

FIJI'S NEW WESTERN CONFEDERACY

Roderick Ewins

At the time of British colonisation, there existed three large confederacies, in Fijian called *matanitu*. They were a result of geographical propinquity, kinship ties (often engineered by strategic marriages), and conquests and/or military alliances. They were called *Kubuna* (grouped around the powerful island kingdom of Bau), *Tovata e Viti* (formed by a 19th-century alliance of two smaller confederacies, Cakaudrove and Lau), and *Burebasaga* (grouped around Rewa). The central highlands of the main island of Viti Levu, and the west and northwest, were not traditionally part of these confederacies, but the colonial government found their hierarchies far easier to both comprehend and administer, so the many smaller separate 'western' socio-political entities were simply 'written in' to *Kubuna*, and to a lesser extent into *Burebasaga*. Being 'drafted' into the eastern confederacies has never sat easily with western Fijians, who continue to have significant linguistic, political and cultural differences from eastern Fijians. But the problems were masked during the colonial era by the fact that administration did not directly employ these divisions, instead establishing a system of provinces and districts which they administered by a mixture of direct and indirect rule.

However, because of colonial governmental policies (in particular the power it vested in the Great Council of Chiefs, itself constructed by the first Governor to provide himself with an efficient channel of communication to both seek information and transmit his vice-regal commands), the confederacies continued to be very important power-blocs. Chiefly marriages between them have been used to consolidate dynastic power,

and since independence in 1970, the so-called 'Bau/Lau' grouping have tended to dominate Fijian politics. Ratu Sir George Cakobau of Bau became the first Governor-General, with Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara (paramount chief of Lau) as Prime Minister for nearly two decades. Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, paramount of Cakaudrove (Lau's partner in the Tovata) next became Governor-General, and after the 1987 coups the President, replaced in turn by Mara. Mara's wife is the highest-ranked chief of Rewa, but Burebasaga has fared less well in the power-stakes than have Bau and Lau, and foreign aid, hurricane relief etc. have long been directed into the east to a degree other Fijians have complained was most inequitable. Western leaders have held none of the strategic posts until the election in 1987 of Bavadra, member of a noble lineage and married to a chief, Adi Kuini (recently Deputy PM in the Chaudhry government). The shift of power Bavadra's election caused was undoubtedly a significant factor in the 1987 coups. And though represented as a united 'Fijian' action, the ensuing general chaos, and with their 'common adversary', the Indians, sidelined for the time being, the fighting over who would wield power actually gave a new lease of life to the old factional rivalries between the confederacies, and in particular between west and east.

Indians are relatively far more numerous in the west, and inter-ethnic intolerance has generally been less in evidence. It is also a region in which there are many land-leases which have not been renewed, resulting in Indian families who have farmed the land for generations being evicted from the only homes they have ever known. But while this is understandably uppermost in Indian concerns, it is not the only matter of concern to indigenous Fijians. Grumbles about the fact that western Fiji earned the lion's share of Fiji's income, but received the crumbs from the table in its distribution, go back to the early days of independence, and became sharply focused during the 1977 elections. Following this, Ratu Osea Gavidi (who has been so much to the fore in reports of the recent events in western Fiji) formed the Western United Front. Since that time, they have mounted a strong push for the formation of a fourth confederacy, the *Yasayasa Vaka Ra*, carving off everything west of a line dividing Viti Levu in half. This received even greater impetus in the rivalries that followed the coups. The reasoning is that while they may not have

the traditional powerful dynasties, such a confederacy would have such economic clout that they would have to be reckoned with. The west has the greatest concentration of tourism, sugarcane, mining, and the pine-forest industry, and the international airport is there. Of major foreign-income earning industries, only the garment industry is predominantly in Suva, and it may be the hardest to re-establish when normalcy returns, having already been effectively destroyed by the present situation.

Speight shows no concern about the danger of a west/east split, as we see him posturing each night for the eager media that inexplicably continue to pander to his paranoid delusions of grandeur and report his every inane utterance. In one interview he said, 'Why not? Australia has eight or nine States, doesn't it?', thus showing his ignorance not only of the number of Australian political divisions, but also of the difference between the secession of part of a united country, and the federation of previously separate States. In truth, it is also extremely doubtful if he actually understands much about the forces at work in Fiji. His grasp of Fiji's history is clearly pretty hazy — for example, to justify his use of force, he keeps reiterating that Britain took Fiji by the force of the gun, whereas in fact it refused the first offers of cession by a cartel of powerful chiefs, and accepted it very reluctantly, and peacefully, after the offer was again urgently pressed. But Speight has also been out of Fiji for much of the period since independence, and does not have direct experience of, and certainly no scholarly apprehension of, the various forces that have moulded current Fijian politics, either inter-ethnic or intra-Fijian.

