

THE RACE BANDWAGON

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1. The Race Bandwagon

Race is a crude fact of life in Fiji. But the recent hijacking of an elected government in Fiji has nothing to do with race. It has to do with factional and provincial warlords, who seized the opportunity to facilitate their agenda. Indigenous Fijians were unhappy with the Chaudhry government and in particular with ALTA, changes to constitution, mahogany, and the Land Use Commission. The discontent gave rise to the Taukei Movement in April and a number of similar movements thereafter. Landowners and chiefs denounced the government for acting contrary to the interest of indigenous Fijians and wanted the government dissolved and the 1997 Constitution abrogated. Whipping up antagonism against the government were opposition politicians as well as factions from within the government's own coalition. The bizarre but understandable configuration of political interest in Fiji saw a strong anti-government mobilisation with some 5000 strong protesters on 28 April in Suva and the number rising to 10,000 by 19 May. All this came at a time when the government was fighting hard to sell its policy to indigenous Fijian chiefs.

The 1997 Constitution became the centre of discussion as opposition groups lobbied for its abrogation. The President of Fiji, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, was presented with a petition to remove the Chaudhry government and rescind the 1997 Constitution. While all this was happening, rumours in early April surfaced that a group of soldiers was behind moves to topple the government in a May 1987-type coup. The Fiji Military Forces (FMF) denied that there were any such moves from within the army. However,

the rumour proved true when George Speight and seven FMF officers from the First Meridian Squadron hijacked the elected government on 19 May.

In what was to be a short stint at removing the Chaudhry government it became a gruelling stalemate with the hijackers jumping from one demand to another. Unlike the 1987 coup, the May 2000 takeover is seriously bungled. Without a clear objective and direction, the rebel leader George Speight attacked and accused Indo-Fijians for all the social and economic ills plaguing indigenous Fijians. However, he further illustrated that Indo-Fijians were different in all respects from their indigenous Fijian counterparts and as a result they had to be removed entirely from the political scene. This was the initial Indo-Fijian bashing, which took a rather sinister form when Indo-Fijian residents of Muanirewa were attacked by bandits loyal to George Speight, who argued that Indo-Fijians controlled the economy and lived in style and luxury while indigenous Fijians lived in abject poverty. Once again the focus was on the business community in Fiji.

Most of the shops in the towns and cities across Fiji are owned by *Gujaratis* whereas descendants of indentured labourers are still on the farm or part of the growing Indo-Fijian middle class. Some have acquired fame and fortune while others have gone into business. Compared with the *Gujaratis*, descendants of indentured labourers own less than 20 per cent of businesses in Fiji. Shopping strips in all major towns and cities are predominantly *Gujarati* and hence the myth that Indo-Fijians own businesses and have a lot of wealth.

Whilst Indo-Fijians perform better in education, commerce and agriculture, indigenous Fijians are not far behind. Educated indigenous Fijians are also part of a growing middle class while a large number of Fijian families, mostly from the islands, continue to struggle in the urban slums of Suva. A lack of proper housing, compulsory education measures and some form of national employment service breed violent and disillusioned indigenous Fijian youths, who take on a profession of crime at an early age.

All this points to a system that is strongly elitist. Under the 1990 Constitution, cronies of the SVT party amassed huge wealth and privilege

under the guise of ‘Fijian political paramountcy’. Under the 1997 Constitution much of the elitist centralised system remained and the indigenous, grassroots Fijian never understood what the Constitution provided for them. When the Chaudhry government released Bills 15 and 16 to amend the Native Land Trust Board (NLTB) Act, the opposition cried foul and demanded an immediate repeal. In fact, under the proposed law, future legislation governing Crown Schedule A and B would not go before the NLTB. Instead, the Cabinet reserved the authority to recommend changes to the President of Fiji. The intention was that Crown Schedule A and B would eventually revert back to the original indigenous Fijian landowners. Apart from that, changes to Section 194 of the Constitution allowed indigenous Fijian Members to continue holding both political and traditional offices. Under the 1997 Constitution, the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* or Great Council of Chiefs, Fijian Affairs Board, *Bose ni Yasana* (Head of the Provincial Council) and *Bose ni Tikiaki* (Head of the District Council) were deemed public offices.

