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Suva: Resilient Coup Capital?

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This chapter is my personal account of the coups in Fiji, which severely disrupted the lives of people in the country, and especially Suva. I was born in the capital's CBD and grew up in the city, living in police barracks in Samabula and Nasēsē. I attended kindergarten in Suva Street, Suva Methodist Boy's (now Primary) School in Toorak and Marist Brothers High School in Flagstaff. My father was a police corporal. It was fortunate that the University of the South Pacific (USP) began in 1968, which made it possible for me to attend the Prelim/Foundation program in 1970.

Like most other children growing up in Suva I have fond memories of the different games and sports we played. Some of these had distinct seasons such as the kite season, marbles season, and 'top' spinning and fighting season. We played improvised games such as 'pani', 'guli danda' and hide and seek. I learnt how to swim in the Nubukalou Creek and at the Olooloo Cruise Jetty behind the post office. It was in this now rather polluted creek that I learnt how to fish for a range of estuarine fishes.¹

Suva was generally a peaceful city in the 1950s and 1960s. The exception to this was during the 1959 riots that accompanied the Wholesale and Retail General Workers' Union strike, which resulted in damages to mainly European-owned businesses. Otherwise rowdiness in the city related to the Christmas and New Year festivities when buckets of water

1 During the *kaikai* (striped pony fish) and *ki* (goat fish) seasons, scores of women, men and children would fish sitting side by side on the banks of the Nubukalou Creek, the local wharf and in the Walu Bay area, and just about everyone would catch enough fish to take home.

were thrown on people, and noisy weekend drunks who spent a night at the Central Police Station in Totogo. Political strife and military coups are postcolonial phenomenon of different order and magnitude.

Like many citizens who left the country to settle abroad following each one of the extra-legal takeovers of democratically elected governments, I took up employment at the Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand in 2003, only to return in 2007 to experience life under yet another military-sponsored government.²

In Fiji's tumultuous post-Independence history of 51 years, Suva, the capital city, has experienced four military coups that usurped political power from democratically elected national governments, replacing them with military dictatorships, new constitutions and novel electoral systems to suit the coup-makers, and reversion to supposedly civilian governments. The capital city, called the 'Hub of the South Pacific', is no stranger to unrest and mayhem.

This chapter is based on my personal recollections of the Suva experience of the 1987, 2000 and 2006 coups. To jog my memory, I have relied on news articles published in the *Fiji Times*, and a number of scholarly publications. The discussion will centre especially on the 2000 putsch, hostage taking, military coup and mutiny, as this period of prolonged turbulence was the most disruptive and violent.

The 1987 Coups

On the morning of Thursday 14 May 1987, I was standing by the counter on the ground floor of the USP Library, then located in the Communications Building,³ when Basant Swann, one of the Indo-Fijian librarians, whispered to me with fear in her eyes that the military had toppled the government. She feared that there might be a repeat of what happened to Indians in Uganda under Idi Amin. I muttered a few words of reassurance along the lines of, 'it was too early to say', and for her to be mindful of her personal safety, and hurried to my office. Academic

2 I applied for the position of associate professor and director of development studies in the School of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences in the Faculty of Science at Victoria University of Wellington in 2002, and was appointed as professor and chair of the program from February 2003 to December 2007. I left VUW because the late Mr Savenaca Siwatibau, the former vice-chancellor of USP had agreed to my request for leave without pay.

3 In December 2018 this building was severely damaged in a massive fire.

colleagues confirmed that the military had overthrown the month-long Fiji Labour Party (FLP) and National Federation Party (NFP) Coalition Government. I had supported the formation of FLP, and was a founding member of the party.

I hurried home to the USP-owned house that I rented at 16 Telau Street, a block away from the Laucala campus. Close friends and activists in the Fiji Anti-Nuclear Group (FANG) and FLP came by to discuss the evolving situation. I learned on the radio⁴ that at 10 am on that day 12 gas-masked and balaclava-clad soldiers of the then Royal Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) led by Colonel Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka, with guns drawn, barged into the Parliament of Fiji and detained the democratically elected prime minister, Dr Timoci Uluivuda Bavadra, and the government members of parliament. This treason at 10⁵ followed in the wake of orchestrated public protests, road blocks, fire bombing and arson in various towns and cities of the country including the capital. The perpetrators of this violent destabilisation were indigenous Fijians.⁶

In the evening, a number of us visited the deposed prime minister, Dr Timoci Uluivuda Bavadra's Laucala Beach Estate house, to express our empathy for and solidarity with his wife, Kuini Bavadra, and their children. Apparently, a gun had been fired in the vicinity of the house. In the early hours of the morning large stones were thrown at my immediate neighbour's USP-owned house, damaging window louvres and security screens. As Professor Bob Briscoe's home was in the same compound as my USP-owned house, and as he was not directly involved in Fiji politics, we agreed that those who pelted his house had mistakenly thought it was mine!

I knew that I would be a possible target of the extremists and the army as I was among a group of USP academics who participated in the Fiji Trades Union Congress deliberations that led to the formation of the FLP, and I had published a working paper in the party's participation in a by-election.⁷

4 FM96's Peter Thompson was perhaps the first journalist to report of the armed takeover of parliament and government.

5 Kenneth Bain, *Treason at ten: Fiji at the crossroads* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 1989).

6 Not all iTaukei supported the coup. A number of villages and settlements put up banners and placards in support of the FLP-NFP government. Ethno-nationalist Fijians maintained, 'all true Fijians support the coup'.

7 Vijay Naidu, *The Fiji Labour Party and the by-election of December 1985: A report*, SSED Working Paper no. 2 (Suva: School of Economic and Social Development, University of the South Pacific, 1986). Other FLP-supporting colleagues included William Sutherland, Wadan Narsey, Atu Bain, Claire Slatter, Tupeni Baba, Sitiveni Ratuva, Satendra Prasad, Simone Durutalo and Michael Howard.

Interestingly, in the days that followed the coup, Navitalia Naisoro, Institute of Development Studies Sussex University graduate and a friend – and soon to be permanent secretary – and a man he introduced as Frazer, had turned up at my house to warn me that if ‘if I didn’t want my legs cut off at the knees’ then I should not say anything or do anything to oppose the coup.

