinance, which required that all the rifle clubs be mobilized under the Fiji Rifles Association in the event of an invasion. During the Boer War (1899–1902), a number of local European residents of British descent volunteered to join the British forces.

It was not until World War I that Fijian troops were sent overseas as a coherent force. They were mostly involved in the Labour Corps because they were not allowed full infantry status by the British. World War II provided the opportunity for Fijians to prove their fighting prowess. Two battalions were sent to the Solomon Islands when the Japanese invaded the Pacific, and fought with distinction under US and New Zealand commanders. It was during the Solomons campaign that Fijians won high praise as 'the best jungle fighters in the world'. During the communist uprising in Malaya (now Malaysia) in 1950, Fijian commandos were mobilized with other Commonwealth troops to crush the anti-colonial rebellion. Again, a significant paradox in this case was the use of colonial troops by the British to quell an anti-colonial movement by other colonized people. Inspired by the exceptional Fijian soldiers' performance in Malaya, the British government recruited 200 Fijians into the British Army in 1960, many of whom joined elite regiments, such as the British Special Air Service (SAS).

Since 1978, Fijian soldiers have been active in peacekeeping operations overseas. These have included the UNIFIL mission to Lebanon as part of

the United Nations-sponsored buffer between Israeli and Lebanese-based anti-Israeli groups, and to the Sinai Peninsula as part of the United States-sponsored multinational force to keep peace between Egypt and Israel over the disputed peninsula. Fijian soldiers were also sent to Rhodesia to be part of an international observer group during the first election after independence. After the end of the Cold War, Fiji participated in UN peacekeeping missions in Croatia, Somalia, Cambodia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Kuwait, Iraq and East Timor, and sent troops to Bougainville as part of a regional peacekeeping force following the end of hostilities there in 1997. Fijians have served in the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) since 2003, under the overall command of the Australian military.

In recent years, a number of Fijian officers have joined the New Zealand and Australian armies, but the largest number have joined the British Army. Since 1997, about 2000 Fijians have been recruited by the British. Many were already trained soldiers in the Fiji military. Private security companies operating in Iraq since the US-led occupation of that country, such as Global Risk Strategies, Homeland Security Limited and Triple Canopy, have recruited close to 1000 former soldiers, serving soldiers (who had to resign) and non-soldiers to perform a variety of security tasks.

The Fiji Navy, an important component of the military, was set up in 1978. The first ships were purchased from the United States and subsequent ones were provided by Australia and Israel, as military aid. The navy has been used mainly for policing the 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone, and in emergency operations relating to rescues and national disasters. The military's Air Wing was formed after the 1987 coup, when the French provided two helicopters as part of its military aid package to the Fiji military. It was disbanded after both helicopters crashed and after subsequent revelations of huge debts incurred as a result of the aircraft. The profile of the navy was raised as a result of the appointment of its commander, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, as commander of the Fiji military.<sup>5</sup>

### **Institutional and ideological transformation**

The military coups of 1987 brought to the surface a whole series of contradictions that characterized Fiji's post-colonial state. By and large, the

contradictions centered on the tension between national identity and civic nationalism on one hand, and communal identity and ethno-nationalism on the other. Theoretically, at the professional level, the military was an institution representing civic and national spirit – but at the ideological and political levels, it was a guardian of indigenous communal interests. The institutional and ideological shift from the former to the latter became the basis for transformation from the 1990s to the post-2000 coup period. By 2006, the military, led by Bainimarama, had aligned itself firmly on the side of national identity and civic nationalism.

The coup in May 2000 was engineered by civilian ethno-nationalist politicians using a small group of élite soldiers from the Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit (CRWU). Although some soldiers were involved in taking the government politicians (including the Prime Minister) hostage, the military, as an institution, was not. The military intervened to thwart the takeover, firstly through negotiations and then, when negotiations fell through, by way of force. The situation in Fiji was precarious, to say the least, with executive and legislative authority neutralized, the judiciary and police rendered ineffective and the President as head of state powerless to take control of the situation. The military, as the last bastion of state power, intervened to salvage the situation by firstly asking the President to ‘stand aside’ and then suspending the constitution. These were the two major barriers to the military’s intention of dealing with the coup perpetrators directly. The actions by the military were contentious and were seen by some as tantamount to staging a coup. However, to the army, these were the only means to deal with the coup perpetrators in a direct and effective way and to maintain order and rebuild security in a new, chaotic situation.

