

# FIJICOUP.COM

Brij V. Lal

**I met Bruce Hill only recently**, but I feel I have known him for a long time. Now managing a public radio station in Melbourne, Bruce was for many years with Radio New Zealand's Pacific program. Once a month or so, he would ring me to talk about Fiji, get my assessment of the situation there, pass on anecdotal information he had. Our talk would be interspersed with banter and political gossip. So, when he rang me around 9:30am on 19 May, I expected another casual conversation about Fiji. 'Have you heard?' he asked. I hadn't. 'Some thugs have marched into Parliament and hijacked the government.' That was all he knew, but promised to get back soon.

I headed straight to the Fiji High Commission, whose own phone bank was clogged with callers, mostly Fiji people living in Australia. They had heard a brief report on the morning radio. The High Commissioner, Ratu Isoa Gavidi, an urbane man of moderate views, was as non-plussed as I was, though not his deputy Rusiate Korovusere, who would later be remanded in custody for openly supporting the coup leader, George Speight. Over cups of tea we measured our concern, and waited for more news. Nothing came. We then decided to ring the Australian Foreign Affairs Department whose secure communication links with Suva provided more detail. Ten armed men, of unknown identity, had taken the Prime Minister hostage, perhaps the Parliament itself. That was all they knew.

By the time I returned to my office around midday, concerned colleagues were milling in the corridors outside my office, wanting more information, expressing sympathy, shaking their heads in bewildered frustration, most knowing that a major part of my life's work faced the danger of premature derailment.

Fijilive is — and has been for sometime — our lifeline to Fiji. This is new: there was no internet in 1987, the time of the first two coups. Fiji's unfolding drama was being relayed to the world in real time. The internet is the great democratiser: everyone is reading the same text, the same background pieces, important documents and policy speeches. Many of these sources would disappear from the screen within a week or so, lost, I suspect, to future researchers. The first announcement of the Fiji crisis comes from Fijilive: 'Seven civilians armed with AK-47s have locked the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers in the upper chamber of Fiji's Parliament. One man is standing at the gate and not letting anyone in. Some shots were fired but it is not clear at this stage whether anyone is hurt.' Those words brought back to my mind what I had heard in 1987. Words fail to describe my sense of anguish and disappointment.

More news comes later. Readers are informed of the long-planned violence-threatening protest march organised by the recently revived Taukei Movement to present a petition to the President against the People's Coalition government. Groups of Fijian men and women are reported rejoicing, dancing to the tune of reggae music blaring from specially hired trucks. Later that afternoon, a rough, rag tag band of Fijian youth, returning from the parliamentary complex at Vieuto, rampages across central Suva, stoning shop windows, trashing the streets. Police are nowhere in sight. Fear and panic seize the city as people clear out of Suva in overflowing taxis and buses. The scene is reminiscent of 1987, except that it is much worse this time.

As night descends on an empty, frightened city, the place erupts. Drunken hooligans take matters into their own hands, looting and torching shops. The looting continues well into the night. Whole families are caught on camera helping themselves, picking and choosing clothes, toys, television sets, cameras, carting their loot in trolleys, on their shoulders, in vans. The image of a young Fijian boy in the back of a pickup van, grinning at the camera, with a large television set wobbly on his knees, lingers in the mind. 'Family shopping' is what one man cheerfully tells a foreign reporter. Suva is covered in black smoke, its streets littered with broken glass and discarded damaged goods. Grieving, distraught shop owners

weep amidst the charred remains of their life's work. Shops will be re-built and shelves will once again be re-stocked, but the memory of terror and pillage will scar their lives forever.

For the next few weeks, attention shifts to the carnival atmosphere at the parliamentary complex. Women singing and dancing, people sitting on mats clapping, drinking *yaqona*, the blue smoke from *lovo* fires, young men and women loitering, the terrorising of foreign journalists by coup supporters. Commentators overseas express bewilderment at the apparent ease with which coup supporters breach the security cordon set up by the military. There is open speculation about the complicity of the police and the army in the unfolding mayhem. The army is divided, the police force strangely disabled. George Speight, brightly dressed, wearing a permanent smirk on his face, his bald pate shining in the camera lights, holds forth regularly about his mission. He is bantering, slick, a salesman; but his gift of the gab also jars, his pronouncements lacking conviction and authority. He is no Rabuka. He is, in fact, his own worst enemy.