Rabuka claimed that the military coup d’état was a pre-emptive action to ensure the ‘security of life and property’⁸ and prevent bloodshed.⁹ The commander of RFMF, Brigadier General Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, and his deputy, Chief of Staff Colonel Jim Sanday, were pushed aside as further acts of disloyalty. Rabuka and the RFMF refused to ‘return to their lawful allegiance in accordance with the oath of office and their duty of obedience without delay’ as required by the governor-general¹⁰ who then declared a state of emergency. The real reason for the RFMF’s unprecedented action lay elsewhere.

In the general election of April 1987, the fifth since Independence, the indigenous Fijian chief-led Alliance Party was defeated at the polls by a multiethnic coalition of the newly formed FLP and the NFP. The coalition obtained 28 seats to the Alliance’s 24. Although the leader of this coalition was Dr Timoci Bavadra, a medical doctor and an indigenous Fijian from the ‘West’, the genuinely multiethnic government (cabinet comprised six Fijians, one general elector and seven Indo-Fijians) that was formed was perceived to be ‘Indian’. The Fiji Chamber of Commerce, the Fiji Manufacturers’ Association and the Duty-Free Dealers Association, farmers’ and workers’ organisations, expressed their support for the new government, and the prime minister said that the ‘overriding mood of Fiji has been one of orderly and peaceful transition’.¹¹

However, defeated indigenous Fijian Alliance Party politicians, some of whom were now in the parliamentary opposition, began agitation and civil unrest. Protest marches were held in urban centres and in the

8 ‘Army seizes power coup’, *Fiji Times*, 15 May 1987.

9 Rabuka had been disaffected as the third ranking officer in RFMF. He was also angry that the Alliance Party had lost the general election. When approached by three coup conspirators, he readily agreed to overthrow the duly elected government. See JR Sharpham, *Rabuka of Fiji* (Rockhampton: Central Queensland University Press, 2000).

10 Sharpham, *Rabuka of Fiji*.

11 *Fiji Times*, 16 April 1987.

capital. An ethno-nationalist and racist Taukei Movement mobilised to orchestrate these protests. One of its leaders asserted that the movement had dedication to its people as the Nazis had been to Germans!¹²

On Friday 24 April, Suva was tense with 100 uniformed police from the Nubukalou Creek bridge to Albert Park on patrol as thousands of indigenous Fijians marched through the city, carrying placards, singing and chanting. Their petition was submitted to the governor-general, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau by Viliame Gonelevu, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola and Ratu Inoke Tavuyava. Protesters' banners included, 'Fiji for the Fijians', 'Stop the Indian Government', 'Noqu Kalou, Noqu Vanua' (my God, my land), 'Reddy Gun, Bavadra Bullet', 'Fiji New Little India. Say No'. The petition rejected the Bavadra Government, called for the paramountcy and rule by indigenous Fijians, and the immediate change of the 1970 Independence constitution. I observed the protest march along Victoria Arcade from near the ANZ Building and was surprised that one of my senior university colleagues and his wife were among the protesters!

The protest march was peaceful. However, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, the former prime minister, having graciously conceded defeat¹³ in the general election and called for a smooth transition, remained silent during the subsequent episodes of protest and violence that were to follow.¹⁴ Following the armed intrusion in the Parliament, Bavadra and his government members were bundled into a military truck and taken to the Queen Elizabeth Barracks in Nabua in the outskirts of Suva. Late in the night, the prime minister, his ministers and members of parliament (MPs) were transported and held at the prime minister's residence in Veiuto. Crowds of people gathered in the vicinity to express their support for the detained leaders, guarded by heavily armed soldiers. Early on the following Tuesday, the hostage MPs were forcefully divided into two ethnic groups – Indo-Fijians were taken to Borron House in Samabula, and indigenous Fijians, including the prime minister, continued to be held in the prime minister's official residence.

12 Robbie Robertson, *The general's goose: Fiji's tale of contemporary misadventure* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017), 62, doi.org/10.22459/GG.08.2017.

13 It was said that Dr James Maraj, the former vice-chancellor of USP who became an adviser to Ratu Mara, had written the statement.

14 *Fiji Times*, 11 April 1987 and 26 April 1987.

My friend, Amelia Rokotuivuna, led a protest march with FLP supporters, mostly young Indo-Fijians from Veiuto along the Queen Elizabeth Drive towards the Government Buildings. The group was disbanded by the police and Amelia was arrested. Following the stone-throwing incident at Bob Briscoe's house, and after receiving warnings that the military were searching for me, I went into hiding. In fact, one late afternoon I managed to narrowly escape soldiers who had parked across the junction of Varani and Telau Street. I drove past them as they waved for me to stop my vehicle. Once inside my yard, I closed the gate. Shortly thereafter I received a phone call from the Raiwaqa Police Station asking me to attend a meeting with military officer, Tarakinikini. I refused. Colleagues and friends sheltered me. For a week or so George and Diane Greg hosted me at their flat on Williamson Road that overlooks Albert Park. I also stayed with Jacques and Eugenia Nicole at their house in the compound of the Pacific Theological College.

Although the deposed prime minister, government ministers and MPs were released after six days, much to the rejoicing crowds of families, friends and supporters, the situation in Suva remained uncertain, insecure and turbulent. Labour Party supporters and FANG members continued to be targeted.¹⁵ The banks and supermarkets reported heavy pressure on their services as people rushed to withdraw funds, and staple items in the shops ran out. Similar trends were reported in other urban centres.

After the two Suva-based dailies' editorials strongly condemned the coup on 15 May, armed soldiers entered the premises of all media organisations and shut them down for six days, following which there was censorship of the media by the military.¹⁶ The Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC)'s news broadcasts became the primary source of information about the unfolding events in Fiji. Foreign journalists were taken from the Travel Lodge and Suva streets for questioning by soldiers.¹⁷ The latter also raided the rooms of six other overseas journalists at the Courtesy Inn, confiscating tapes and notebooks.¹⁸ Buses stopped running in the city, and the pressure on the Immigration Department to issue passports

15 A number of them eventually left the country as refugees.

16 *Fiji Times*, 21 May 1987.

17 *Fiji Times*, 21 May 1987.