Upon the removal of the President and the suspension of the constitution under the ‘doctrine of necessity’, the military proceeded to put in place a re-democratization process, starting with the setting up of a ruling military council, followed by a caretaker government and an election a year later. Meanwhile, the coup perpetrators – consisting of nationalist politicians, former military officers, members of the CRWU and other civilian ethno-nationalist agitators, and including some chiefs – were rounded up and imprisoned. A final attempt by the nationalists to complete their unfinished business and reclaim lost glory,

by removing the military commander in a mutiny on 2 November 2000, failed. The plan was to remove the commander and take over the military, release George Speight and the coup perpetrators, and establish an exclusivist ethno-nationalist state called the *Matanitu Vanua*, outlined in a document called the Deed of Sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> The military had vowed to put an end to any attempt by indigenous ethno-nationalists to implement their political agenda and, since 2000, has been campaigning hard against ethno-nationalist ideology. This was a sudden change in the ideological and political orientation of the military – from its role as guardian of indigenous nationalism to one which advocated multi-ethnic statehood. The military made use of nation-wide public relations programs to articulate these changes.

### **The military public relations machine in motion**

While the military had been involved in public relations exercises – such as the use of its band and sports (especially rugby) teams – for many years, it was really only after the 1987 coup that there was large-scale concerted effort to mobilize public opinion and re-create an acceptable public image of the military. Since then, public relations has grown into a professional priority for the military – a priority that has seen it deploying its troops around the country to carry out a variety of integrated tasks. Since the 1987 coups, three phases of image-making can be discerned. The first was the post-1987 coups extensive image re-creation process, the second was the post-2000 coup public relations exercise, and the third was the 2006 election campaign. Each had its own specific objectives, characteristics and methods, although there were basic similarities in terms of the ultimate motive: to win the hearts and minds of the citizens.

### **The post-1987 coups image reconstruction**

The coups in 1987 undermined the Fiji military's international and local image in a significant way. Internationally, the Fiji military was highly respected as a fighting and peacekeeping force and this image took a battering as the international and local media vilified the Fiji military in ways that were unprecedented. From a heroic outfit the military became a demonized mob. While the military was hero-worshipped by indigenous nationalists, it was vilified by other ethnic groups, especially Indo-Fijians, who felt that the coup

had victimized them and relegated them to the status of second-class citizens. There were also many Fijian supporters of the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) who were openly critical of the military.

The response of the military then was twofold. The first response was to use force, torture, imprisonment and psychological coercion to intimidate opponents of the coups. The second was to engage in an extensive public relations exercise to convince people of their goals in uniting the country.

There were two audiences for the public relations exercise. The first was the local Indo-Fijian community, which had to be convinced that Indo-Fijian political rule had led to instability and that the coup was to provide the political environment for 'political stability'. The second audience was made up of Fijians who were opposed to the coups and who were seen by the military as probably the biggest barrier to their attempt to unify Fijians under the military's ideological spell. After the coups, a large number of Fijians, especially from the western side of Fiji, had mobilized behind Dr Timoci Bavadra, the deposed prime minister (also from the western side), and the ensuing tension led to various violent incidents.<sup>7</sup> To the military, the Fijians were seen as a greater threat to their designs than the Indo-Fijians because Fijians could easily 'melt' into the Fijian community without being identified, unlike Indo-Fijians who were more 'visible' as a group.

In these circumstances, a number of varied but complementary approaches were used by the military to change its public image and provide legitimacy to its post-coup political consolidation. These included direct community public relations use of sports, entertainment by the military band, introduction of the school cadet scheme, expanded recruitment, establishment of the auxiliary unit, use of symbolism, 'civilianization' of military personnel, and extensive use of the church and of the *vanua*. The details are shown in Table 3.1.

