

THOUGHTS ON FIJI'S THIRD COUP D'ETAT

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George Speight has the support of the *vanua* and therefore informally the Bose Levu Vakaturaga (BLV), who are the trustees of Indigenous Fijian traditions and culture. Make no mistake, the issue for this third coup d'état, as with the first two, is indigenous rights and self-determination. Despite the design of indigenous structures, institutions and legislation to achieve that objective, it remains an ivory tower ideal. The system was unable to process a culture of development in tandem with indigenous aspirations and dreams for a better quality of life, even though the leadership role was in place. Ratu Mara did not deliver. The problem is an indigenous one being manifested in the '*kudru ni vanua*', provincial wrangling and political uprising. The discontent emanates from unequal distribution of the benefits of development, the democratic process and leadership.

I am not surprised that the dissatisfaction culminated in the third coup d'état on 19 May 2000. This time it happened during the march organised by the nationalist Tako Lavo Party. The march was attended by the main indigenous Fijian political parties, SVT, FAP, VLV, Taukei Movement and the Tako Lavo, that make up approximately 80 per cent of the primary indigenous Fijian voters. These parties for the first time united to participate in the march, representing approximately 158,000 primary indigenous Fijian voters in the country, to express their powerlessness in the Mahendra Chaudhry Indian-led Labour Coalition government. In the May 1999 general elections, 1.9 per cent of indigenous Fijian primary votes went to the Labour Party. The balance, minus those indigenous Fijians with some primary votes in the Labour Coalition (98.1%–18.1%), are now in revolt in the people's coup d'état.

From a management point of view, the product/service and market mix does not fit that which needs strategic thinking and management. During the colonial era, the development model was one designed for the colonial economy where raw materials and surplus were exported through the big multinational corporations and the laws were codified to support those activities. The colonial powers' export and pricing policies basically meant unequal exchange that exploited us, leading to our current underdevelopment. Hence the process of alienation began 125 years ago, so that today the majority of the *vanua* feel powerless, helpless and hopeless, resorting to collective survival tactics.

In the 1970s, when the leadership was questioned on the change of legislation from ALTO (Agriculture and Landlord Tenancy Act) to ALTA (Agriculture and Landlord Tenants Ordinance) and its subsequent pricing based on subjective unimproved capital value of the land, Butadroka, the champion of indigenous rights and land issues, was sacked by Ratu Mara from the Alliance Party because he dared raise concerns over the negative dynamics that had surfaced, embarrassing and violating the Alliance Party policy and stand on multiracialism.

Fijian leadership after independence did nothing to address this unrest so that today the indigenous Fijians are still marginalised from the development process for the sake of multiracialism that acknowledges our common goals but not our differences in culture and status of development. These facts are endorsed by the 1970 and 1997 Constitutions where the old order of centralised and imposed decision making continue to be the norm. The decisions are not decentralised, democratic or participatory, even though the structures, the Native Land Trust Board (NLTB), Bose Levu Vakaturaga (BLV), Ministry of Fijian Affairs (MFA) and Fijian Affairs Board (FAB) are there to process information and feedback for desirable changes as required by the traditional and new social orders. While indigenous culture and social capital or *veivakaliuci* includes the process of consultation and consensus, the grassroots indigenous input was assumed by the leaders to have been acquired by structural and role presence, but in reality indigenous rights and interests were not processed and took second place to international and regional interests, power, self-interest and the elite status of the leader, Ratu Mara.

For example, take the 1990 Constitution. The Generals or Others, who make up about 5 per cent of the population or 38,750, with approximately 18,000 voters comprising *Vasus* or relatives with European mixed blood from the colonial era, and minority groups were over-represented in Parliament. They have four seats to represent approximately 18,000 voters when it should be a distribution of approximately one seat per 6000 voters or a maximum of three seats for them. Having one extra seat means fewer seats for our indigenous people and their rights, and therefore a skewed emphasis on western civilisation and modernisation further alienating our people and culture. The grassroots indigenous Fijians were never actively consulted for their input, interpretation, understanding, consensus and acceptance to collectively integrate our Fijian culture, traditions and language into the development process, connecting who we are in identity, spirit, satisfaction and self-worth. Fundamentally self-identity is based on our spiritual relationship with our land and when that has been undervalued at the economic, social and political levels, that in itself begins psychological and ethnic cleansing, impacting negatively on our mental and emotional health, integrity, personality and social relationships. Loss of identity and dignity leads to social disintegration, which explains why indigenous Fijians, in 1998, make up 80 per cent of the population in prison compared to 51 per cent racial distribution in the general population.