18 *Fiji Times*, 21 May 1987.

increased. By the end of the month 10,000 applications for new passports were received, and visa officials in the Australian and New Zealand High Commissions reported 500 to 700 applications a day.¹⁹

More widely, there were threats by trade unions of strike action, and farmers refused to harvest sugar cane. Tourists stopped arriving, and hotels and resorts reported widespread cancellations of bookings.²⁰ There was an attempted hijacking of an Air New Zealand jumbo airliner at the Nadi Airport. Schools in Suva reported low school attendance and early closures. USP brought forward its semester break and study leave to close the institution; Indo-Fijian students left for their homes and overseas students also departed, including in chartered flights to their home countries in the region and elsewhere.²¹

Rabuka sought to name a 'Council of Ministers' that included himself, Ratu Mara and other prominent members of the defeated Alliance Party, while the governor-general named a 19-member Council of Advisors that largely comprised the same Alliance Party people, Dr Bavadra and his deputy, Mr Harish Sharma, as well as two or three independent persons. Bavadra, Sharma and Rev. Daniel Mustapha, a former head of the Methodist Church, declined to be advisers.

Even though the state of emergency proscribed unauthorised public gatherings, a large crowd of indigenous Fijians had gathered in the vicinity of the Suva Civic Centre where the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) began meeting after the coup. They sang hymns and popular songs, and responded to speakers who addressed them. The governor-general, Ratu Sir Penaia, was subjected to 'an unprecedented show of disrespect for a high chief' when he was booed by the 3,000 strong Fijian crowd gathered at the Civic Centre.²² Rabuka received roars of approval by the same crowd, as he shouted, 'Sa nodana naqaqa (We have won)'. The hitherto silent Ratu Sir Kamisese also addressed the crowd, and in the evening some chiefs danced with women in the crowd.²³

19 'Passport applicants besiege Immigration Office in Suva', *Fiji Times*, 30 May 1987, 10.

20 'Heavy cancellations hit hotels and resorts in Fiji', *Fiji Times*, 26 May 1987, 8.

21 *Fiji Times*, 22 May 1987.

22 *Fiji Times*, 22 May 1987.

23 *Fiji Times*, 22 May 1987.

Besides this hubbub of activity, Suva had become a ghost town after the riots, rampaging, arson, stoning and looting by indigenous Fijian youths on Wednesday 19 May.²⁴ Suva lay silent on Thursday. 'Most shops, the post-office, doctors' surgeries, bus services remained shut ...'²⁵ The victims of this violence were Indo-Fijians, men and women, old and young who were in the city at that time,²⁶ and those who were gathering in Albert Park for a prayer meeting. Sweet sellers and market vendors were attacked, and their produce and stalls destroyed. They were kicked, punched and hit with sticks and iron rods. Cars driven by Indo-Fijians and those who looked Indo-Fijian were stoned.²⁷ Some indigenous Fijian office workers, a retired boxer, and the police sought to protect Indo-Fijians caught up in the chaos in Suva's main streets extending from Rodwell Road, the Suva market and bus stand, Victoria Arcade and Queen Elizabeth Drive.²⁸ Houses and business premises were stoned and broken into and looted in many suburbs of Suva, and this lawlessness spread to Nausori, Korovou and Navua.

According to the *Fiji Times*, 'from Lami, Delainavesi to Wainibokasi in Nausori, and in the interior from Tacirua to Sawani' rowdy gangs destroyed property, robbed homes and struck fear among Indo-Fijian residents. Stones, sticks and iron rods were used by these gangs. For much of Wednesday and Thursday, residents battened their property and took steps to defend themselves. In one incident in Samabula, an Indo-Fijian shop keeper fired a gun and wounded an indigenous Fijian youth.²⁹ A bus company owner relied on men from a neighbouring indigenous Fijian village to protect his buses and property.

Indo-Fijians were fearful of their safety and security while the courts were kept busy adjudicating numerous cases of rioting, arson, looting, assault and damage to property. Led by the chief justice, Timoci Tuivaga, judges and magistrates maintained their firm loyalty to the governor-general.

24 *Fiji Times*, 22 May 1987.

25 'Suva lies silent', *Fiji Times*, 22 May 1987, 2.

26 'Mob quelled as violence flares', *Fiji Times*, 21 May 1987, 3.

27 A well-known indigenous Fijian rugby referee's car was stoned by rampaging youths who mistook him for an Indo-Fijian (personal communication).

28 My good friend the late Kisor Chetty was attacked by a group along Carnavon Street, and an iTaukei man stepped out of his office block to pull him indoors to safety.

29 'Rowdy gangs strike homes in Suva area', *Fiji Times*, 22 May 1987, 3.

They were joined by the high chief, Ratu Jone Madraiwiwi, and 59 other members of the legal profession.³⁰ The chief justice advised the governor-general on constitutional and other matters pertaining to the rule of law.

I found it quite dismaying on how the leading chiefs dealt with the matters at hand. The three-day GCC passed a number of motions including maintaining ties with the British monarchy; amnesty for Rabuka and other RFMF military personnel responsible for the coup; a government backed by the military comprising the Council of Advisers; an appeal to the governor-general that Mohammed Apisai Tora and Senator Jone Qio (on bail for \$400 and \$10,000 respectively) be given amnesty as their alleged crimes were political in nature; to raise \$500 per province to fund their legal defence if the governor-general was not able to grant them amnesty; to request the governments of India, Australia, New Zealand and United States to accept all Indo-Fijians who wished to leave the country, and the Fiji Government to pay for the repatriation; and to replace the 1970 constitution with a constitution that ensured the paramountcy of indigenous Fijian interests.³¹ A letter writer responding to John Moses's feature article³² on the coup and its negative short and long-term aftermath asserted that: 'Democracy is a foreign flower – wrong soil'.³³

A group of male Indo-Fijian students who lived in a house at the junction of Grantham Road and Telau Street got implicated in a number of bombing incidents.³⁴ Some of these students were known to me and occasionally visited my house. The police found that a number of the explosive devices were wrapped on computer printing papers that came from a USP lab. The students were interrogated and tortured. One of them, whose soccer team I helped to coach during his high school days at Suva Grammar School, had his arm broken as soldiers assaulted him. Moses Driver, a senior police officer, arrived at my home following the bombing incidents to question me about my possible involvement with the group of students. He and his team thoroughly searched every room of the house and paid close attention to all the containers of oil, kerosene and cleaning materials. They also compared samples of computer printing paper to printed material that I had in my study.

30 'Chief Justice's role in the rising crisis', *Fiji Times*, 21 May 1987.

31 *Fiji Times*, 27 May 1987.

32 *Fiji Times*, 22 May 1987.