### **Post-2000 coup public relations**

The public relations approach after the 2000 coup was different because of the different circumstances of the coup. The coups in 1987 were direct interventions in which all branches of the military were involved. In 2000, although the élite CRWU of the military was involved in the coup, the entire operation was largely supervised by civilian politicians and nationalist activists. As in the 1987

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**Table 3.1 The nature of the military's public relations exercises after the 1987 coups**


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Public relations activity	Purpose and approach
<b>Participatory approaches</b>	
Sports	Organization and involvement in rugby as a public relations tool.
School cadet scheme	Setting up of military cadet schemes in schools as part of the curriculum in order to inculcate military values into young minds.
Auxiliary unit	Setting up of a maritime unit involved in marketing village produce. This was a way of projecting a good image of the military in the rural areas.
'Civilianization' of military and militarization of civilian life	Senior officers were recruited into senior civil service positions and many civilians were absorbed into the military, where they held military rank. They could operate both as civilians and military officers
Expanded recruitment	Expansion of the army under the justification of 'security' and 'employment', and facilitation of Rabuka's promotion to major general.
Rural infrastructure projects	Use of the engineering unit for infrastructure development in rural areas.
<b>Ideological/sentimental approaches</b>	
Brass and rock band	Bands used in concerts and on public occasions to whip up pro-army sentiments.
Use of church	Use of Methodist Church to mobilize Fijian support for the military.
Use of <i>vanua</i>	Use of traditional sociocultural links to consolidate military support amongst Fijians.
Media	Use of newspaper and radio (both English and vernacular) to propagate military values and ideas
Symbolism	Use of military, political and cultural symbols (e.g. wide use of military uniform, songs, dances, promotion of warrior mythology etc.) to promote military discourses.
Public show of force	Use of parades and public shows of force to keep the public reminded of who has the power.

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coups, the public justification was political paramountcy for indigenous Fijians, although there were complex economic and political factors associated with the coup. The military as an institution intervened to thwart the coup and free the members of parliament who were held hostage. The military succeeded in doing this after weeks of cat-and-mouse negotiations with the hostage-takers, culminating in the use of force by the military to neutralize the coup makers.

At the height of the hostage drama, the military and the coup makers were engaged in an intensive propaganda and counter-propaganda warfare never before seen in Fiji. The coup makers produced dozens of leaflets making allegations – ranging from deposed Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry's conspiracy to get India to take over Fiji, to President Ratu Mara's blood-drinking antics. The coup makers deliberately planted rumours to keep the public in a state of fear and panic, hoping that this would work in their favour, especially in terms of the military bowing down to their demands. George Speight, the self-styled coup leader and international public image of the coup, was the major official mouthpiece through which the 'aspirations' and 'cause' of the coup were articulated. The military responded by attempting to nullify the coup-makers' claims and vilifying their leaders.

Meanwhile, the military engaged in active public relations throughout the country (discussed in further detail later in this chapter). The exercise continued even after the coup rebels were overpowered. There was an increase in the media blitz, with the military frequently making public statements, and a special Fijian program on Sundays for the commander, Commodore Frank Bainimarama. The military bands (both the brass and rock bands) were used extensively for public entertainment to provide a 'feel-good' factor during the depressing times after the coup, and also to project an image of the military as defender of public interests. However, political developments after the coup saw the relationship between the government and the military deteriorate and the military's public relations stance took a different twist, both in style and intensity.

### **The post-coup/pre-election military–government power struggle**

Unprecedented tension between the government and the military preceded the 2006 election and provided the backdrop to the military's pre-election campaign. From 2003 onwards, Frank Bainimarama directed sustained criticism

against the government on a range of issues, including his own reappointment as military commander, reconciliation policy, the size of the military budget and the performance of politicians and public servants. But he reserved his greatest censure for the government's attitude towards those involved in the 2000 coup. That attitude, in his view, was revealed by the RTU Bill introduced into parliament in 2005. He thought the government too lax, and demanded that the rule of law be upheld so as to ensure that no more coups took place.