The Deputy Prime Minister of Fiji, Adi Kuini Speed, made it absolutely clear that on amendments to NLTB Act, a sub-committee would be established and views of all affected parties sought. However, by then, the SVT mounted a massive disinformation campaign which largely downplayed the entrenched constitutional safeguards for all indigenous Fijian institutions. Under Section 185 (1) of the 1997 Constitution, the following indigenous Fijian institutions are fully protected:

- (a) Fijian Affairs Act;
- (b) Fijian Development Fund Act;
- (c) Native Lands Act;
- (d) Native Land Trust Act;
- (e) Rotuma Act; Rotuman Lands Act;
- (g) Banaban Lands Act; or
- (h) Banaban Settlement Act; including a Bill prepared in consequence of the enactment of this Constitution:

All Bills regarding the above are deemed not to have been passed by the Senate unless at its third reading in that House, it is supported by the votes of at least 9 of the 14 members of the Senate appointed by the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga*.

Disinformation continues to play a large part in Fiji today. The hijackers' claim that an Indo-Fijian Prime Minister can single-handedly dismantle an entrenched indigenous Fijian institution does not hold up to scrutiny. It confirms that race has been used to facilitate sectional provincial interest under the guise of "Fijian political paramourcy".

However, all the half-baked effort of George Speight will amount to zero if constructive programs to lift the overall standard of disaffected indigenous Fijians are not put in place. There has to be a number of initiatives put in place straight away. These include a Fijian business institute, compulsory education, rural development and creation of a viable communal-based village economy. This will arrest unskilled and uneducated Fijian youths from migrating to the cities. A good start will be to establish an office of Indigenous Fijian Improvement with qualified and skilled policy specialists. This office shall advise the Interim Government on specific measures and programs. Once implemented, the programs have to be evaluated against stringent performance criteria. All of these cannot materialise without the support of Indo-Fijians, who must be included in any Interim Government of Fiji. By right, they should constitute 40 per cent of the total number of Ministers.

If the above is not done soon, a majority of indigenous Fijians will unlikely see any changes to their economic life even in this century. Finally, George Speight and his group have no credibility whatsoever when it comes to fighting for indigenous Fijian rights and the abrogation of the 1997 Constitution — agreed by SVT, FAP and GCC — is a grave error on the part of the military.

If for any reasons indigenous Fijians were unhappy with the Chaudhry government, then they certainly should have waited and voted as a bloc and defeated Chaudhry in the general elections of 2004. A group of people with guns cannot determine constitution, order and government in any society, let alone Fiji. It is therefore imperative that the hijackers are condemned by all Fijians.

2. Militarisation of Fijian Nationalism

The recent hijacking of an elected government by sectional interests in Fiji does not come as a surprise, since plans have been in progress for a year to undermine Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, who seemingly fell out of favour with Fiji's elite powerbrokers.

Debate continued for nearly a year on the results of the May 1999 general election. Starting with Rabuka's post-election outbursts, many indigenous Fijians believed that Indo-Fijians en masse rejected the Rabuka-Reddy compromise and voted as a bloc to install the Chaudhry government. However, behind this assertion lies a deeper, more culturally based explanation for Indo-Fijian action. The vote against Rabuka and Reddy was not against the constitutional compromise but against Rabuka, who continues to be seen as an individual responsible for executing the coups and causing enormous pain and suffering to Indo-Fijians.

