

THE SUN SET AT NOON TODAY

Brij V. Lal

1. Fiji: The Gathering Storm

‘Trust is like a mirror,’ says Apisai Tora, Fijian nationalist leader from western Viti Levu. ‘Once broken, it can’t be restored.’ It is arresting imagery, but coming from Tora, it sounds incongruous. Mr Tora is a veteran party-swapper, having been a member of virtually every political party in Fiji in a mercurial career spanning four decades. His latest handiwork is the spectacularly mis-named Party of National Unity, which fought the recent general election in coalition with Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry’s Fiji Labour Party. Two of its four members in Parliament are in the current Cabinet. Mr Tora wants them out, and he wants Chaudhry to go as well. ‘Indians came as slaves, and they are now our masters,’ he told Radio New Zealand a few days ago. Fiji, he says, should have a Fijian Prime Minister. Nothing less will do.

Mr Tora lacks political credibility, but he is not the only Fijian leader attacking the Chaudhry government. Another is the opposition leader, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, coup strategist, Taukei Movement stalwart, a reluctant supporter of the present Constitution, and currently the chair of the Cakaudrove Provincial Council. His province has passed a vote of no confidence in the government, and is likely to be followed by others in a carefully orchestrated campaign of anti-government propaganda among Fijians. Ratu Tevita Bolobolo, Tui Navitilevu, is the chair of a recently formed landowners council, Matabose ni Taukei ni Vanua, attacking the government and threatening the non-renewal of the expiring native

leases to (mostly) Indo-Fijian farmers. Taniela Tabu, former Taukei Movement supporter and trade unionist with a chequered career, and head of the newly formed Viti National Union of Taukei Workers, is accusing the Chaudhry government of 'Indianising the public service'. The charge is baseless, but effective among Fijians already distrusting of the government. They are encouraged by the waning national influence of powerful chiefs like Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, President of Fiji, and the absence from the centre stage of Sitiveni Rabuka and other leaders of moderating influence.

The government also has some silent foes within. Members of Labour's coalition partner, the Christian Democratic Alliance, labelled the government anti-Fijian over its hesitation to renew the work visa of expatriate Fiji TV head Kenneth Clark, because the Fijian provinces hold the majority shares in the company headed by Mr Clark. Poseci Bune, CDA's parliamentary leader and currently Minister of Agriculture, was talking of leading a coalition of Fijian parties against Chaudhry soon after getting elected, until he was inducted into the Cabinet. Members of the Fijian Association, another coalition partner, have similarly been critical. Deputy Prime Minister Adi Kuini Bavadra Speed, who is currently facing an internal revolt against her leadership, pleaded for the conversion of Chaudhry to Christianity.

A part of the reason for the orchestrated campaign is the politics of revenge. The former ruling party, the SVT, which now has only eight seats in the House of Representatives, will play rough and hard against those who caused its downfall, adopting expediently extremist positions, and injecting race into every issue of public policy to embarrass the government. A part of the difficulty for Chaudhry, too, arises from the manner in which his coalition won the election. The parties in the fractious 'People's Coalition' were united not so much by a common agenda for social and economic reform, but more by a desire to get rid of Rabuka and his government. Each wanted Rabuka out for reasons of its own: because of his government's sad, scandal-ridden record, because of the coups he staged (though not entirely by himself, Rabuka now concedes), and because he somehow sold out Fijian interests in the constitutional review

process. But now that Rabuka is out of politics, the task of forging a common ground among the Coalition partners, with their own agendas and ambitions, is proving more difficult.

An important reason for Labour's victory in the May 1999 elections was its electorally appealing but generally uncosted program for social and economic reform. The party and its partners promised to reverse wholesale structural reform, strengthen the social safety net for the disadvantaged, and introduce a minimum weekly wage of \$120, among other similar promises. The promises will take time to deliver, and there may be some need for re-adjustment and re-direction of public policy. The rhetoric of the hustings may have to re-adjust to the realities of governing. Understandable in rational terms, but a godsend to the racially motivated opposition parties bent on bringing the government down.

The Chaudhry Cabinet is new and inexperienced, learning the responsibilities and challenges of government as it goes along, on the job, with all the hiccups that the learning process involves. Its counterproductive tussle with the media could and probably should have been avoided. The issue of working visas for expatriates could have been handled more sensitively. Chaudhry himself, supple and resourceful, is learning to make, not without a hitch, the transition from trade union leader to national leader, just as Rabuka did a decade ago, moving from the military to the national stage.