Military objections to government policy first appeared following attempts by Qarase's government to reduce the sentences imposed on soldiers convicted of mutiny at the Sukunaivalu Barracks in Labasa during the 2000 coup. Some government members also called for the release of George Speight and his accomplices. The military resisted this move, arguing that the rule of law should take precedence over political emotions and that those who had been found guilty must serve their full sentences. The war of words caused some public anxiety, compelling Bainimarama to publicly state on 15 April 2003 that there was not going to be a coup.<sup>8</sup>

Things came to a head some months later when Bainimarama's contract expired and the government threatened not to renew it. Bainimarama called for the removal of Jeremaia Waqanisau from his post as CEO of the Ministry of Home Affairs, and was alleged to have threatened him personally. Bending to the pressure, the government appointed Waqanisau as ambassador to China soon afterwards. To mobilize support within the military, Bainimarama asked his senior officers to pledge allegiance to him. Five senior officers refused, saying that their loyalty was to the military not to the commander. The officers, Colonels Ratu George Kadavulevu, Alfred Tuatoko, Samuela Raduva, and Akuila Buadromo, and Commander Timoci Koroi, a naval officer, were asked to resign as a consequence. The five alleged that, during the stand-off with the government, Bainimarama had asked the senior officers to organize a coup. The government requested President Josefa Iloilo to establish a commission of inquiry into the case, but he refused on the grounds that Bainimarama had given assurances that the military had no intention of overthrowing the government. Because Bainimarama was the biggest obstacle in the government's attempt to free the 2000 coup rebels, the government – from 2001 to 2004 – had been pursuing indirect methods to replace him.

Bainimarama was offered diplomatic positions in the UK, Malaysia and New Zealand, all of which he turned down. The government even promoted him to vice admiral and backed his unsuccessful application for the post of UN field commander in Kuwait. At the end of the day, Bainimarama opted for a contract renewal to enable him to see through the conviction and punishment of the coup rebels. With considerable reservation, at the end of January 2004, the government eventually extended Bainimarama's contract for another five years.<sup>9</sup>

The government soon discovered it had reappointed one of its greatest critics. From October 2004 onwards, Bainimarama engaged in repeated public criticism of government policy; it continued until the election was held in May 2006. He criticized the government for organizing Fiji Week for the purpose of inter-ethnic and inter-religious national reconciliation. The ceremonies included public apologies by some chiefs – some of whom were involved in the 2000 coup – to the Indo-Fijian community for the suffering they had endured during the crisis. The military refused to take part in the ceremonies, saying that the apologies were meaningless without justice taking its course.<sup>10</sup> The military again condemned the government for the early release of the former vice president, Ratu Jope Seniloli (who was convicted of coup-related crimes), and argued that it made a mockery of the judicial process and was a threat to national security. This drew criticism from a number of government politicians, who accused the military of meddling in political affairs. Moreover, after the resignation of Seniloli, Bainimarama publicly supported the idea of having a non-Fijian take over Seniloli's position, saying he favoured someone with excellent leadership skills for the post, regardless of race. The government saw his statement as unjustified interference with the affairs of the state. The tension reached a level of seriousness that raised widespread public concern in late 2004 and early 2005. Bainimarama sent out a series of warnings to the government that the RFMF 'would put pressure on anyone' who dared tamper with national security, saying that 'if we don't act, this country is going to go to the dogs and no investor will want to come here'. He likened the military to a tiger sitting in a corner. 'You have to give it [the tiger] room', he warned. 'If you don't give it room, it will bite you.'<sup>11</sup>

In April 2005, two convicted coup plotters – Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu (now Minister for Fijian Affairs) and Ratu Josefa Dimuri (now Minister of State for Agriculture, Alternative Livelihood and Outer Islands Development) – were given early release after serving just eleven days of their eight-month prison sentences. Bainimarama delivered a salvo of criticism against the government, provoking an equally fiery reply from Home Affairs Minister Josefa Vosanibola, who warned the commodore that he would be 'disciplined' if he spoke to the media without consultation with him. A public argument between the two followed. And more conflict came with the non-renewal of the contract of Australian lawyer Peter Ridgeway, the Deputy Director of Public Prosecutions, who, on 20 June, was ordered by the government to leave Fiji. Bainimarama saw this as an attempt to undermine the coup investigations, especially because Ridgeway had made significant inroads into the coup investigations and prosecutions.