33 "'Foreign flower" letter by Adi Finau Tabakaucoro', *Fiji Times*, 28 May 1987, 6.

34 An Indo-Fijian technical staff at USP lost his life as a result of sustaining injuries when an explosive device was accidentally triggered in his car.

The Back to Early May Movement

I joined some well-respected Suva people who had begun a petition that was labelled the ‘Back to Early May Movement’ in support of the governor-general’s efforts at returning to constitutionality and negotiated settlement between those who supported the deposed government and those who supported the coup and its objectives. Members of the clergy, professional people, academics, representatives of civil society organisations, business people and former civil servants led the movement. Over a relatively short time, large numbers of people signed the petition, which was presented to the governor-general.

It is unclear what impact the petition had but the governor-general, between May and September, was able to mediate between Dr Timoci Bavadra’s deposed government and the defeated Alliance Party leadership led by the interim prime minister, Ratu Mara. An accord that was to be known as Deuba Accord was signed on 23 September. There was optimism of a government of national unity that would take the country forward but this was not to be. Rabuka and his ethno-nationalist supporters became increasingly restive as the governor-general’s mediation was underway.

In early September, three weeks before the second RFMF coup d’état, an especially unpleasant incident involved the reggae band, ‘Rootstrata’, whose members dug up a *lovo* pit across from the Parliament in close proximity to Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna’s statue, and threatened to cook my friend Richard Naidu, a prominent local lawyer and adviser to Dr Bavadra. Acts of violence, house breaking and robbery, and random mugging escalated to arson and looting of commercial premises. Brij Lal wrote:

Shops in central Suva parts of the city were torched with petrol bombs and looted in smash-and-grab raids, and Fiji’s only medical laboratory, belonging to a known Coalition supporter (Dr Karam Singh) was razed to the ground ... Further violence was prevented only after the military erected roadblocks and installed checkpoints at strategic points in the city.³⁵

Lawlessness reached epic proportion on 23 September when prison guards supportive of the Taukei Movement released more than 100 prisoners to march from the Naborua Prison, in Suva’s hinterland to the

35 Brij V Lal, *In the eye of the storm* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010), 402, doi.org/10.22459/ES.11.2010.

Governor-General's Residence. They were hurried through the capital's Victoria Parade by their guards to meet the governor-general to submit their objections regarding the court action brought against Ratu Penaia Ganilau by Dr Timoci Bavadra, and to pay their respect to the high chief. They were hosted in the head of state's compound and provided breakfast. Needless to say, for Suva residents, this event of convicted criminals being paraded through the city to the Government House to make their petition and hosted to breakfast was most shocking.

However, an even more traumatic event was unleashed a few days later. Dissatisfied and frustrated at being left out of the negotiation process, Rabuka, supported by the extremist ethno-nationalist Taukei Movement, staged the second coup on 28 September.³⁶ Once again, the military commander appeared on the television screen and the media to declare that he had taken over the government. Soldiers raided and occupied media buildings and airports, and made excursions on the Laucala Campus of USP to take over the satellite communication hub. The armed military was suddenly seen everywhere in twin-cab Toyota utilities and larger trucks. Ethno-nationalist Fijians freely moved around the city. Shops were shuttered and closed, and the media was censored. The Fijian Broadcasting Commission (FBC) played sombre music as announcements were made by Rabuka and/or the governor-general.

Steven Ratuva and I were at my home in Telau Street when Claire Slatter informed us about the coup and that the military was rounding up FLP supporters. We hurried to her place on Beach Road at Suva Point but as night fell, she received a phone call saying that soldiers were coming to detain her. The nightly curfew had begun. We agreed that it was best that Steven and I left the house via the back door. The two of us walked about 100 metres and Steven suggested that we should take different routes so that we were not apprehended together. It began to drizzle. As I anxiously crossed the little park at the junction of Beach Road and Catalina Drive, I contemplated if I should spend the night in a nearby mango tree! It suddenly occurred to me that my USP colleagues and friends Morgan

36 At a Citizens Constitutional Forum public consultation in 2012, Rabuka explained that he 'wasn't a tissue paper to be used and cast aside'!

and Eileen Tuimaleali‘ifano lived just nearby. I called out their names, and got an immediate welcoming response from Morgan who said watch out for the dog. My relief at this turn of events was overwhelming!³⁷

Early the following morning Morgan and Eileen’s eldest son, John, and I walked along Queen Elizabeth Drive and the USP fenced compound until we were near the clump of mangroves. He pointed to the hole in fence through which I crawled, saying goodbye and thank you to him. I walked through the bush and crossed the park to get to Epeli and Barbara Hau’ofa’s house. I stayed with them for a few days until someone tried to phone me. I was supposed to be incognito. We decided that I should leave. I then spent a few days at Rajesh and Dharma Chandra’s place on campus. They too were kind hosts but as I did not want to jeopardise their safety, I travelled to Nakasi and stayed with close friends for two nights. I got frustrated with hiding from the police and military and after close to two weeks, I returned to my USP office and called the police inquiring why they were looking for me.

Senior Superintendent of Police Qalo Bulatiko turned up at my office accompanied by two constables. One of them frisked me in case I carried any weapons. I was asked to accompany them to the police station wagon that had been donated to them by Westpac Bank. Bulatiko got me to sit in the boot of the car! At the main gate of the campus, the then vice-chancellor, Geoffrey Caston, tried unsuccessfully to wave the police vehicle down. Bulatiko declared that ‘the white man must be careful, otherwise he’ll leave the country in a coffin’.

At the Central Police Station, a policeman took my details and got me to empty my pockets and to give him my trouser belt. I was then put into a cell that smelled of urine and excreta. Later in the day, the renowned comedian John Mohammed joined me in the same cell. As in the first coup, scores of people were detained by the military and police. Those who led the ‘Back to Early May Movement’ and supporters of FLP and NFP were targeted. Suva stood at a standstill as armed soldiers took control of the streets.

37 Steven Ratuva somehow managed to stay in the shadows and eventually found a safe house to stay in for the night. Armed soldiers and police led by Senior Superintendent of Police Qalo Bulatiko arrived in three vehicles at Claire Slatter’s house. Having asked whether she was Claire Slatter, he inquired if I had been at the house. He held a pistol in his hand, and used a torch to search the house including under the bed in one of the bedrooms. Claire was driven to the Central Police Stations and put in a cell.