Viewed simplistically, it might appear as though the western chiefs should line up behind Speight's rhetoric about Fijian rights. But in fact, they have stated that they oppose him strongly and are demanding a return to democratic government. The reason is that they will already lose an enormous amount, as a result of the economic isolation Fiji will undoubtedly suffer, whatever happens from now on. Their prosperity depends on social and political stability, and their prosperity is the key to a greater share in power.

Also, though on the face of it their history should lead them to share Speight's opposition to the Mara dynasty and its allies, their positions are

radically different. Speight is one of an increasing group of economic 'chancers' in such developing countries, and the chaos following 1987 opened up undreamed-of possibilities for them. The structure and accountability the Chaudhry government was imposing were disastrous from their viewpoint, and also set in train legal forces that, if permitted to take their course, must spell Speight's doom. Intent on self-preservation, he obviously saw the half-baked plot of disaffected third-raters that was brewing, as his opportunity to circumvent that happening, and he took control of it.

Speight has piggy-backed on the racist, 'nationalistic' rhetoric Rabuka developed to provide a plausible rationale for his actions following his coup in 1987. He is quick on his feet and has refined and amended this to suit the occasion, and predictably he has attracted a certain amount of support from Fijians, including a number of chiefs whose understandable anxieties about the preservation of their identity and land rights were once more brought to the fore by the Chaudhry government's proposed land legislation. Given that, what is actually most interesting is that the level of support is far less than Rabuka was able to marshal playing on the same fears, and much of that is doubtless down to Speight's opposition to Ratu Mara and his refusal to acknowledge the authority of the Great Council, which Rabuka was at pains to elevate. But in actuality a strong traditional leadership is as inimical to Speight's self-seeking, anarchic agenda as is a democratically elected government. While he deceitfully tries to make a display of acknowledging the chiefs, in fact he has no use for them, and has shown that he will reject anything they say or do which does not fall in behind his personal agenda.

The western chiefs' ambition, on the other hand, is to walk taller in the halls of traditional leadership, rather than to attempt to pull that leadership down. They recognise that, despite growing resistance to, and increasingly marginal relevance of, Fiji's chiefly system, the momentum that tradition has in Fiji will still carry it well into the foreseeable future. It would be a mistake to see the western chiefs' stated opposition to Speight as noble support for a multicultural Fiji, or for democratic institutions per se. While they must certainly be dismayed at the dark

economic times that will inevitably result from his actions, the threat implicit in their declaration of a separate confederacy is not aimed at Speight, upon whom it can have no immediate effect and who seemingly cannot understand, or does not care about, its long-term implications. Rather, they are seizing the opportunity to move into the next act of their own ongoing campaign, and are attempting to better position themselves for the unstable situation and renewed jockeying for power that will inevitably ensue when the shouting dies down. Their implicit threat is that, unless they do well in the resulting carve-up of power, they might actually secede, an action that would totally destabilise Fiji and bring its viability as a nation-state under threat. While Fiji's west may possibly be economically viable on its own, it is far less clear that the remainder of Fiji would be.

All of which shows that, as is the case in the Solomons, the mix of ethnic division, traditional rivalries and modern economic power is a highly explosive brew. There have always been many more agendas in play from day one than the simplistic depiction of events, mainly in racial terms, might lead one to believe. Indeed, though Speight continues to try to play the 'race' card, apart from individual acts of thuggery, the current conflict has moved past even the pretence of being an ethnic issue, and is now between the gang of kidnapers and the (indigenous) Fijian army.

Finally, a plea that observers not see the sickening instances of vandalism, looting and violence that have occurred and continue to occur in Fiji as indicative of indigenous Fijian bellicosity or even widespread hostility toward Indians. That these particular occurrences are only incidentally ethnic is shown by the fact that many rural Indians are taking refuge from these thugs, with Fijian villagers. These are the actions of the ever-present cruising sharks who move in for the kill at any signs of weakness and distress. We see similar instances in crises and conflicts worldwide. In this case, Indians have been offered up by Speight's wild inflammatory utterances as an acceptable target, and in the chaotic climate generated by his actions, law-enforcement agencies are unable, even in some cases unwilling, to protect them. The perpetrators of these actions are utterly contemptible, but sadly such creatures are always with

us — it's just that happily, most of the time, in a climate of law and order, they have fewer opportunities to act so concertedly or on such a scale. It is in fact a tribute to the customary decency of the wider ethnic Fijian community, and the responsible behaviour of the majority of the police and military, that Fiji has not developed into a Sarajevo or Kosovo. I do not believe it ever will, despite having little confidence that a resolution of the crisis is near.