The most important source of military–government tension, however, was the controversial RTU Bill, which the government hoped would settle the post-coup matters once and for all. Amongst other provisions, the Bill proposed to set up a Reconciliation and Unity Commission with powers to grant compensation to the coup victims as well as provide amnesty for the coup perpetrators as part of the process of national reconciliation. The military argued that providing amnesty would undermine the rule of law and would encourage future coups. The military was adamant that all convicted coup perpetrators were to serve their full sentences. When the earlier draft of the Bill was being discussed in parliament, the military sent a number of officers to watch and listen to the proceedings and at the same time provide a show of force to tell the government and parliament that they were serious.

Other issues also soured the relationship between the government and the military. Amongst them were allegations by the military in August 2005 of plots to remove the president, with some alleged plotters having links with the government.<sup>12</sup> In October of the same year, the military spokesperson, Lieutenant Colonel Orisi Rabukawaqa, made scathing allegations regarding corruption in the Registrar General's office involving illegal Chinese immigrants. In the same month, the military publicly opposed its budgetary allocation,

stating that it wanted more autonomy over its finances rather than having to go through the CEO for Home Affairs. The military saw the bureaucratic control of their budget as tantamount to 'political control' of the military by the Ministry for Home Affairs. Bainimarama was further infuriated by the fact that, although the military budget announced on 4 November had been increased from F\$67 million in 2000 to F\$76.4 million for 2006, it was still short of the F\$84 million the military wanted. Due to the shortfall, the military was forced to apply cost-cutting measures. Earlier, in October, the commander had been fined for overspending the military budget, but this was later overturned by the Supreme Court.

The situation grew tense in December 2005 as the military demanded the resignation of the CEO for Home Affairs, Lesi Korovavala, because of the delay in the re-trial of the 20 soldiers charged with mutiny during the 2000 coup, resulting from difficulties in sorting out the contract for the judge advocate, Graham Leung. Bainimarama threatened to 'send his boys' down to the CEO's office to 'secure it' if nothing was done quickly. The stand-off led to the intervention of Vice President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, who stepped in to cool down the situation. On 31 December 2005, Bainimarama stated that the military no longer recognized Josefa Vosanibola as the minister responsible for the military, stating 'The Military now is on its own and is not answerable to anyone'.<sup>13</sup> He further stated that legislation being proposed by the Qarase government was 'racist' and based on self-interest, not on the interest of the nation. In a related pronouncement he reassured the nation that, 'I am the one who is standing for democracy and the rule of law because the Government and its officials only want the laws to be made to suit them'.

The 2005 tensions spilled over into 2006 and intensified. Towards the end of January, the Auditor General, Eroni Vatuvoka, accused the military of contempt of court for refusing to follow the Supreme Court order to open up the military welfare fund, about which the military has been protective, arguing that the fund is a private one not a public one.

In addition to the RTU Bill, the other Bill which attracted the wrath of the military was the Qoliqoli Bill, which was meant to legally enforce indigenous ownership and control of traditional fishing grounds currently under state jurisdiction. The military commander saw the Bill as a threat to security, on the

grounds that it has the potential to cause dispute and conflict within the Fijian community. He assured the country that there was not going to be any coup, in response to widespread rumours of a possible takeover of the government.

In early January 2006, Bainimarama called on the government to resign because of its inability to resolve the 2000 events and also because of its 'racist' legislation. He claimed:

They have let people out of jail on one excuse or the other. How can they [the Government] sleep at night – do they have a clear conscience?...This government is incompetent...It's better that they resign so that better people can do the things that [are] supposed to bring us good.<sup>14</sup>

The tension was worsened a few days later when the military learned that the government had approved a shipment of arms for the police. The military stated that they were not consulted and it appeared that the government was deliberately arming the police against the military. This was denied by the government as well as by the police and the matter was laid to rest after the Commissioner of Police visited the military headquarters to explain that the arms were standard police equipment, were only for use in confined places, and were needed to replace dilapidated old police weapons.