Late at night, the police drove me to the Queen Elizabeth Barracks in Nabua, and handed me to the military. I was put into a cell, and heard voices that sounded familiar. A number of FLP members were in the neighbouring cells. They included Kenneth Zinck and Richard Naidu. Stories were shared in the midst of laughter and much bantering about how each one got arrested and his experience with the police and/or the military. The prisoners tried to make light of their predicament. A day or two later, in the company of armed soldiers, Richard Naidu and I were driven in separate Toyota Hilux twin-cab utilities to the back of the Korovou Gaol. Here we were locked away in separate, rather dusty, cells once used to hold death row inmates. We were kept in these cells for at least two days, and on the morning of the third day each one of us were subject to severe beatings by soldiers, and to psychological torture.

I was told that ‘educated Indians like you are the problem’, that as an academic ‘you are like an underwater reef that harmed boats’ and that ‘you damaged the country by teaching the wrong things to your students’. I was told that I could be killed and my body could be disposed of in Suva Harbour, and nobody would be the wiser. This caused me a lot of trauma and I was also in great pain from what was diagnosed as a hair line fracture caused either by a boot or the butt of a gun struck on my ribs. During my detention, the university’s registrar, on the direction of the vice-chancellor, got USP’s lawyers to prepare a habeas corpus petition for me to submit to the courts.

Rabuka, as RFMF commander and head of the military government, imposed the Sunday Observance Decree that prohibited the playing of sports, public transport, ‘non-essential work’, trading, picnicking and other leisure activities on Sundays.³⁸ The dominant faction of the Methodist Church and its supporters set up roadblocks in various parts of Suva City including on Queen Elizabeth Drive and the country to stop and question motorists. Soldiers and police apprehended Indo-Fijians playing soccer or found engaged in activities deemed to be proscribed or if they were near picnic spots. Suspected Indo-Fijian offenders were often mistreated – slapped, kicked and tortured.

38 Fiji Military Government, ‘Sunday Observance Decree 1987’, Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute, 11 November 1987, www.pacilii.org/fj/promu/promu_dec/sod1987206/.

Suspensions between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians and other minorities increased in Suva and elsewhere in the country. There were rumours of fruits and vegetables being poisoned at the local Suva market, and of indigenous Fijians reporting on Indo-Fijian employers. Snitching by indigenous employees, including domestic workers, gardeners, cleaners (even in hospitals), secretaries and students (at USP) and others, on what their Indo-Fijian employers and staff were doing increased as the police and military hounded those who opposed the coups.

Fiji had been declared a republic in October; its membership of the Commonwealth lapsed and the 1970 Independence constitution was abrogated. It was not long before the coup leader realised that the country had taken a disastrous turn. In December of 1987, paramount chiefs Ratu Penaia Ganilau and Ratu Mara were returned to power as allies of Rabuka. The former transitioned from governor-general to president of the strange new republic, and the latter as prime minister.

A number of protests were made against the coup and Rabuka. These included a well-orchestrated protest, despite the presence of police and the military and roadblocks along Rodwell Road, by a few courageous women at the premiere of *Rabuka – No Other Way* at the Phoenix Theatre. They wore T-shirts that suggested that ‘there were other ways’. Seven of these women were arrested. On the anniversary of the coup a number of us, later called the ‘Democracy 17’ by the Fiji media, were arrested for unlawfully gathering in Sukuna Park with anti-coup and pro-democracy banners. Among those arrested were nine women and two Irish Catholic priests’.

While in the prison in the Central Police Station, we discovered that Father Paul Tierney was a great singer who knew the words of ‘Streets of London’ by heart. We sang hymns and popular resistance songs. We sang most loudly the Fijian national anthem, especially the verse, ‘the land of freedom, hope and glory’. This upset the police who, having failed to silence us by shouting ‘shut up’, proceeded to reverse a large police truck and rev up its engine so that the cells could fill up with noxious exhaust. Fortunately, for us, the breeze and the elevated angle of the truck blew much of the exhaust fumes away.

A number of constitutional review commissions were convened. These included one chaired by Sir John Falvey, and another by Colonel Paul Manuelli. I remember making a submission to the Falvey commission and being interrogated by Apisai Tora on my views on what were the provisions

of a fair and just constitution. The 1990 constitution was imposed by the military-backed regime. It paid little regard to the submissions made by FLP, NFP and civil society organisations. It was described as feudalistic and racist and was promulgated by the president, and endorsed by the GCC.

Coup leader Rabuka became the elected prime minister following the 1992 general election under the 1990 constitution and its electoral system of entirely communal representation, with 37 of the 70 seats in parliamentary allocated to indigenous Fijians. The chiefs also endorsed the Soqosoqo Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) Party led by Rabuka.

In the early 1990s with deep divisions between political leaders, I joined a number of concerned people inspired by Martin Ennals of Amnesty International and Professor Yash Ghai to form the Citizens Constitutional Forum (CCF). The founding members were from the university, churches, professions and trade unions who wanted to promote peaceful dialogue among political and community leaders and citizens to find common ground regarding the constitutional crisis and to bridge divisions. The principles of democracy and accountability as the bases of governance guided the discussions. A number of national consultations were held on specific aspects of a broadly acceptable constitution. These included electoral systems, power sharing, communal and indigenous interests, and land. International experts in these areas were invited to share their experience, knowledge and advice participants. According to a 1995 CCF report:

Religious leaders, politicians, academics, unionists, educators, lawyers, social workers and concerned citizens from different backgrounds met in a spirit of conciliation. Broad agreement was reached on the issues of electoral system, power sharing, ethnic interests, accountability, independence of the judiciary and the military.³⁹

Meanwhile, the show of ethnic solidarity among indigenous Fijian political leaders was short-lived because of divisions within SVT. The 1994 Fiji national budget was not passed because of the split. The government was compelled to return to the polls. The SVT party was re-elected but

39 Citizens Constitutional Forum, *One nation diverse peoples: Building a just and democratic Fiji* (Suva: Citizens Constitutional Forum, September 1995), 2.

needed Mahendra Chaudry's FLP support to form government, and for Rabuka to remain prime minister. He was to hold this position until the 1999 general election.