In the meantime the trend of under-valuing and pricing continued in the leasing of our land under ALTA. So it is little wonder that after 125 years of contact with the outside world and because of core differences in culture with Indo-Fijians, our cultural strengths have also been marginalised from the development process, because our leaders have lost sight of their vision and role, abandoning us like lost sheep. When the migrant races want to dominate us economically and now politically, through the 1997 Constitution, even though we have a higher population distribution of 51 per cent, the so-called democratic system does not stack up for our rights and differences. The indigenous Fijians are overwhelmed by their lack of guidance to change from a subsistence to a cash, industrial, market and information economy in spite of all the money and scholarships given through the Fijian Affairs Board (FAB) to help us change and take responsibility for our output.

For the 1997 Constitution, regardless of the fact that the BLV rejected it by eight out of fourteen provinces, the central powers decided to push it through. For the sweeping changes it was expected to bring, such a document and subject should have been discussed at grassroots level, with input from our indigenous Fijian intellectuals at the University of the South Pacific (USP), followed by voting at a national referendum. This, regrettably, did not take place.

The third coup d'état, with violence, burning, rioting, shooting and killing, and the experience in negotiations and mediation between the coup makers, the BLV, the President and the army are symptomatic of lack of *veivakaliuci*, the traditional democratic process taking place, which would have prevented these events. Instead, this time around, the situation disintegrated further into Fijian against Fijian and a leadership struggle for stewardship. The responsibility must rest on Ratu Mara's shoulders, as he was the leader unable to read the 'writing on the wall' and guide Rabuka. Their relationship grew into a battle of personalities when the young leader showed promise, culminating in the sale of his book on experiences during the army's first and second coups d'état which unfortunately did not deliver either. This conflict led to Rabuka trying to make a mark for himself in pushing for a Constitution that was way ahead of our time and inappropriate to our indigenous needs.

All these events lead us to believe that eventually the indigenous Fijian race and culture would be wiped out by a process of assimilation with the more advanced Indo-Fijian and Vasu communities in the economy, taking over with their western values, cultures and lifestyles. This is the reason for the *vanua* and indigenous support for George Speight. They have a cause to fight for. The third coup d'état is a grassé roots people's coup which removed their leaders Ratu Mara and the SVT Prime Minister of the previous government, Chairman of the BLV or mediator, Sitiveni Rabuka, because they did not produce for the *vanua*. Leaders by definition should innovate, bring about major change, and inspire followers to pursue extraordinary levels of effort. Ratu Mara and Sitiveni Rabuka should have addressed symptoms of underdevelopment of our people, through transformational leadership, using *veivakaliuci*, or

consultation and consensus allowing the traditional democratic process to take its course. That participation would have empowered our people to take responsibility in the 'Amendments and modifications to the 1997 Constitution' paving the way to a 'home-grown model of development'. This course of action would have been more productive and meaningful. Taking the best from both worlds, western civilisation and our unique social capital, value systems, culture and traditions, relevant to the modern information and market economy, would guarantee the sustainability of not only our indigenous communities but others as well. This is a political reality because indigenous Fijians have always 'cared and shared'.

The negotiations and mediation undertaken at present without Ratu Mara, and Sitiveni Rabuka, but between RMF, George Speight and his team of advisers and the *vanua*, are at a very sensitive stage for an agreement on a line-up of advisers. Their terms of reference are to rewrite the Constitution while managing the country to return to normal operations and democratic rule. This will require a multi-pronged approach for law and order, building confidence in the business community and healing. What we do not need now is a group of senior job-seeking army officers, an 'army culture' of autocratic bureaucrats and centralised decision makers who by that very culture will kill initiatives to help us evolve out of this crisis. What we do need, however, are talented, creative and enterprising civilians and professionals who are committed to save indigenous Fijian culture and the motherland.

A.D. Patel and Jai Ram Reddy understood our differences, problems and common goals. Mr Reddy even offered to be the Deputy Prime Minister if the SVT/NFP/UGP Coalition succeeded in the May 1999 general elections based on multiracialism espoused in the 1997 Constitution. These were rejected outright by the Indian voters and Mahendra Chaudhry's Labour campaign message led to their overwhelming victory and majority.