One of the most high profile incidents was when the military issued a media release in which it threatened to take control of the country if the government failed to 'continue the good fight'.<sup>15</sup> This was in response to a newspaper-reported comment by Pita Nacuva, the acting Foreign Minister and now Speaker of the House of Representatives, that the attitude of the military was based on 'sour grapes'.<sup>16</sup> When the president of the FLP, Jokapeci Koroi, appeared on Fiji Television supporting a 'government take-over', the incident created a political crisis that saw the intervention – and resolution of the conflict – by the Vice President, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, on 16 January. Nevertheless, the impact of Bainimarama's outburst had consequences within the military itself. The land forces commander and deputy to Bainimarama, Colonel Jone Baledrokadroka, confronted his boss about his outburst. This led to a stand-off between the two that culminated in the dismissal of Baledrokadroka from the army.

In responding to criticism regarding his anti-government stance, Commodore Bainimarama stated, 'I really don't have any business in the political running of government. My outbursts are not political. It's about national security...

Security to me and the RFMF means a clean and corrupt-free country'.<sup>17</sup> In a meeting between the Prime Minister and the Commodore convened by the Vice President, it was agreed that both Bainimarama and the commissioner of police be invited as observers in the Security Council and also that there be more direct communication between the Prime Minister and the Commodore through regular meetings to discuss issues of common concern. The Prime Minister also assured Bainimarama that the next election would be conducted fairly, without government interference. The Vice President urged the two parties to be more responsible in their dealing with each other, saying, 'It is critical that elements in the Government and the military exercise circumspection and discretion in their dealings with each other at all times'.<sup>18</sup>

However, that was not the end of the matter. The Minister for Home Affairs lodged an official complaint with the commissioner of police against Bainimarama for his threat to overthrow the government and asked him to determine whether or not the commodore's words were seditious or treasonous.<sup>19</sup> The Minister for Home Affairs told Bainimarama that he would withdraw the complaint to the police on the condition that Bainimarama apologize for his threat of 8 January to depose the government. As expected, Bainimarama refused to apologize, saying, 'Asking me to apologize for making that statement is an insult to the working people of this nation because, simply, it is my job...No one is going to attack the military without any retaliation from the military – not even under any agreement'.<sup>20</sup> On the advice of his senior officers, he retaliated by withdrawing commitment to the agreement made with the Vice President on 16 January; in particular, any further talks with the Prime Minister were to be put on hold.

### **Pre-election psychological warfare: The 'truth and justice' exercise**

As the tension between the government and the military increased in tempo, and as the election approached, the military embarked on a nation-wide program to combat what they saw as 'lies' perpetrated by 'opportunists' in government. The announcement for the commencement of the campaign was made by Bainimarama on 10 March:

We will go into villages and tell them the real truth of what happened and what is being done...I will advise the people because they cannot continue to advise a government that continues to make it okay for those that went to jail to get back into society. By not educating the people about doing what is right, it is willfully lying and misleading them.<sup>21</sup>

The proposed campaign was supported by the FLP, which by that time had aligned itself with the military. The leaders of the Conservative Alliance and the New Nationalist Party called for Bainimarama's arrest for fomenting instability. The SDL saw the proposed campaign as an attempt to undermine its power base while some, like former prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka, saw it as a perfectly constitutional process.

In response to accusations of interfering in elections, the military stated that what they were involved in was an 'exercise' not a 'campaign'. The military's confrontation with the government even extended to the Supervisor of Elections, Semesa Karavaki. The military commander attacked the election preparation as being disorganized; Karavaki, himself a territorial soldier, reciprocated by saying that Bainimarama should not interfere in the election process. In fact, Bainimarama had initially opposed the election date, saying that it was too early given that the registration process had a lot of anomalies.

The military's strategy in the election campaign was twofold. The first element, the 'truth and justice' exercise, was focused largely on re-educating the public about the 2000 coup; the second element of the strategy was direct campaigning against the SDL party. The two were closely linked because the SDL was seen as supportive of the 2000 coup, both its ideological justification and its political execution.