In accordance with the review provision in the 1990 constitution, a three-person constitutional review commission (CRC) was appointed by the government in consultation with the opposition. Sir Paul Reeves, a former archbishop and governor-general of New Zealand was the chair and Tomasi Vakatora, a former parliamentary speaker, and Professor Brij Lal were the two members. Led by Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, a number of CCF members and I made the CCF submission to the CRC based on the booklet, 'One Nation Diverse Peoples' subtitled, 'Building a Just and Democratic Fiji'. The CCF presentation was one of 852 submissions made to the CRC. The commission made numerous recommendations that significantly changed the 1990 constitution.

The 2000 Putsch, Hostage Taking and Coup

Following the review of the 1990 constitution and the introduction of a relatively complicated electoral system with a preferential alternative vote arrangement in the 1997 constitution, the FLP won a resounding victory in the 1999 general election. It allied with a minority ethnic Fijian political party to form government. In deciding not to follow the power-sharing provision of the 1997 constitution, FLP antagonised the SVT party. Its new leader, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, promised to prevent the government from completing its term in office. However, unlike the 1987 military coup d'état that replaced the Bavadra Government in a month, the FLP-led government remained in power for a year.

Mahendra Pal Chaudhary became Fiji's very first Indo-Fijian prime minister. This in itself caused some initial controversy but the president, Ratu Mara, was able to persuade minority party Taukei MPs to work with Chaudhary. The government managed the economy well, and increased the allocation of poverty alleviation funds and initiated taxation review, as well as other pro-poor policies. However, in removing certain individuals from statutory boards, and in trying to establish a land use commission as well as appointing his own son as his private secretary, Chaudhary

increased the number of people opposed to him. He appeared to have alienated some wealthy Indo-Fijian businessmen over taxation matters. He also antagonised the media, which portrayed him as arrogant.

These provided fuel to his political opponents and especially ethno-nationalists to destabilise the country. Against the advice of his minister for home affairs, and later on the commissioner of police, he allowed the SVT opposition, the Taukei Movement and other ethno-nationalists to hold protest marches in the capital. Three such anti-government ethno-nationalist protests were held with increasing numbers of demonstrators. The last on 19 May was said to have 10,000, protesters making it the largest in the history of protest marches in the city. The protest leaders were supposed to submit their petition to the president at the entrance of the presidential compound.

While attention was focused on the protest, nine Revolutionary Warfare Unit (CRW) soldiers of the RFMF entered Parliament and took the prime minister and the government MPs hostage. The former head of the Fiji Hardwood Corporation, described subsequently as a failed businessman, George Speight, became their spokesman and leader. I can recall a period of confusion as it was not at all clear if those who had seized the prime minister and his government had the support of the military as a whole. Like other people I was aghast that during the first two weeks of the forceful takeover of the legislature, large quantities of arms and ammunitions were transferred from the military armoury to the parliamentary complex. The haul was exhibited to local and overseas journalists by a former British Army special forces retiree who claimed to have trained the CRW soldiers and hostage takers.⁴⁰

Groups of youth who had been part of the protest march entered the parliamentary complex and formed a human shield for the hostage takers. Other groups of youth rampaged through central Suva smashing shop windows, looting, burning and trashing a number of shops. Indo-Fijian men, women and children were attacked, punched and kicked. The police and some indigenous Fijians attempted to protect some of them. There was mayhem in the capital and the police largely failed to deal with the situation. For reasons that were never revealed, the police mobile force, together with its gear and transport, were not used to quell

40 Ex-British SAS Major Ilisoni Ligairi had been approached by Rabuka to help establish and train the First Meridian Squadron or Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit following the 1987 coup.

the rioting. In the wake of the violence, throngs of indigenous Fijians helped themselves to clothing, electrical goods, kitchen wares, alcohol and foodstuff from shops and supermarkets. Supermarket trolleys were used to cart some of the stolen items to various residential areas as far away as Delainavesi, and to informal settlements.

The *Fiji Times* reported that by midday on Friday 19 May, schools in the Suva area had closed. Parents rushed to pick up their children to take them to the safety of their homes. The fire brigade sped to the CBD and to Toorak to put out burning shops that had been looted and trashed. Shops were barricaded and/or cordoned off, and banks shut their doors. Supermarkets in the suburbs of Samabula, Nabua and along the way to Nausori, and in Nausori, did brisk business. Traffic queued on either side of the Suva peninsula as scores of people drove out of the city. On Saturday morning, city council workers and shop owners and their employees cleared away shattered shop display window glass and other debris while having to put up with the stench of rotting food.

Another sight to behold at this time was the hundreds of indigenous Fijians from the provinces of Rewa, Tailevu and Ra (some of whom were related to George Speight) arriving at the parliamentary complex bearing gifts of foodstuff, kava and clothes. They too became part of the human shield in the complex.

In the ensuing 56 days of holding the elected prime minister, his cabinet and backbenchers hostage, mob violence, looting and trashing of shops and residential premises continued. The national TV station, TV One, was attacked by an angry mob of George Speight supporters following a candid interview with my friend and CCF member Jone Dakuvula, a prominent political analyst whose very clear message was that Speight was not genuine in his declaration of being an ethnic Fijian nationalist leader as he had no record whatsoever of being one. The mob smashed windows and doors and destroyed equipment as TV journalists and staff hurriedly escaped through the back door.

There were frequent rumours of mobs of iTaukei youth heading to the president's compound, to central Suva, to USP etc. – with each one of these rumours, schools closed. Parents rushed to pick up their children. Parents also stopped sending children to schools. USP had several periods of stops and starts. In the midst of the civil unrest and political crisis there were power cuts and water supply problems. Lawlessness, looting, burning of

homes and assaults, sexual abuse and rapes spread to some neighbouring rural hinterland. In one rather surprisingly blatant case that was televised, a police truck was loaded with the carcass of a bull and bundles of taro and driven back to the parliamentary complex. All these items were forcefully stolen from Indo-Fijian farmers in Muaniweni, Naitāsiri.

These farmers had their houses stoned, looted and trashed by gangs of youths from neighbouring villages. They and their families took shelter in the homes of indigenous Fijians and a white missionary, as well as in nearby bushes. Concerned non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and individuals from Suva provided groceries and other support to them in the following days. I went with Father Kevin Barr and other close friends to Muaniweni, Baulevu and other nearby places to speak to affected families and to share food and grocery items. They were eventually transported to Lautoka as displaced people and took refuge at the Girit Centre where they were cared for by Shaista Shameem, Sashi Kiran and Anit Singh.

