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## AN HISTORIC VIEW OF FIJI

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**Let me begin on a personal note.** In mid-afternoon on 14 May 1987 I was hurrying along William Street in Sydney when I caught a glimpse of a newspaper billboard that I thought carried the words ‘Coup’ and ‘Fiji’. Curious but not concerned, thinking that I had either misread the notice or that it meant something other than what a literal reading would suggest, I carried on to the news-stand on the next corner. There, the reading of a newspaper confirmed that what I thought — or merely hoped? — had not happened, had in fact happened.

The month-old, democratically elected government of Timoci Bavadra had in fact been overthrown by armed rebels. Despite being a professional student of Pacific affairs and a regular visitor to Fiji since 1966, I was surprised by this dramatic turn of events, not because it had been entirely unpredictable but because, on the contrary, it was the realisation of a possibility that, hoping against hope, one had long feared but had hoped but preferred not to contemplate. For there were long strands of communal division in Fiji’s history that linked the present disquietingly to the past. Consequently, when on 19 May [2000] George Speight and a group of armed and masked myrmidons presumed to overthrow the constitutionally elected government by an act of terror putatively undertaken on behalf of the indigenous Fijian sector of the nation’s population, the news came more as a disappointment than as a surprise. For not only are there structural fault lines that can be a source of tensions among Fiji’s peoples, as shelves of books can testify, but those divisions are also susceptible to being distorted, magnified and perversely exploited

by miscreants and the misguided, especially among the Fijians. George Speight is a case in point.

Ironically, the Indian community at which Speight's animosity is primarily directed has been the saviour of the Fijian people. Despite the prejudices of Speight's sympathisers, a group which extends well beyond its overt supporters, the Fijians' debt to the Indians is incalculable. They began incurring that debt in 1875, a year after Britain, accepting Ratu Cakobau's second offer of secession, agreed to annex Fiji as a colony. Returning from a visit to Sydney, Cakobau and his two sons brought measles back with them, and in the space of a few months over 30,000, a fifth of the population, died from the disease. When Arthur Gordon, the first resident governor, arrived in June 1875 to establish the colonial regime, he was therefore confronted with an ailing people; one which in its sad plight he likened to the Scottish peasantry of his day, with which he likewise sympathised.

Consequently Gordon, and his ally John Thurston, framed politics designed to preserve the Fijian population, to keep its society and traditional culture intact and to maintain their ownership of the bulk of the land. To this end, in order to provide the supply of cheap labour required to service the European-owned plantations, which supplied the revenues needed to sustain the government and its policies, he imported labourers from India. The first of them arrived on the *Leonidas* in 1879 and the last in 1911. By 1920, when the last of the labour contracts had expired, over 60,000 Indians had been brought to Fiji, and many of them had settled there. In the words of one historian, JD Legge, they represented 'a kind of human subsidy to Gordon's Fijian welfare policy'. Life on the plantations had not been easy for them, '*narak*' ('hell') they called it in Hindi, nor was it always much better after 1920. Still the Indians strove to improve their position through education, by going into business and by farming on their own account (usually on leasehold land).

An unyielding pattern had, however, been set. As early as 1875 Lord Salisbury, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, had decreed that any Indian settlers who had completed their labour contracts 'will be in all respects free men, with privileges no whit inferior to those of any other

class of Her Majesty's subjects resident in the Colonies'. While Indians, then, might be entitled to — and expect — parity with other citizens, that entitlement was consistently limited in Fiji by the administration's adherence to the counter principle of maintaining 'the primacy of Fijian interests'. That is, Gordon's policy of providing privilege and protection for the indigenous people, the Taukei, prevailed. If in the game of the survival of the fittest the Indians often won it was always through their own efforts. In 1977, for instance, following a government decision to reserve 50 per cent of its scholarships to the University of the South Pacific for Fijian students, Indians needed 261 marks to win a scholarship whereas for Fijians the qualifying mark had to come down to 216 for their quota to be filled.

More directly relevant to the current messy situation has been the readiness of Fijians to find advantage in skewed constitutional arrangements. Led by Ratu Mara, the Fijian-based Alliance Party provided Fiji's first government on the attainment of independence in 1970. But Mara had only agreed to accept independence on condition that the constitution contained a gerrymander in favour of the Fijians. Even so, there were some among the Fijians who, aware of what Idi Amin had done in Uganda, had also hoped that independence might bring the expulsion of the Indians from Fiji. The strength of that sentiment, and its ability to embarrass the compromising Mara, was seen in the election of April 1977. The Fijian vote was split by the rise of the explicitly racist Fijian Nationalist Party led by Sakeasi Butadroka. Accordingly, the Alliance lost its majority in the Parliament, leaving the Indian-based National Federation Party as the largest group there — and hence the potential government. Four days later, though, when its leader Siddiq Koya went to Government House to be sworn in, the Governor-General informed him that he had already re-appointed Mara, to form a minority government. A new election in September returned Mara and the Alliance with a secure majority, but the events of April carried grave portents. They revealed the depth of anti-Indian feeling among some Fijians, the inclination of Mara that he was the natural leader of the nation and, possibly most reprehensibly, the neglect of the Fijian leadership to assure its following that an Indian-controlled government would not have the constitutional power to interfere with Fijians' land ownership or with their valued social and cultural institutions.