No doubt that had Reddy formed a partnership with someone other than Rabuka, he and his party would not have been punished so severely at the polls. Things went from bad to worse with the about-turn of SVT under the leadership of Ratu Inoke Kubuabola — one of the leaders who carried out the destabilisation campaign against the Bavadra government. Joining him were other disgruntled politicians, including Ratu Timoci Silatolu and Ratu Tu'akitau of the Fijian Association Party, Mitieli Bulanauca of the Christian Democratic Alliance (VLV), Fijian Nationalist Viliame Savu and former members of the Party of National Unity led by Apisai Tora — not to mention reported meetings between a dubious Iranian-born Swedish arms dealer and members of the opposition and the army on 6 May in Colo-i-Suva.

It all points to institutional fragility that characterises many multi-ethnic states. All the way from the Balkans to Africa, self-styled military warlords and thugs have assumed ethnic leadership and waged cultural persecution of other ethnic groups. In the case of Fiji, indigenous Fijians were extended a franchise in 1963 and since then have engaged in communal voting. The shift towards common voting among largely urban indigenous Fijians resulted in the Bavadra government, which was

deposed in the coups of 1987. The process of developing any meaningful culture of democracy among indigenous Fijians was thwarted in 1987 and then given a knee-jerk start in 1997 with the promulgation of the new compromise constitution. At that time, SVT Cabinet Ministers remained steadfast in their defiance for any concessions to Indo-Fijians and all this is very well reflected in the SVT submission in October 1995 to the Constitution Review Commission.

Indigenous Fijian political paramountcy remains a powerful ideological tool. This paramountcy is based on the Deed of Cession of 1874 and the concept that the government of Fiji shall remain under the hegemony of the *Taukei* or indigenous Fijians and that *vulagi* or foreigners have to participate in the national political economy of Fiji on indigenous Fijian terms. While all this sounds very good, the problem still remains of indigenous Fijian disunity, which played a large part in compromising SVT's political position in the last general election. Rabuka in his biography pointed out that provincialism was eating away the cultural fabric of Fijian society. However, for the moment this green-eyed monster is conveniently in the background while the Indian bogey remains of urgent concern. In the case of contemporary Fiji, this paragraph from Dr Frank Harvey is most telling: 'Ethnic identities are evoked in certain structural circumstances to advance the material and political interests of actors whose primary purposes are not ethnic. Subsequent myth making and the dredging up of past events become symbols around which ethnic groups coalesce. These symbols make inter-ethnic violence appear just, honorable and legitimate.'

It means that those whipping up the chimera of Indian dominance in Fiji are doing so to fan fears of cultural insecurity, which is endemic among grassroots indigenous Fijians. Agitators like Apisai Tora have called for Indo-Fijians to be repatriated. A similar call was made by the late Sakeasi Butadroka in 1975. Tora's own political record is anything but consistent. After being in Alliance stalwart, Tora became a leading figure in the 1987 *Taukei* Movement and was a Minister in the Interim Government until he had his share of fall-out with Mara. In 1992, he formed the multicultural All National Congress (ANC), which was disbanded in 1995 following

a merger between the Fijian Association and the ANC. In 1998, Tora spearheaded the Party of National Unity (PANU) as an opposition party to the SVT and joined hands with the Fijian Association and the Fiji Labour Party later in that year.

After losing his seat, Tora became bitter and hostile and blamed Indo-Fijian voters for thwarting his political ambition. After going public with his comments, Apisai Tora started his own secret project and resigned from PANU. Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry who was previously seen as committed to multiculturalism became a dictatorial monster, harbouring secret ambitions to dismember current Fijian land ownership. For Tora, Chaudhry had to be stopped in his tracks before he undermined 'Fijian culture'. It was shocking to see a non-indigenous Fijian sitting with the high chiefs at the Great Council of Chiefs. Not only that but the Land Use Commission, ALTA, recent changes to the Constitution, the mahogany deal, provincial council funding, and civil service reforms were seen as not in the best interest of Fijians. Capitalising on certain concerns, Tora and his gang launched the Taukei Movement in April.