Over the nearly two months of the occupation of the parliamentary complex by the renegade CRW soldiers, scores of young iTaukei men and women gathered in a celebration while the elected prime minister and his government side were held hostage at gunpoint. Kava and alcohol appeared to be shared and consumed, and cooking of food in *lovos* and over open fires took place. Euphoria and bonhomie extended to having sex as well. Some youths acted the part of warriors dressing up in traditional leaf skirts, blackening their faces and raising what appeared to be a *tapa* flag symbolising the *vanua*'s ascendance over Western-style democracy. Several homes in the area had been previously invaded, looted and trashed by gangs of youth who continued to occupy the Parliament. Armed renegade soldiers shot dead Police Corporal Seavula on the evening of Sunday 28 May as he drove a police vehicle along Sukuna Road close to the Parliament.⁴¹

The number of military personnel within the parliamentary complex increased, to the horror of Suva residents and the nation as a whole, when retired soldiers in uniform were shown on television marching into the parliamentary complex in support of George Speight and his group of armed interlopers. Besides these 100 odd 'Dad's army' types, on 7 July rebel RFMF soldiers mutinied at the Sukunaivalu Barracks. The mutiny

41 Arieta Vakasukawaqa Suva, 'Father's death inspired sons to join RFMF', *Fiji Sun*, 25 December 2016, fijisun.com.fj/2016/12/25/fathers-death-inspired-sons-to-join-rfmf/.

was supported by some chiefs in the area. Prominent chiefs also attended meetings in the parliamentary complex and separately, as GCC members. They were not able to end the crisis.

Nor were a number of international attempts able to bring a peaceful resolution. Both the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group led by Don McKinnon of New Zealand and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's personal emissary, Mr Sergio D Mello, were unsuccessful in their efforts to negotiate the release of the hostages, and help to end the national crisis.

The president appointed the minister of labour in the Labour Party-led People's Coalition Government as prime minister for a day so that he could then formally resign, and Parliament could be prorogued. Following unsuccessful attempts by the president to calm the situation, and to negotiate with an increasingly belligerent George Speight to release the hostages, the so-called civilian coup made possible by special forces soldiers, the military coup d'état took place on 29 May.

President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was approached by Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, Ratu Mara's son-in-law Ratu Epeli Ganilau, the former RFMF commander, and Sitiveni Rabuka to relinquish his position and leave the city. Overnight he was compelled to leave the capital for 'his own safety' on a naval ship that sailed him to Lakeba, Lau.

The Interim Military Government with Bainimarama as head took control of the state under emergency regulation and established the Military Exclusion Zone around the parliamentary complex. It was not until 9 July that the 'Muanikau Accord' was signed by the military commander, Bainimarama, and George Speight, which facilitated the release of the remaining 27 hostages including the deposed prime minister four days later.

The accord, among other things, appeared to fulfil the wishes of George Speight and to address the grievances of 'the indigenous Fijians': it included abrogation of the 1997 constitution, acknowledgement of the removal of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara as president, ascendance of Ratu Josefa Iloilo as acting president, appointment of exclusively ethnic Fijian

ministers, immunity for all those who committed 'political offences', and the reinstatement of military personnel 'involved in the political takeover ... before 19th May'.⁴²

The parliamentary complex was cleared of the supporters of the hostage takers, and arms and munitions were returned to the Queen Elizabeth Barracks. Scores of Speight supporters took over a school in Naulu, Nasinu. Having run out of food, they began raiding vegetable gardens in the neighbourhood, and demanding produce from vendors in the nearby roadside market. On Wednesday 26 July at a checkpoint in Nasinu, George Speight was apprehended by the military with two of his advisers and armed bodyguards. They were deemed to be carrying firearms and failing to surrender all the guns and ammunitions that were taken from the military armoury. On the following day RFMF soldiers cracked down on Speight supporters using tear gas. One person died and 56 others were injured with 24 being hospitalised.⁴³ Rebel soldiers took to the bush with other extremists, and on 8 August Police Corporal Raj Kumar and RFMF's Private Joela Weleilakeba lost their lives in an ambush in the Naitāsiri hills.⁴⁴

For Suva residents and all of Fiji, the ethno-nationalist CRW and George Speight saga had another twist before the year's end. On 2 November at a little after midday, people in Samabula, Vatuwaqa, Nabua, Tamavua, Caubati, Namadi Heights, Bay View Heights and Laucala Beach Estate heard sounds of gunfire coming from the Queen Elizabeth Barracks. Gun noises continued for a few hours. At least one person in Samabula North had a ricocheting bullet shrapnel enter his stomach. Confusion reigned. It was later in the evening, and on the following day that it was clarified that there had been a mutiny at the barracks with CRW and other rebel soldiers taking control of the armoury and overrunning the camp. During the mutiny three unarmed loyal soldiers were killed and the military commander, Voreqe Bainimarama, narrowly escaped an attempt on his life. The mutiny was quelled by the RFMF's 3rd Infantry Regiment led by Colonel Viliame Seruvakula whose troops had returned from training at the Sigatoka Sand Dunes. During the weeks that followed, four CRW soldiers were brutally killed by loyal soldiers.

42 'Free at last after 56 days in captivity', *Fiji Times*, 18 August 2015.

43 The Associated Press, 'Coup leader in Fiji is arrested by the military', *New York Times*, 27 July 2000, www.nytimes.com/2000/07/27/world/coup-leader-in-fiji-is-arrested-by-the-military.html.

44 Suva, 'Father's death inspired sons to join RFMF'.

Captain Shane Stevens and 42 other soldiers were subsequently convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment and long prison terms. Implicated in the machinations relating to the mutiny, Ratu Inoke Takiveikata, the Qaranivalu (paramount chief) of Naitāsiri Province was also convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment.⁴⁵

In fact, the Suva courts were kept busy over a number of years adjudicating cases of some 2,500 people charged by police for offences relating to the mayhem of 2000. These trials proceeded following the appointment of an almost exclusive ethnic Fijian civilian government led by Laisenia Qarase. The military commander also appointed Ratu Josefa Iloilo as president of the Republic. Both the appointment of government ministers and the head of state appear to reflect the wishes of George Speight who contested the 2001 general election while in prison.

