

LIVING IN UNUSUAL TIMES

Sir Vijay R. Singh

1. Living in Unusual Times

We live in unusual times, almost like Alice in Wonderland, where things are seldom what they seem or are claimed to be.

Most of us have friends of all races — many of them very close and almost like members of the family — but at this tense hour we do not know on whose integrity to the rule of law, commitment to uphold the constitution and concepts of decency we can really rely.

Most of those whom we had chosen as our leaders in calm times on the strength of their self-advertised commitment to champion democracy and protect the people's rights, although not held hostage, suddenly discovered after 19 May that they suffered from uncontrollable diarrhoea that constrained them to remain close to their closets, or that their acute laryngitis infection precluded them from speaking out on behalf of the people they had chosen to represent.

Or had other urgent commitments elsewhere.

Discretion, according to the politically correct, may well be the better part of valour, but it is also symptomatic of cowardice, examples of which we have now witnessed in ample measure.

While a select few had the courage to state their convictions, even if others disagreed with their expressions, the vast numbers of a select group of honourable men and women who basked in the community's

adulation and respect in good times are suddenly missing or silent when the people face the most traumatic time of our lives.

Meanwhile, many a well-fed lily-livered religious leader lectures us to love our assailants and forgive the destroyers of our livelihood.

Not surprisingly, Ilisoni Ligairi, a retired soldier of distinction, has emerged as the real power behind the throne and controller of events that began six weeks ago, thereby destroying the shadow of the myth that it was a 'civilian coup'.

So we come back to square one — the official military versus its own kith and kin, the serving and former soldiers who have been on extra-curricular duties at the parliamentary complex for the last six weeks that Commodore Bainimarama has to deal with.

How it resolves this situation will demonstrate the mettle of the official military and the reason for its existence.

2. The Skylark will Sing

It has been well said before.

Nobel Laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore in *Gitanjali* expressed well where we aspired to head for:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic wall
Where words come out from the depth of truth
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit
Where the mind is led forward by thee
Into ever widening thought and action
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.*

And some years later His Holiness Pope John Paul III visited us and declared, 'Fiji, The Way the World Should Be'. We were getting there, for sure.

But in 1987 and more grievously again last May, the passion for power on the part of some moved them to treason and hold prisoner not only their government but their reason and religion, as well.

On each occasion, most customary and chosen leaders said they were unaware of their people's aspirations until the coup makers told them so — whereupon they readily agreed and gave earnest encouragement to evil deeds.

But in so doing, they ignored the wise counsel of Khalil Gibran:

Your reason and your passion are the rudder and the sails of your seafaring soul.

If either your sails or your rudder be broken, you can but toss and drift, Or else be held at standstill in mid seas.

For reason, ruling alone is a force confining.

And passion, unattended, is a flame that burns its own destruction.

Therefore, let your soul exalt your reason to the height of passion,

That it may sing:

And let it direct your passion with reason

That your passion may live through its own daily resurrection

And, like the phoenix, rise above its own ashes.

While those who lusted for undeserved power — and their many misguided followers — were embarked upon a malignant enterprise against their homeland and its leaders, most successors to ancient warriors and the ethically naked but finely attired retailers of divine wisdom sank deeper into the ashes of their own vice.

They sought reflected glory in glorifying the inhumanity of their sinful flock; but in their uncompassionate hearts could not find the will to spare a moment to cast a comforting glance at the hapless and innocent prey who languished but a few yards away.

They joined together to desecrate the national motto — Fear God and Honour the Chief — for they violated the solemn promise.

And their political outriders, far and wide, high and low, military and civilian, hastened to proclaim their support for the newly invented 'cause',

while occasionally proclaiming not to support the evil means — at least for the record — nevertheless, had not the courage to condemn and resist it.

Some enacted the charade of seeking forgiveness of their victims but without showing a semblance of remorse for the evil they had wrought, claiming that this was their custom and tradition.

Such pretence of piety will not heal the trauma of the hostages and their loved ones for their 55-day stopover into hell. Or wash away the tears of Filipino Seavula's young wife suddenly made widow or her young orphaned son, or diminish the daily agony of parents, suddenly made jobless, as they strive to feed their hungry children.

Some of the victims may, in a show of genuine or simulated generosity of spirit, feign forgiveness.