The problem here was the new alternative and preferential system of voting. In the seat for Lami Open, which I contested, in some instances one vote had up to 10 values and others just one value. This is manipulated democracy. Democracy is one man one vote. What was

wrong with the old system of first past the post, which is used in most developed countries? Even our social capital of *veivakaliuci* is more democratic than the manipulated hence flawed preferential system, to reach 50 per cent +1 to be elected.

Because of lack of time, we did not study the system to ensure the indigenous Fijians understood it for our preferences to win seats for our indigenous cause. But we were politically naive and ignorant. Perhaps we needed to experience failure to learn a very bitter lesson on vision and strategic management. The resulting dominance of the Indo-Fijian community in the last elections plus Mahendra Chaudhry's autocratic leadership style and interests threatened our very survival and the indigenous national extremists instinctively reacted, leading to the present crises. The signs were obvious but Mahendra and his indigenous Fijian Ministers were lulled into a false sense of security with their overwhelming majority, arrived at by a system of voting that was confusing, undemocratic and unwieldy. The system was amenable to corruption, buying preferential votes and party collusion. Voters did not understand it, which led to 15.9 per cent of invalid votes cast.

In summary, the colonial government left us a legacy where the social structures were changed from extended family and small groups to large groups and provincialism that protected colonial interests. The leadership and elite were rewarded accordingly, at the expense of the indigenous community, leaving a problem that is 125 years old. Another migrant race, the Indo-Fijian community, now wants to step into colonial shoes to control Indigenous Fijian development. The role of indigenous leaders has not been able to process change as desired by the *vanua* regardless of the structures, legislation and policies in place. This basically means ineffective leadership. The position has been vacated by Ratu Mara and Sitiveni Rabuka. The *vanua* is now crying out for a leader who will embrace our development philosophy of self-determination under ILO Convention 169. But he or she must be able to turn the belief into a way of life that governs mainstream behaviour and policy. Other races who support this belief need not fear for their security and safety as we wish to preserve our culture, tradition, language, a population of only 400,000 in the whole wide world and our motherland. Who will begrudge us this unique position?

The problems of leadership, development, democracy and our basic core differences with the Indo-Fijian community must be addressed once and for all, as no one agrees with the coup d'état method and its negative impact on cost, trust, goodwill and international relations. While it is justified to prevent indigenous Fijian community and culture from being wiped off this earth, there are also many Indo-Fijians who are happy to go about their lives and not politically dominate us. We do not want a nation tarnished with a coup d'état image. Instead (how the world should be through) we want a true democracy through parliamentary seat allocation according to population distribution, not by an imposed Constitution.

For the future, there are many opportunities that exist in the market economy for a 'home-grown development model' particularly at the macro level for indigenous rights and the micro level for small business development. Successful indigenous entrepreneurs are increasing due to the Affirmative Action Policy of the SVT government based on the 1990 Constitution. They can act as role models to guide indigenous people and enterprise culture while linking local villages to the global markets accessed by information technology and internet services.

At the core of any indigenous community is the need for sustainable development, that is environmentally safe, resource efficient, energy clean and financially viable. Subsequently, an appropriate and innovative option for government is to play an active role to promote green products and markets. Indeed that will facilitate productive and efficient processes and systems that are traditionally and democratically appropriate and dynamic. As such, our vision can only be bright for indigenous Fijian generations to come and those other races who believe in our survival.

The structure that has been changed and lengthened by the colonial powers 125 years ago must now be reversed and shortened to its original length. This will integrate the *veivakaliuci* process and improve the communication flow. Had the political will been active and indigenous grassroots and human input been systemised in the development paradigm, that feedback process could have avoided the three coups d'état and their debilitating national cost and wastage.

Sociologically, anthropologically, economically and politically decentralised stewardship and small group dynamics are the humane and strategic answer to our development problems. What is in dire need is a bottom-up empowerment perspective. Through empowerment-orientated organisation-building, people rediscover indigenous wisdom, recognise their potential and worth, learn new management and technical skills, reap due fruits of their development efforts, gain staying power, learn to demand what is due to them and at the same time become responsible citizens.