After a failed Taukei Movement protest march on 20 April, organisers went back to the drawing board and promised a better performance for the march in Suva on 28 April. About 4000 people marched through Suva in support of the SVT party and the Taukei Movement for the Prime Minister to step down. A group of SVT and Taukei Movement members later presented their petition to the Boselevu Vakaturaga, or the Great Council of Chiefs. The petition called for the dissolution of the Chaudhry government, changes to the constitution, the proposed Land Use Commission to be abolished, all Schedule A and B land to be returned to landowners and the mahogany deal to be reviewed. Participating in the march were members of the Fijian Association Party and the Christian Democrats. Another protest march was held by the Nationalist Vanua Tako Lavo Party on 19 May. By then certain commercial interests had thrown support behind the destabilisation campaign. It was rumoured that a group within the 15,000 protestors would start riots in Suva on 19 May. However, unfortunately, the looting and burning of mainly Indo-Fijian businesses went out of control.

Following an intensification of anti-government activities, moves were afoot from within the Coalition government to move a motion of no confidence against Prime Minister Chaudhry. It is believed that Dr Tupeni Baba, who is rumoured to have supported the nationalist protest on 19 May, was to be installed as the new Prime Minister of Fiji. However, that was not to happen because George Speight and his six gun men had other plans.

George Speight, a failed businessman and a recognised fraud from Tailevu, along with six members of the Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit, stormed Parliament and held government MPs, including the Prime Minister, at gunpoint. Speight, who has no notable history of championing indigenous Fijian rights, had appeared in Suva Magistrates Court on a foreign exchange scam and has dubious links to various pyramid schemes in Australia. In fact Speight saw his fortune quickly evaporate with the victory of the Coalition government. Among other things, Speight was removed as the Chairman of the Fiji Hardwood Corporation and was fired by Health Insurance Fiji Limited. Despite these setbacks, Speight was a major player in the mahogany deal with the US-based Timber Resource Management (TRM). When it was certain that the Coalition government would give the lucrative multi-million dollar timber contract to the British-based Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC), Speight and his group started advising landowners that they had a better deal with the TRM.

Immediately following a campaign of disinformation, chiefs and landowners started to criticise the government, which referred the matter to the Great Council of Chiefs at its 26–28 April meeting at Raffles Tradewinds Hotel in Suva. Apart from lobbying against the government, Speight and his group, mainly from the SVT party, conspired with an arms dealer to illegally import automatic weapons into Fiji. The plan was hatched with the assistance of certain businesses to bring in arms and ammunition via Vanua Levu. Army officers were recruited to provide direction and support for the whole operation. While the planning and execution went on with precision, certain chiefs of the Kubuna confederacy were informed and their support assured just in case anything went wrong.

The plan was to hijack the government, abrogate the 1997 Constitution, remove the President, and install a Taukei government under the leadership of one of the Kubuna chiefs. The hostages were to be held for a week with anticipation that the overall disgust with the Chaudhry government would lead to an outright indigenous Fijian support of George Speight and his men. However, unfortunately, things did not go as planned. The Great Council of Chiefs gave unanimous support to Mara to resolve the crisis as some Kubuna chiefs found themselves siding with the terrorists. Mara refused to accept George Speight's Taukei government, but gave in to his demands by dismissing the Coalition government.

With the President holding firm, Speight let out his thugs to provoke the military and the police. As a result, two soldiers and a journalist were wounded and a policeman from the west killed. After intense negotiations between the army and the President, Mara stepped aside on 29 May as the military imposed its rule on Fiji and repealed the 1997 Constitution. However, talks between the army and George Speight went nowhere as Speight imposed one new demand after another.

In the end, institutional fragility followed by a serious underdeveloped democratic culture, mainly among indigenous Fijians, allowed radical elements to manipulate the grassroots by creating a myth of a non-existent threat to land and identity. Indigenous Fijians have only their leadership to blame for their economic backwardness. The only outcome of a twelve-year experiment to transform indigenous Fijians into successful businessmen is disillusionment, failure, militancy and George Speight.