Bainimarama openly spoke of his campaign to discourage his soldiers and friends from voting for political parties and candidates he deemed 'racists' and 'discriminatory'. This attracted flak from SDL campaign manager Jale Baba, who urged Bainimarama to stand for the election to prove his worth, as well as from Alexander Downer, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, who warned Bainimarama about interfering in politics.<sup>22</sup>

Bainimarama's campaign was very direct. He urged voters not to listen to fearmongers and 'opportunists' who claimed that a victory for the FLP would spell instability for Fiji. He then asked voters to keep an open mind, saying, 'Don't choose a party just because it's a Fijian party. Choose an Indian or Chinese

if his policies are for your benefit'.<sup>23</sup> The military defended its campaign saying that it was not against any particular party or politician; it was primarily for the purpose of asking the voters to vote with their conscience.

A case which further infuriated Bainimarama was the sacking of Sitiveni Raturala, a popular Fijian radio host who, on 9 March, hosted a show with Bainimarama. In response to allegations by the military that the government had a hand in the sacking, the CEO of the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation Limited (FBCL), Francis Herman, said that Mr Raturala had breached his contract. It later emerged that the issue had to do with Raturala giving the whole air time to Bainimarama without allowing time for the public to ask questions live on air. The military warned the FBCL against muzzling its voice and, in a surprise move, Raturala was quickly drafted into the military's public relations team.

### **The military public relations team**

The military public relations team consisted of 30 to 40 soldiers – in teams of three to four – who visited various provinces in Fiji. To make sure that they were welcomed, men from the provinces were deployed to carry out the public relations tasks. The normal approach was for the soldiers to ask, traditionally, for permission to enter the village to carry out their exercise. Often, the presentation was accepted, although in some cases the soldiers' requests were ignored. Fijian protocol usually demands that visitors are welcomed, no matter how disliked they are.

After the *sevusevu* ceremony (welcoming ceremony), a request would be made for *veitalanoa* (discussion) to take place. The soldiers would explain the purpose of their visit and would then proceed to make their verbal presentation. Questions and answers would follow. The whole process would take place in the presence of the chiefs and other leading members of the village and often involved kava-drinking. Upon completion of the task, the soldiers would head for another village.

Although the military said that their campaign was successful, it is not easy to provide evidence for this. The fact that they were readily accepted into the villages and given the chance to make their presentation did not mean that people were convinced by their message. Furthermore, even if the messages were convincing there was still doubt about whether or not the impact was

sufficient to sway the people's votes away from the SDL. The landslide victory of the SDL could mean that the military's campaign had very little impact on Fijian voters' behaviour.

### **Conclusion: implications of the military's public relations activities**

The direct participation of the military in the 2006 election shows that the aftermath of the coup of 2000 still shaped, to a great extent, the political and ideological climate in Fiji. The post-coup public relations effort by the military sought to undo the 'lies' which justified the 2000 coup, and the effort intensified as election fever heated up. The military was bent on ensuring that the political trajectory before and after the election was based on the principles of multiracialism and transparency – although the approach used was highly questionable in the context of modern liberal democratic norms; in particular, the line of demarcation between the civil state and the 'non-political' military was blurred.

Normally, in a parliamentary democracy, the military operates under civilian authorities so that its coercive power is manageable and accountable. A military with special interventionist powers may not be good for stability and democracy. The role of the military is one of the dilemmas of post-colonial militaries, in which there have been difficulties in making it align with and accountable to civilian rule. This dilemma is partly historical because, since the colonial and post-colonial period, many post-colonial militaries have been used as active components of political governance by colonial and post-colonial élites. During the colonial days, as we have seen in the case of Fiji, the role of the military was to help maintain internal security. The Fiji military was groomed as part of the Fijian élite power structure, and its intervention in 1987 on behalf of Fijian nationalism was a violent manifestation of this.

The 2000 coup was not strictly military, but a civilian intervention undertaken by civilian nationalists with the help of some soldiers. Moreover, the military intervened to smash the coup, imposed martial law and helped put Fiji back on the road to democratic governance. The military was of the conviction that the coups of 1987 and 2000 were not to be repeated, and that all possible steps should be taken to ensure this. The military saw their public

relations exercises as ways of educating the people about the 'evils' of coups. The SDL was seen as an institutionalized supporter of the 2000 indigenous nationalist ideals.