CCF, and especially Jone Dakavula, worked closely with the lawyers for Chandrika Prasad, a farmer and one of the victims of the Muaniweni disorder to uphold the 1997 constitution against Bainimarama's bid to abrogate it. CCF collected affidavits and evidence to substantiate the argument that the citizens of Fiji had not consented to the new order established by the military, and that the constitution remained valid. CCF was appointed *amicus curiae* during the court proceeding. Much to our delight, the Supreme Court ruled that the constitution had not been abrogated.

In the 2001 general election, Speight, held as a prisoner on Nukulau Island, was a candidate of the Conservative Alliance, the right-wing ethno-nationalist party that advocated indigenous Fijian paramouncy, abolition of the 1997 constitution, the declaration of a Christian State and Sunday Sabbath. He won the Fijian communal seat in his home province of Tailevu. However, Qarase's Soqosoqo Duavata Lewenivanua (SDL) Party won 32 seats to FLP's 27 and formed government. Although his government sought national reconciliation, Prime Minister Qarase was seen to be sympathetic to the standpoint of indigenous Fijian ethno-nationalists. Over time he antagonised the military commander Voreqe Bainimarama, who overthrew his democratically elected government in December 2006.⁴⁶

45 Thakur Ranjit Singh, 'Fiji's failed military mutiny: The day Frank Bainimarama was supposed to die – a dark history of modern Fiji', *Fiji Pundit* (blog), 1 November 2014, fijipundit.blogspot.com/2014/11/fijis-failed-military-mutiny-day-frank.html.

46 Vijay Naidu, 'Coups in Fiji seesawing democratic multiracialism and ethno-nationalist extremism', *Deuforum* no. 26 (2007): 24–33.

The 2006 coup

I began working at the Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) in early 2003 and made the occasional visit to Fiji to, among other things, participate in conferences and seminars and visit family and friends. A year after I left, Robbie Robertson was appointed as professor and director of development studies at USP. In 2006, I advised Professor Philip Morrison, the head of the School of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences at VUW, that I would be returning to Fiji at the end of year. He asked me if I was sure about this decision, and he was especially sympathetic when the coup was executed in the first week of December.

This coup appeared to be unusual as it deposed an ethnic Fijian Government that had been elected by 80 per cent of indigenous Fijian voters and had complied with the power-sharing provisions of the 1997 constitution by appointing FLP members into its cabinet. The military also challenged and eventually undermined the influence and authority of Fijian chiefs, and the predominantly ethnic Fijian Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma. The military phased out the GCC, which had stood at the apex of the Fijian Administration for over one and a half centuries. Quite surprisingly, even though deposed Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase strongly condemned the coup, apart from a number of small pro-democracy protests in Suva and Lami neighbourhoods, there was no major disruption in the city. The military acted swiftly and firmly against those who protested the coup. Many civil society leaders were detained and tortured, and a number of civilians were killed.

Unlike the clandestine coups of 1987 and the putsch of 2000 followed by the actual military takeover, the 2006 coup followed weeks and months of a public 'arm wrestle' covered by the media between the elected prime minister and the military commander. Qarase had unsuccessfully tried to replace Bainimarama, and to have the killing of four rebel soldiers in 2000 investigated. He also had spoken about downsizing the military. Bainimarama justified the overthrow of the democratically elected government as a 'clean up coup' to address perceived governmental corruption and racism. Suva residents, fearful of further strife, had begun to batten down but were assured by the military commander that the security forces were in control, and they were safe.

My family and I returned in early February 2007 to find the capital in its usual bustle. However, it was not long before I found that there were deep divisions between those who supported the coup and those who opposed it. It was apparent that a majority of Indo-Fijians and other minorities supported Bainimarama while indigenous Fijians were dismayed by what the military had done. Among academic colleagues, some argued that the 2006 coup was a 'good coup'. Trade unionists and FLP were divided because Mahendra Chaudry joined the military-backed interim government. The Christian clergy was divided, with non-Catholic denominations perceiving the Catholic Church as supporting the coup. Among civil society organisations including NGOs a rift emerged between those who advocated human rights and those who upheld social justice.

The 2006 coup continues to divide people today. There are those who recognise Bainimarama as a legitimate leader after his electoral victories in 2014 and 2018, and there are others who question if Fiji is truly democratic.⁴⁷ Since 2009, Suva, like other municipalities in Fiji, ceased having an elected city council and mayor accountable to local residents; instead it is governed by a central city administrator appointed by the minister of local government. There is a groundswell of antagonism towards the imposed 2013 constitution that, among other things, reinstated immunity to military personnel involved in coups, and the provision that gives the military primary responsibility to ensure the security and wellbeing of all Fijians. This ascendancy of the military as the final arbiter of civilian social, economic and political dynamics does not provide any guarantee that Suva and Fiji will be free of military intrusion in civil politics in the future. Whether the 2006 coup is the 'coup to end all coups' remains to be seen.

Over the last 30 years, I have witnessed Suva becoming the epicentre of political instability and military coups. The capital has experienced peaceful and not so peaceful demonstrations as well as outright interethnic violence, arson, looting and damage of business premises and private homes. Mobs roamed its streets. The city's daily weekday business routine of the opening of banks, supermarkets, cafes and restaurants, retail and wholesale outlets, factories and garages, the Suva market and bus station were disrupted. Media outlets were compelled to close their doors as soldiers took over. Like other residents I have been alarmed and outraged

47 Mary Chapman and Graham Leung, 'Is Fiji still a democracy?', *Fiji Times*, 9 October 2021.

on seeing armed soldiers patrolling the streets with the police force becoming an unarmed appendage of the military. The city was silenced. Residents lived fearful lives behind closed doors.

However, the capital city has remained the social, economic and political hub of the nation where the big-wigs from government, corporations and international agencies rub shoulders in board rooms and cocktail circuits. Social inequality and the presence of the poor is also evident in the homeless street dwellers as well as in the mushrooming informal settlements where 20 per cent of Suva residents live. There are certain things that do not change!

I have been a member of a number of NGOs including FANG and CCE, and after my return from Wellington, I have worked closely with the Ecumenical Centre for Education, Research and Advocacy and the Peoples Community Network and have seen firsthand how people have coped with the difficulties that followed each one of the coups. Suva has experienced natural disasters such as cyclones and, in the post-Independence era, man-made disasters in the form of military coups. The city residents have picked themselves up and rebuilt their lives after each disastrous coup. And in doing so have ensured that Suva regained its vibrant resilience as the central hub of social, economic and political dynamics of Fiji.

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