The overwhelming sense in Fiji is that the mandate of the ballot box should be honoured, and that Chaudhry should be given time to prove his mettle. How long? That, of course, is the question. For people like Apisai Tora and others like him, the time is up. Meanwhile, there is no shortage of problems for the government to tackle. The resolution of the land lease problem, balancing the interests of the Fijian landowners and the largely Indo-Fijian tenants, is one. Reassuring a Fijian community bombarded by anti-government propaganda is another. To meet the challenges of the 21st century, Fiji needs to move gradually but decisively away from the futile politics of race toward a more inclusive non-racial culture of politics. Turning back the hands of the clock will not do the clock any good. Lessons of the past will have to be learnt anew. In the words of one sage, 'The best prophet of the future is the past'.

2. Damaged Democracy

Fiji is a damaged, divided democracy. George Speight's dramatic intervention has dislocated the process of political reconciliation, severely strained race relations, and shattered the foundations of the nation's economy just when Fiji was gradually emerging from the debris of 1987. The images of looting and burning, thuggery and violence on the streets of Suva, the worst in the history of Fiji, will forever remain deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of its people, and the recovery from the wreckage and ruin will be long and hard.

George Speight, a Fijian of Part-European descent, a failed businessman, an Australian permanent resident, proclaimed himself as a saviour of the Fijian 'race'. The Constitution, which only three years ago was unanimously approved by the Fiji Parliament (the majority of whose members were indigenous Fijians), blessed by the Great Council of Chiefs, and praised by the international community, had to go, he said. The government of Fiji must be returned to indigenous Fijian hands.

Speight is the frontman for a variety of interests, including the radical nationalist Fijians operating on the fringe of indigenous politics, opportunistic Fijian politicians defeated at the last elections keen to settle old scores, and an assortment of people from various social and ethnic backgrounds who rode the gravy train of the 1990s, but whose prospects dimmed upon the election of Mahendra Chaudhry's People's Coalition government. They were not pleased, and they threatened reprisal. Elements of the military, too, are involved, especially members of the crack Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit established by Sitiveni Rabuka after the 1987 coups. Their involvement is the inevitable consequence of a politicised armed force whose loyalties lie with individual leaders than with the institution of the army.

The Chaudhry government's hectic — in the view of some of his critics, too hectic — legislative program heightened their fears. The Prime Minister's pugnacious style, forged during his long years in the country's trade union movement and his government's ongoing, hugely counterproductive confrontation with Fiji's media, worsened the situation.

The government was understandably pressed by its political opponents to deliver early on its electorally appealing but economically costly election promises, including introducing minimum wages, providing social security, rolling back the structural reform program, and resolving the ever-difficult issue of expiring leases. Land, always an emotional issue in Fijian politics, became the rallying point for Fijian groups already distrusting of the government and galvanised into action by the dormant Taukei Movement by that mercurial chameleon of Fiji politics, Apisai Tora whose own party is Chaudhry's coalition partner. Such is the nature of politics in Fiji.

The problem, if there is one, is not Mr Chaudhry's ideas and his vision for Fiji; it is more his style and the tradition of open, robust political discourse it represents which does not sit easily with the other tradition of more allusive and indirect discourse, conscious of well-defined cultural protocols, rank and hierarchy. Removing Chaudhry from power will not solve Fiji's ever-deepening social and economic problems in an increasingly globalised world. The land question will have to be resolved sooner rather than later because the Fijian sugar industry drives the engine of the national economy. The state, whoever runs it, cannot evade responsibility for the fate of people turfed out from the leases after generations of earning their livelihood from them, nor ignore the legitimate interests of Fijian landowners who want them back. The principles of good, effective and transparent governance will have to be observed irrespective of who is in power.

Speight and those who support him want a reversion to the 1990 Constitution which enshrined Fijian majority in Parliament and to the principles of ethnic dominance which underpinned it. But even with greater numbers, Fijians could govern only with the support of non-Fijian parties because they have splintered into political parties bitterly opposed to each other. Rabuka lost the 1999 election in large part because of Fijian political fragmentation. The same will happen again, for Fijians, like other communities in Fiji and elsewhere, are divided by ancient prejudices and modern greeds. And the fragmentation will increase with the gradual disappearance of the fear of Indian dominance which has informed political discourse in Fiji for the last half-century.