Given the lofty insouciance of the Alliance, little had changed by April 1987 when the Fijian vote again split, this time with many of the more urbanised, professionally trained and better educated Fijians making common cause with the self-reliant Indians. Thus, a Labour-Federation coalition government led by Dr Timoci Bavadra came to power, only to be met with protests from unruly mobs appropriating the name and status of *taukei*, and interpreting Mara's fall from power as a blow to their racial pride and to their presumption of untrammelled sovereignty. The agencies responsible for maintaining law and order in the society were unwilling to take firm action to suppress the *taukei*, so a month later the army under then Lieutenant Colonel Rabuka dismissed the elected government and established military rule. Within a few hours of the coup Mara, who appears to have been indifferent to the unruliness of the *taukei*, accepted an invitation to join Rabuka's Cabinet. In December, when Fiji declared itself a republic, Mara again accepted appointment as Prime Minister. These interim arrangements lasted until 1992. Then, following elections under a new Constitution that vitiated the Indian vote, a civilian government, but with Rabuka now as Prime Minister and Mara as President, came to power.

International pressure and also, it should be noted, reasoned voices within Fiji called, however, for the 1990 Constitution to be replaced with a more democratic one. That was duly enacted in 1999, and in the ensuing election Rabuka was defeated by his Indian rival Mahendra Chaudhry. But on 19 May 2000 after a year of efficient and honest, if at times brusque, administration Chaudhry's government was forcibly disrupted by Speight. This action can be interpreted in the light of Speight's personal agendas and those of various private interest groups, but its wider significance, and especially the responses to it within Fiji, are to be found in a fuller context.

Speight's attack on the Parliament fits into the pattern of the historical events just outlined in various ways. Most obviously, he is the latest exponent of the extreme anti-Indian position aired in the mid-1970s in the rhetoric of Fijian nationalism by Butadroka. Then, there is the assumption of a Fijian entitlement to paramouncy that has become embedded both in official policy and in common Fijian thought. Then there is the Vicar-of-Bray-like

adaptability of Mara, ever ready to bend to the prevailing breeze, as long as it is Fijian. Then there is the army, from which Indians have long been excluded, and which in 1987 preferred to topple the government rather than risk shedding the blood of Fijian rioters, and which in 2000 could be expected to show similarly delicate and partisan sensibilities. Then there was the knowledge that with some unequivocally disloyal soldiers to help him carry out his hijack he could count on the sympathy of a cross-section of Fijian society extending from the *taukei* rabble in the streets to the Great Council of Chiefs. Considering such factors as these, it becomes clear that from the start Speight had a better than average chance that his gamble would succeed.

And such seems to have been the case. Four weeks after the hijack he has not yet released his hostages, and the authorities have still not taken decisive action against him. Mara has resigned after conceding Speight's demand for an amnesty and for the abrogation of the Constitution. Meanwhile, the rebel leader's supporters have burned and pillaged shops and houses, raped Indian women and destroyed Indian property; and have even murdered a policeman. Yet the Great Council of Chiefs is still not prepared to disown his enterprise; military personnel fraternise with him; and Speight himself is not afraid to venture outside the Parliament which he has occupied. All this is sadly predictable. Rabuka, the president of the Great Council, spoke for many — but not all — Fijians in saying that he sympathised with Speight but disagreed with his methods. In the circumstances, it was an egregiously mild rebuke. Indeed, it is not inconsistent with a measure of connivance, at least indirectly so, in Speight's adventure.

Speight claims, with dubious altruism, to have acted on behalf of and in the interests of the indigenous Fijians. Yet, despite the readiness of many of them to believe him, he has not only severely destabilised the economic system, the social structure and political order of Fiji, all of which were finely balanced. He has also challenged the political philosophy which underpinned the broadly comfortable conditions of life that prevailed there. By denouncing democracy as a foreign ideology, a sneer also commonly heard from indigenous nationalists elsewhere in

the Pacific, and by elevating indigeneity to be the source of what amounts to a divine right to rule, he has activated other social faultlines besides the Fijian-Indian one.

Democracy is a system that enjoins respect for (or, at least, resignation to) such things as restraint, tolerance, inclusiveness, egalitarianism, acceptance of variety and co-existence with 'otherness'. Now, in his assault on this system, Speight has raised issues that a peaceful Fiji would be advised to be reticent about. These are such matters as the fissures between the western (Melanesianised) chieftainships and the eastern (Polynesianised) ones, those between urbanised and rural Fijians, those between chiefs and commoners, those between young and old, those between traditionalists and modernisers, and those between people who wish to see their lands profitably cultivated and others who merely wish to assert ownership of them. Talk of a western Fijian independence movement, reviving memories of the Western United Front of the early 1980s, is a symptom of these divisions. So, too, are the difficulties that have hindered the established authorities in coming to a consensus about how to handle Speight. And so, too, is Speight's ability to spend so long playing cat-and-mouse with them, while so many of his supporters seem determined to bring Fiji to a state of barbarism and for the farms to revert to bush.

If there is an argument about democracy in all this, it is not that Fiji is not ready for democracy, or is unsuited to it, but that it needs it in order to avoid the disruption that is likely to flow from any enshrinement of indigenous sovereignty. Those indigenous innocents from Fiji's Pacific neighbours, not least of these from New Zealand, who have endorsed Speight's claims out of sympathy for what they see as an indigenous cause, would be well advised to revise their opinions about what he has accomplished. For in attacking the Indians, whose habits of industry have contributed more than any other factor to the nation's commercial economy and to the growth of a local professional class, he is attacking people whose historic role in Fiji has been to benefit the Fijians — as Governor Gordon intended.