Eager to stage its own coup, my university alerts the media to my presence as a Fiji expert, a co-architect of the 1997 Fiji Constitution. ABC's *Midday Show* is the first to call, seeking an instant take on the unfolding events. Is it a coup? No, I say, this is not 1987. The army is still in the barracks, and no recognisable group has claimed credit for the deed. It is a hijack of Parliament, I say, the crisis likely to be over by the weekend. Surely the lessons of 1987 had been learned. No one in their right mind, I ventured, would like to revisit that dark period, from which the country was just beginning to recover. How wrong I turned out to be. Historians are better at predicting the past than divining the future.

Who was George Speight? Did I know him, or of him? I did, I said. I had met him in 1997 when my fellow Constitution Commissioner, Tomasi Vakatora, and I had gone to Brisbane to explain to the Fiji community there the essence of our report. After the talk, Speight, athletic, articulate, grinning, had embraced me and said, 'Doc, this is a brilliant report. The only thing wrong with it is that you did not recommend dual citizenship.' I later realised the self-interest that prompted his remark. Speight, living in Australia, wanted to have it both ways. I was not against the idea,

I responded, but it had to apply to all Fiji citizens, not only to the indigenous community, as some Fijian submissions demanded. Padma, my wife, was likewise impressed with Speight, his command of the English language, his presence and his vision for Fiji. 'If only we had more people like him, Fiji would be a much better place,' she mused.

Trying to understand his background, some people in the media began calling George Speight a 'global businessman'. This was in reference to his reported business activity in several countries. I called Speight a 'failed businessman', and that description stuck. I was not wrong or malicious. Speight had left behind him, wherever he had worked, a path littered with broken promises, failed deals, shady transactions. I was later to learn that although well connected and with powerful patrons in the Rabuka government, Speight had been dumped as chairman of both the Fiji Pine and the Hardwood Corporations. Personal and pecuniary interests, rather more than a well-defined political philosophy, drove Speight. He was the front man for an assortment of other interests, I told the media, defeated politicians, ultranationalists, the riders of the gravy trains of the 1990s now facing the prospect of public scrutiny.

The ABC interview, done while the gun was still smoking, opened the floodgate. Radio stations from around the country, as well as overseas, called, many several times and at odd hours. Some asked probing questions, but most sought elementary information about Fiji, its politics, demography, the 1997 Constitution. The commercial radio and television stations were cashing in on an unfolding story, highlighting the dramatic, seeking my quick take on the events, seeing Fiji through the prism of their own prejudices or understandings of 'indigenous' and other such issues. Live interviews on commercial stations are a dangerous terrain. The presenters ask questions but then put their own 'spin' on my answers, sometimes imposing interpretations on one's words beyond what had been said or intended. But it is too late to correct: the presenters move on to other pressing issues of the day. Over time, though, I learn to 'play' the media better, using their questions to get my own points across.

The newspaper coverage is different. Unlike 1987, there is by and large a better, more complex, nuanced, understanding of the issues in Fiji.

The Fijian crisis is no longer portrayed solely as a racial issue. This crisis, we learn, is more about a fight for power and political supremacy among various groups of indigenous Fijians, in which Indo-Fijians are used as a scapegoat. Speight's real target is the eastern hierarchy represented by Ratu Mara about whom Speight is openly disparaging. This was once unthinkable. The 1987 coup was believable as an indigenous uprising against a government dominated by Indo-Fijians. Speight's coup is an uprising against an experiment that was working, against a Constitution blessed by the Great Council of Chiefs and unanimously approved by a Parliament dominated by indigenous Fijians. Often there is open sympathy for the Indo-Fijians among many reporters who know that all the guns are on the other side, a people whose only crime is their success achieved through decades of hard work.