The culture of political patronage that emerged in the 1990s brought the country to the verge of bankruptcy, epitomised most notably in the near-collapse of the National Bank of Fiji. Well-connected opportunists had a field day. Virtually every public institution became infected by the virus of mismanagement or abuse of office. The most seriously affected victims of this were the ordinary Fijians of all ethnicities. But there were also some who benefited unscrupulously from the public coffers, and some of them are among the moving agents behind the present crisis. Returning to 1990, as Speight and his supporters demand, will once again hobble the institutions taking Fiji towards better governance.

Race has been portrayed in the media and popular commentary as the main issue behind the present turbulence. It is an issue, but there is more to the story than meets the eye. Speight has trained his sight on the Indians, but he is also leading a middle-class revolution against the Fijian establishment symbolised by Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. The disrespectful and dismissive (once unthinkable) tone in which his name is being taken, the call for his resignation, the increasingly audible whispers about his supposed dynastic ambitions, the long reign of the eastern hierarchies of the Koro Sea, touch deeper issues about the structure of power in traditional Fijian society than is first apparent. Race becomes a tool for mobilising Fijian opinion, for in the ultimate analysis this crisis is more than about Indians.

Mahendra Chaudhry is not the problem facing Fiji today. You may remove him from power, but the deep-seated problems will not be removed. You may maim the messenger, but the message will not go away.

3. Wandering Between Two Worlds

*The promises have gone
Gone, gone, and they were here just now*

W.S. Merwin

The abrogation of Fiji's 1997 Constitution has saddened me immensely. Part of the reason is personal. As a member of the three-man Fiji

Constitution Review Commission, I had a small hand in devising it. Our report was a comprehensive document based upon the most extensive consultation in Fiji, a close first-hand examination of the constitutional arrangements of jurisdictions with problems somewhat similar to Fiji's, and expert advice drawn from the South Pacific region and international experts in Europe and North America.

The Constitution, based on our report, was unanimously approved by an ethnic-Fijian dominated Parliament and blessed by the Great Council of Chiefs. Now it lies tattered in the dustbin of Fijian history.

I feel deeply sorry for the ordinary people of Fiji of all ethnicities as well who will have to pick up the pieces from the wreckage of the last 12 days and start all over again. The task of reconstruction will not be easy. The fabric of multiculturalism and harmonious race relations has been severely strained. The philosophy of multi-ethnic cooperation on the basis of equal citizenship has been discarded. The economy, which was beginning to show signs of recovery after years of stagnation caused by mismanagement, and an insecure investor confidence, is hobbled. However you look at it, the hostage crisis is a huge disaster for Fiji. It has put the country back at least a couple of decades.

Fiji has failed the ultimate test of democracy: to survive a change of government. We now know what havoc a gang of armed thugs can wreak. George Speight, front man for an assortment of interests, has achieved virtually everything he wanted. The People's Coalition government headed by Mahendra Chaudhry is out of power. The President, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, has been forced, however gently, to vacate his office. The timing and the manner of his departure, under armed guard in the middle of the night, brings to an end an illustrious, though not unblemished, career. He was the last of the great chiefs who ruled Fiji. The multi-ethnic Constitution, prepared after such exhaustive consultation, is out. And Mr Speight and the seven men who hijacked Parliament and held the Prime Minister hostage, have received amnesty. Mr Speight, volatile, dangerously delusional, the self-appointed saviour of the indigenous Fijian 'race', even though he himself is half-indigenous, is savouring his gains and demanding a place at the head of the country's

political table: he wants to be Prime Minister. If he has his way, there will be more Speights in Fiji in the future and, one fears, in other South Pacific states where the roots of the democratic tradition are dangerously shallow.