As for me,

*I am no Homer's Hero, you all know,
I profess not Generosity to a Foe.
My Generosity is to my Friends,
That for their Friendship I may make amends.
The Generous to Enemies promotes their ends
And becomes the Enemy and Betrayer of his Friends.*

Because, as Martin Luther King Jr said:

*I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time
much more effectively than the people of goodwill.*

Undeserved forgiveness is unforgivable encouragement of evil.

But all who gloat at the triumph of lawlessness and its perceived prizes might do well to heed Bob Dylan's 1963 lyrics in his *Song for the Rocks in the Stream*:

*The line it is drawn; the curse it is cast
The slow one now will later be fast
As the present now will later be past
The old order is rapidly fading
And the first one now will later be last
For the times, they are a-changing.*

The already sidelined and discriminated and soon to be displaced Indo-Fijians now know that their ethnic Fijian friends and neighbours, 'they are a-changing, and the line is drawn and the curse is cast'.

But however distressed and disillusioned, they will behave as they always have — with the same patience and fortitude that their forefathers showed in the long night of the '*Girmif*' — 'With a mind without fear and head held high'.

As Khalil Gibran said with touching eloquence:

*You can muffle the drum,
You can loosen the strings of the lyre,
But who shall command the skylark
Not to sing.*

It has indeed, all been well said before.

3. Uneasy Answers

With each passing day, the crisis that we have endured for seven long weeks seems to have become increasingly complex, with the potential for much more devastating consequences than have already been visited upon our hapless people. An event that was originally regarded as an act of terrorism, hostage taking and treason by a civilian-led posse of serving and retired soldiers has unravelled in most peculiar ways.

There are no easy answers to any hostage crisis, but the manner in which events have unfolded — or been permitted to unfold — serve to perplex most people and pain others.

One assumes that the military, and the police force, too, led as it is by a former senior army officer, had some idea of the 'cockpit drill' to follow immediately such a crisis eventuates.

Elsewhere in the world, the parliamentary complex would have been immediately cordoned off, making it off-limits to civilians, and all communication between the hostage takers and the outside world cut off.

But that is not the Fiji way.

A large human shield has been allowed to establish itself at Parliament. Hundreds of supporters have been allowed to visit and offer gifts of food and encouragement to the hostage takers, who themselves are allowed to give press interviews and to go to a TV studio to debate the army. And, according to a rumour, in the early days, to shower and change at the barracks before resuming their extra-curricular duties at Parliament, although this might be a bit far-fetched.

All the while national leaders who are victims of the crime have languished in lonely silence for seven long weeks.

Is that the Fiji way?

The Council of Chiefs took a whole day to decide the obvious — to give the President its unequivocal support — only to undermine the President's executive authority the next day by deciding to negotiate with George Speight, one of whose demands was the President's removal from office.

Is that the Fiji way?

The President dismissed the Government and assumed executive authority. The military leaders then stepped up and asked him, who was then the Government and Commander in Chief, to step aside and go visit his farm in Lakeba. They did so in the 'traditional way', although it is not clear when that tradition was established. And the President, surprisingly, obeyed.

That was a coup of sorts. By consent; the Fiji way.

When it assumed executive authority on 29 May 2000, the military posture gave the impression that it knew what needed to be done to release the hostages, and knew also, how to do it.

It therefore 'wholly removed' the Constitution; abolished the Supreme Court, dismissed members of the Public Service Commission and countermanded the appointment of two Indo-Fijians as ambassadors and offered the hostage takers amnesty.

If that was an uniquely Fiji way to obtain the hostages' release, it didn't work.

In the meantime arms were removed from the FMF armoury and found their way into the care and custody of the hostage takers and their sympathisers. Was this an example of military security, the Fiji way?

The military then began interminable negotiations with George Speight on the future of Fiji, a profound matter on which neither side has any authority, and arrived at the Muanikau Accord. It remains a secret document although it affects every member of the public in profound ways, including those not yet born.

Eventually, the President's secretary Joe Brown announced that 'the journey' (not the agony) that had begun on 19 May would end the next day. But it was not to be. Mr Ligairi vetoed the Accord.

Having possibly given away much that was non-negotiable, the 'negotiations' came to naught. But the offer of amnesty remains.