While the government and various foreign governments, such as those of Australia and New Zealand, denounced the public relations exercise as 'political interference', many people in Fiji, especially the Indo-Fijians and other ethnic groups, saw the military as a saviour, as the only institution that would protect their rights and well-being from extremist Fijian hegemony. The country was divided into two groups of citizens; those who felt that the military had overstepped its authority, and those who believed that, despite the extra-legality of its actions, the military was right in terms of ensuring political stability.

The military's public relations effort may have driven Indo-Fijians into the FLP camp – as they felt confident that the military would provide them with the sought-after security if the FLP won – and driven Fijians towards the SDL – as they felt alienated and threatened by the military's perceived alignment with the FLP.

The tension between the military and the government took an unexpected turn. After the SDL party won the election, it offered the FLP nine cabinet seats and, consequently, a multiparty cabinet was set up. This had an immediate effect on the political perceptions and behaviour of the citizens, as well as those of the military. People of all ethnic groups welcomed the move and the military made a commitment to support the multiparty government. The political tension that had characterized the pre-election and election period suddenly disappeared. Most of the issues of contention between the military and the government suddenly became obsolete. And, as a result, the military disbanded its public relations group and, in its place, created a small but professional public relations team of six people, and shifted its effort from direct propagation of views to the public towards community service by its service arms, such as engineering, and naval search and rescue.

The question then is, will the new political climate be sufficiently sustainable to see the blossoming of a new civil state–military relationship in which the professional lines of demarcation are respected? Or will future political developments re-create the conditions that led to the pre-2006 election 'cold war'?

This all-important question, however, became somewhat superfluous when, in September, the 'cold war' between the military and the government reared its ugly head again. The military demanded that the government withdraw the Qoliqoli and the RTU Bills, spawning further tension between the two institutions; by November this had developed into a national crisis leading to speculations about a possible military coup.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Ratuva, S. 2003. *Storm in Paradise*. Life and Peace Institute, Uppsala.
- <sup>2</sup> For details, see Brown, S. 1998. *From Fiji to the Balkans: History of the Fiji Police*, Fiji Police Force, Suva.
- <sup>3</sup> Sanday, J. 1991. 'The coups of 1987: A personal analysis', *Viewpoint*, 30(2).
- <sup>4</sup> Brown, 1998. *From Fiji to the Balkans*, p.24.
- <sup>5</sup> Ill feelings between the navy and land forces have existed, but not to the extent of causing tension and conflict. Bainimarama was born 27 April 1954, on Bau island. He joined the Fiji Navy on 26 July 1975. He was appointed acting chief-of-staff in November 1997 and confirmed in April 1998. He was named commander of the army on 25 February 1999, to replace Brigadier General Ratu Epeli Ganilau, who resigned to enter politics.
- <sup>6</sup> See Ratuva, S. 2000. 'Another failed coup attempt', *Pacific Journalism Online*, <http://www.usp.ac.fj/journ/docs/news/nius3090shoot.html>. This was confirmed by Captain Stevens, leader of the mutiny during the military court martial.
- <sup>7</sup> See Ratuva. 2003. *Storm in Paradise*.
- <sup>8</sup> Fijilive.com, 15 April 2003.
- <sup>9</sup> Fijilive.com, 1 February 2004.
- <sup>10</sup> Fijilive.com, 12 October 2004.
- <sup>11</sup> 'Frankly speaking', *Review*, December 2004.
- <sup>12</sup> Fijilive.com, 24 August 2004.
- <sup>13</sup> Fijilive.com, 31 December 2005.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Fiji Times*, 4 January 2006.
- <sup>15</sup> Fijilive.com, 7 January 2006.
- <sup>16</sup> *The New Zealand Herald*, 10 January 2006.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Fiji Times*, 16 January 2006.
- <sup>18</sup> *The Fiji Times*, 16 January 2006.
- <sup>19</sup> Fijilive.com, 25 January 2006.
- <sup>20</sup> Fijilive.com, 29 January 2006.
- <sup>21</sup> *Fiji Sun*, 10 March 2006.
- <sup>22</sup> ABC television interview reported by Fijilive.com, 3 March 2006.
- <sup>23</sup> Fijilive.com, 9 March 2006.