There are other casualties of this crisis as well. Among them is the Great Council of Chiefs. Formed by Sir Arthur Gordon soon after Fiji became a Crown colony in 1874, it occupied an honoured place in Fijian society as the government's and the Crown's principal adviser on indigenous affairs. Sadly, it stands today as a diminished body of dithering men and women, confused, partisan, manipulable, unable to exercise their much sought after — and much hoped for — role as the custodians not only of indigenous Fijian but also of Fiji's broad national interests. The chiefs have grievously breached the trust bestowed in them by the nation. They listened to Speight's pleas for Fijian paramountcy, but there was no place in their deliberations for the voice of a multi-ethnic democracy and the defence of a Constitution which they themselves had blessed just three years ago. They have showed themselves to be parochial men and women, bereft of a broader vision, chiefs with a small 'c'. Unelected, unrepresentative and dominated by chiefs of the east, especially from Mr Speight's Kubuna confederacy, they will meet on Monday to decide the political future of Fiji: whether Fiji will continue under military rule, or whether it will be governed by a so-called civilian rule under the leadership of George Speight and his men. A wrong decision at a critical moment will spell doom for them. Already, western Fijians, long resentful of eastern hegemony and demanding greater recognition for the disproportionate contribution they make to the national economy, are gathering to decide whether they want to remain in their present position or seek a separate state for themselves. They have no problems with the Indians, they say, with whom they have lived side by side for well over a century. But their voice is under-represented in the Great Council of Chiefs.

Fiji's much praised military forces, too, have had their reputation tarnished. They vacillated while the country burned, terrorised into immobility by armed thugs roaming the streets of Suva. Why, it will be asked for some time yet, did they not intervene earlier, and more

decisively, to prevent a catastrophe they knew well was coming. Allegations of complicity cannot be dismissed and, one hopes, would be investigated by an impartial body. Be that as it may, there is no doubt the Fijian army of today is not the army it was some years ago, an institution of integrity and professionalism. Now the military is deeply divided, its ranks infected by the deadly virus of provincialism. Had the crisis gone on longer and martial law not been imposed, thereby testing the regional and personal loyalties to chiefs and *vanua* (land, place of birth), it is not too far-fetched to say that the army would have fragmented into separate provincial militia. In view of its lacklustre performance in protecting the security of the state, and its blatantly partisan and racially exclusive character, the people of Fiji may well ask whether Fiji should have an army at all. If that is not countenanced, then it will be in the interests of the indigenous Fijian people themselves to have more and more non-Fijians enter its ranks to diffuse provincial tensions. Keeping the status quo is a recipe for disaster.

This crisis, everyone now knows, was more about the restructuring of power in indigenous Fijian society than it was about race. Knowledgeable commentators are saying that the support base for the coup is in the Kubuna confederacy from where all its leading thinkers and strategists come. They were ascendant in the 19th century, and they want to regain their place in the Fijian sun after a long period of wandering in the political wilderness. But the crisis is also in some sense about a cry of those Fijians marginalised by modernisation and globalisation, feeling left by the wayside while helplessly watching as others marched on to good and greater things for reasons they cannot comprehend. Speight's mesmeric rhetoric and simple solutions touched a chord with them. Get rid of the Indians and revert to Fijian tradition, and the world will be well. It is not as simple as all that, and Speight and his advisers know that only too well, but they cynically manipulated innocent and confused Fijian emotions for their own ends. The crisis was not about Fijian identity and tradition. In any case, identity is a process that changes with time, and there is no one single, cohesive Fijian identity and tradition to speak of except in opposition to other groups.

Indo-Fijians are the meat in the sandwich. They are trapped, terrorised into silence. They are still regarded as '*vulagi*', foreigners, in their own land of birth, where they have lived for four to five generations, descended mainly from the 60,000 indentured labourers brought to the British colony in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to work on Australian Colonial Sugar Refining Company's vast plantations. When their five years contract ended, most settled down to a life of agriculture. They have no land although they drive the engine of the country's agricultural economy. The thirty-year leases they occupy are expiring, with renewals looking remote or taking place at exorbitant rentals. And now, once again, they face the stark prospect of political disenfranchisement and unequal citizenship, and that, too, for one, and one reason only: because they are of a different ethnicity. Their plight deserves more sympathy than is usually shown in an age dominated by the rhetoric of indigenous nationalism. Unwanted and humiliated, many will understandably seek to re-build their lives in other countries, and one hopes that countries which have benefited from their labours, especially Australia, will show sympathy for a people condemned to a life of permanent servitude in their land of birth.

Meanwhile, Fiji drifts, divided and uncertain, into uncharted waters. An era has come to an end, and another is in the throes of a difficult birth. In the words of Matthew Arnold, Fiji is poised to

*Wander between two worlds
One dead and the other powerless to be born.*