In between, military leaders kept expressing their sympathy for the hostage takers' objectives. To test that sympathy, two junior officers at the Labasa barracks led a mutiny and held hostage their superior, giving further proof of the breakdown in discipline in the principal arm of the disciplined forces.

And while chiefs and hundreds of their men rushed to the barracks to lend the mutineers their support, the military top brass negotiated with its own rebellious soldiers.

Is that leadership by example, the Fiji way?

In the meantime, civilian factions got in the act. One wanted the military to vacate its Nabua headquarters. Another closed Labasa airport. Another still, rather fittingly under the circumstances, visited darkness on much of the country by messing about with the Monasavu electricity supply.

Is that too the Fiji way?

In the meantime, the long hour of darkness engulfing the lives of the hostages and their loved ones receives scant attention.

And now voices are raised against Commodore Bainimarama; that he too must go. Might he be asked to do so in 'the traditional way'? Or the military way?

All the while, the Indo-Fijians, the declared ‘enemy’, lick their wounded souls in silence and, like the ill-starred hostages, wondered — when will this hideous nightmare end? Or are we on the threshold of much worse — the ‘Fiji way’?

4. Role Models for the Young

Much has been said about the traumatic events that began on 19 May sending the economy rushing downhill. But in our preoccupation with material values we have paid scant attention to a much more substantial and grievous impoverishment that has already diminished us as a people and will assuredly impair the quality of our relationship with our neighbours, even after the economy has been rehabilitated.

No society can afford to allow individuals or groups among it to defy the rules of conduct that all are required to observe in the larger interest of the well-being, and even survival, of the community as a whole.

That is the reason why parliaments make laws, the police prosecute suspected offenders and courts punish the guilty and prisons incarcerate them. All these things are done to advance the welfare of society as a whole and deter lawlessness.

Those who hold offices in the state apparatus are accorded respect and obedience for what they do in society’s interest. We hold them out as role models for our children and encourage them to follow in the footsteps of the pillars of society and be worthy citizens of whom we may be proud parents.

Painful experience has shown to civilised societies the world over that lawlessness becomes endemic if some are held to be above the law of the land because, after all, it’s the laws that bind individuals and groups together to make a composite society. Further, society makes punishment fit the crime; the more serious the lawlessness, the more severe the penalty.

Once leaders of any society adopt the posture that some persons are above the law or that certain crimes should be forgiven because they

were committed for an acceptable objective, they invite repeated acts of lawlessness by others for similar objectives. From there on, it's a slippery downhill road.

Let us be frank and look reality in the face, however unpalatable it might be.

Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, as he then was, barged into our consciousness in 1987 by holding government Members of Parliament hostage, deposing the Queen as Head of State and abrogating the Constitution. As he has candidly admitted, he and his collaborators had committed treason, the most heinous crime known to law.

Instead, half the country treated him as a hero if not its saviour. Leaders granted him amnesty, made him a life member of the Great Council of Chiefs, promoted him in the army and propelled him to the road to elective leadership of the country.

Although those who got to know him later found Rabuka to be a charming and intelligent person who, by his own admission, had been used by others to commit the coup, the fact that he was rewarded with amnesty and later enjoyed political success had its own dynamics. He paved the way for George Speight and his group of rebellious civilians and former and serving army officers to embark on a similar escapade for the same objective — indigenous Fijian supremacy.

On this occasion, an impotent army has readily granted Speight and all his supporters amnesty for their 'political' crimes since 19 May and any that they might commit for several days thereafter.

The way in which so many leaders and rank and file members of the ethnic Fijian community have rushed to his support has certainly transformed George Speight into an overnight folk hero. And these parents hold him out as a role model for their children to follow when they become adults.

But it is not George Speight alone that one should be concerned about. The amnesty granted by military leaders to rebellious and mutinous soldiers will only encourage their likes, including children still at school, not to fear acting in like manner.

They are the real victims of the painful drama that has been our daily companion since mid-May.

Perhaps the next hostage-takers might, as in Labasa, be junior soldiers, mutinying against their superiors. Or school children may practise it on their teachers, and workers on their employers and prisoners on their guards.

On the basis of precedent, they too will, understandably, expect forgiveness without remorse, and amnesty from prosecution and punishment for their misdeeds.

Those who have sown the seeds of a culture of lawlessness in pursuit of a purportedly righteous cause have done our future generations incalculable disservice. And it will beget grief to all for decades to come.