Several major Australian newspapers have their own reporters on the ground. Unlike the television journalists who set their sights on the besieged parliamentary complex, presenting a distorted picture about what was actually happening in the country at large, the newspaper reporters go beyond Suva to the countryside, focusing on the plight of people terrorised by Speight's supporters. They write about the harrowing human casualties of the tragedy. The pictures of burnt tin shacks, of people weeping as they pick up the pieces, of frightened shopkeepers seeking shelter behind shuttered windows, of menacing young men armed with knives and sticks ready to go on a rampage, leave behind unsettling images that continue to haunt.

Another difference between 1987 and 2000 is the advent of the internet. Ten years ago, the facsimile machine was the latest communication invention, revolutionary and mind-boggling in the speed with which information could be conveyed. But the internet is something else, enabling people to follow up the breaking story in real time. Even Speight, we learn, browses through the internet as he prepares for the day's interviews. Fijilive is the main source of information, interviews, documents, indispensable to lay readers and professionals alike. Other sites spring up in Hawaii, Vancouver, Auckland and Sydney, carrying stories, opinion pieces and editorials from around the world. Chat sites

mushroom, enabling people with assumed names from around the globe to express their thoughts and opinions, vent their frustration and anger, engage in racial abuse.

I begin to realise for the first time how truly wired-up the world is. There is information overload. The real challenge is to make sense of this mass of information, constructing a coherent, contextualised picture. And that is where my expertise as a historian comes into play. I have been engaged in research on Fijian history and politics for two decades now, more recently as a participant in its constitutional developments. That knowledge base, built up over a long period, and informed by frequent visits to the country and an acquaintance with some of the leading political figures there, helps me separate matters of moment far more easily than some other commentators. Yet, I realise that the culture in the academy is moving away from investing in long-term academic projects informed by a deep knowledge of a country's culture and history. The current fashion favours short-term, project-driven, outcome-oriented research. All this is necessary, I suppose, in these hard days of economic rationalism. But I hope that this will be a passing phase. There is no substitute for sustained, sensitive engagement.

A year later, Fiji's political problems remain unresolved. George Speight, incarcerated on Nukulau Island — once the quarantine station for Indian indentured immigrants — is still awaiting trial for treason, the case delayed ostensibly because the prosecuting authorities have been unable to find sufficient evidence to convict him of the high charge. A new Fijian political party comprising Speight supporters has named him its president, and wants his unconditional release so that he can stand for the general elections scheduled for August 2001. Others, speaking in the name of reconciliation, want the past forgiven altogether, the coup perpetrators pardoned. But genuine reconciliation will come only after the truth of what happened, and why, is fully understood by the people of Fiji so that history does not repeat itself.

The interim military-backed administration is engaged in a massive vote-buying spree among the Fijian voters, promulgating policies and programs which, it knows only so well, have failed in the past. The dream

of indigenous Fijian political unity is as unrealistic now as it ever was. A new Fijian political party is born virtually every week, exacerbating the problem of fragmentation which had caused the downfall of Fijian-dominated governments in the past. Fijian leaders are embroiled in provincial and regional rivalries, bereft of a larger, overarching national vision for their people and for the country as a whole. They want power because 'it is their turn at the helm', not because they have a plan to take the country out of its present morass.

The Indo-Fijians are also divided over the means and methods of confronting the problems facing them. Their leases of native land are expiring, and they wonder whether these will be renewed, and on what terms. The sugar industry, which has sustained generations of Indo-Fijians, faces a bleak future in a globally competitive economy. Emotionally uprooted and made to feel unwanted, the best and the brightest are leaving for other shores, taking with them skills and experience the country can ill-afford to lose. Those who cannot leave hope that their children will. Meanwhile, the country is marooned in the shallows, divided and drifting. So much potential, so many missed opportunities. In the words of T.S. Elliot:

For our own past is covered by the currents of action,  
But the torment of others remains an experience  
Unqualified, unworn by subsequent attrition.  
People change, and smile: but the agony abides.

*The Dry Salvages*