

# CONVERSATIONS AT MAHENDRA CHAUDHRY'S HOME

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**Yesterday I was reading an article** I received on the internet by Kathy Marks of the *Independent* in the United Kingdom in which she said Major General Sitiveni Rabuka had told her that Colonel Ilisoni Ligairi, Mr Speight's head of security and former head of the elite Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit, had telephoned the former and said: 'Come here and watch me shoot Mahendra Chaudhry.' I understand that my uncle, Colonel Ligairi, from Nabalebale Village in Wailevu, Cakaudrove, was angry with Rabuka because he had sided with Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.

This incident prompts me to write about my visit to Mrs Veermati Chaudhry and members of her family at their home at Suva Point on Saturday 21 May. I went to express to her my sympathy and wish that the illegal seizure of her husband's government will be resolved soon. I hope that Mrs Chaudhry will forgive me for revealing here some parts of our conversation but I feel compelled to publish to help public understanding of her and her family members.

I noticed when I entered her kitchen that her family seem to live their private lives, exemplifying what her husband and his political party preaches, that is multiracial tolerance, understanding and peace. They were sitting around the kitchen table listening to the radio. There was her son Sachin, a Fijian woman, an Indo-Fijian woman and two Fijian men. One of the Fijian men is Emosi Bari, Mr Chaudhry's police bodyguard, with

whom I had attended Niusawa Methodist Mission School in Taveuni. These were some of the things she told me that I have been thinking about in the last week:

I learnt that the late Mr Frank, an excellent Methodist teacher who taught Emosi Bari and me in Niusawa, was her older brother. Mr Frank had been responsible for looking after the Dilkusha home (just before he retired) and which we heard on the radio had been burnt down.

The first thing Mrs Chaudhry told me was that she wanted the opportunity to forgive those people who were holding her husband hostage and who had threatened his life and physically assaulted him and his son. She also wanted the Government led by her husband to be able to forgive the coup makers after the release. (I think she meant spiritual forgiveness.)

She also said that her husband had often told her and members of his family that what he wanted most to achieve as Prime Minister was to uplift the standard of living of the indigenous Fijian people because they were the community most in need of development. Her husband had told her that he considered it would be the crowning achievement of Mahendra Chaudhry to have Fijians tell him at the end of five years that he had done something significant for them. She said this was a fundamental aim of the Fiji Labour Party Manifesto. (Now, that will be hard to believe especially for those who do not like or who distrust Mahendra Chaudhry, and I include myself amongst such people.)

She regretted that what had happened will tarnish the image of indigenous Fijians all over the world. She said indigenous Fijians did not deserve this image as arrogant racists because what she had experienced in her own life and in her church was that we Fijians were very tolerant, generous and decent Christians.

She observed that it will be very hard for her and members of her family to imagine leaving Fiji as a result of Speight's attempted coup. Their roots, historically and culturally, are so deep and steeped in Fiji, and especially herself, because of her upbringing with indigenous Fijians in the Methodist Church, and now in her new church, the Assemblies of God.

Just before my arrival she told me that a pastor and some members of her church had just left. They had prayed together for all the people in Parliament.

This was the first time for me to meet Mrs Veermati Chaudhry. And she said all this to me in response to my introduction of myself to her as a member of the SVT party who had been a critic of her husband for the last eight years. I spent about an hour in their modest wooden house. It is very clean, neatly furnished with nice furniture and carpet. It has a very homely feeling about it. Now I understand why they did not want to shift. I would not want to shift anywhere else if I had a house, compound and location like theirs.

For a while, we watched the television news of the latest goings-on at the Parliament complex. After hearing George Speight, Sachin and I wondered about his state of mind. Then Emosi Bari expressed his view that the 'coup' was mainly a grab for political power by some leaders of Kubuna who have always believed that they should be politically pre-eminent amongst the indigenous Fijians. Emosi also told me that once he had earnestly advised his boss to include one or two Kubuna Chiefs from the Fijian Association Party backbench in his Cabinet. He had warned Mr Chaudhry that vanua politics was far more dangerous in its power motivation and direction than rivalry between Indian political leaders. The response from his boss was that none of the Fijian Chiefs in the FAP was 'clean' enough to be included.

Mrs Chaudhry told me, at the time I visited, that very few people had been to see them. Mrs Chaudhry's family appeared to be in a cheerful mood when I arrived and when I left. I came away wondering about this gap between my positive impression of the private Chaudhry family and the public image of the Prime Minister that many people have, and that the coup makers said had compelled them to seize his government. Mrs Veermati Chaudhry had impressed me as a dignified and generous woman. Mahendra Chaudhry was a very fortunate man in that regard. I regret that I had not said sorry to her as an indigenous Fijian for what happened to her husband and son.

I join Taufa Vakatale, the former President of the SVT party, and her group of women who had written to Veermati Chaudhry and publicly apologised to her for what had been done to her husband by some of our fellow indigenous Fijians, claiming to be acting in our interest. I also apologise to her for the bad things I have said about her husband to many of my friends and which she does not know.

If there is any reader out there who feels that she or he wants to write to Mrs Veermati Chaudhry, send your letter to her C/- GPO Box 11549, Suva. Let us begin to walk the path of reconciliation that Mrs Chaudhry has shown to us by her own example, now.