

6. The Fiji military and ethno-nationalism: Analyzing the paradox

Stewart Firth and Jon Fraenkel

Despite three years of regular public criticism and threats by the commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), Commodore Voreqe ('Frank') Bainimarama, most people in Fiji during the period 2002–06 thought he would not overthrow the government of Laisenia Qarase. The rank and file in the RFMF were solidly ethnic Fijian and had backed Qarase's SDL party in large numbers. Bainimarama had put Qarase into office, and the RFMF had initially backed the latter's 'blueprint' for lifting Fijian living standards. It seemed odd that Bainimarama could so change his political tune. The commander himself repeatedly said that there would be no coup, and that he was and would remain a loyal servant of the 1997 constitution. When the RFMF seized power, on 5 December 2006, it left many licking their intellectual wounds, and wondering how and why what was the hitherto seemingly impossible had come to pass. Yet few subsequently sought, with the benefit of hindsight, to revisit that earlier experience, and to ask why the expectations of so many – that the constitutional order would survive – were so shattered. This chapter seeks to fill that gap.

How was the 99 per cent ethnic Fijian RFMF transformed from the key instrument of ethno-nationalist Fijian rule in 1987 into its nemesis in 2006? How was a relatively junior officer, swiftly elevated through the ranks and becoming commander of the RFMF only in March 1999, able to avoid a mutiny, consolidate officer support and establish a loyal base amongst the rank and file? Why was the reaction from the rank and file, who voted for the governing Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) in large numbers in 2006, so muted? The answers lie in the hidden legacy of the top-level power struggles of the 1990s; in the fraught experience during and after the 2000 coup; and, above all, in the distinct ways through which the Qarase administration and the military sought to consolidate their influence by placating discontent or eliminating rivals.

In theory, the Qarase government was the employer of Commodore Bainimarama, and paymaster of the RFMF. In theory, it could sack the commander and replace him with someone willing to accept the orders of the democratically elected government. In reality, the RFMF had, by late 2006, long since become a law unto itself and ceased to recognize government authority. The commander was convinced he knew better than the Prime Minister what was best for the people of Fiji. As Bainimarama said at the end of 2005 – after a furious row with the

Minister and CEO of the Ministry of Home Affairs – ‘The Military now is on its own and is not answerable to anyone’.¹ Under these circumstances, Qarase, the newly re-elected prime minister, had little alternative but to deal cautiously with the RFMF in the hope that the military commander would come to accept the verdict of the election.

In October 2006 Qarase made a ham-fisted attempt to replace Bainimarama with a more congenial commander, the only effect of which was to hasten the demise of the elected government. The coup so often threatened by Bainimarama eventually happened, and the RFMF resumed the control of the country that it had yielded to Qarase’s government in 2000. The infrastructure of military takeover quickly appeared on the streets as armed soldiers manned checkpoints with red and white painted metal barriers. Familiar official advice followed, telling people to continue with their normal lives. Bainimarama said ‘the Government and all those empowered to make decisions in constitutional democracy are unable to make decisions to save people from destruction’.² With the choice being between destruction at the hands of the elected government or salvation by the RFMF, he had had no choice but to take over.

The military tradition in Fiji is strong. Fiji’s military was known as the Fiji Defence Force when war broke out in 1939 and was renamed the Fiji Military Forces in 1942, when Fijian soldiers entered active service fighting the Japanese invaders in the Solomon Islands. Peak strength in 1943 was over 8,500, of whom 6,371 were indigenous Fijians. The wartime performance of the Fijians inspired lavish praise from the British and Americans, of the kind expressed by the historian of the World War II Fiji Military Forces, R.A. Howlett. ‘The flower of the country’s manhood was assembled and trained and then sent into conflict against a cunning and vigorous foe’, he wrote. ‘They took their place and were not found wanting. They fought valiantly and met success with equanimity, adversity with fortitude, and death with honour. They lived up to the proud traditions of a warrior race and by their deeds left a heritage for the generations yet to come’.³ That judgement reflected the Fijian soldiers’ view of themselves as the modern representatives of a warrior race, and the esteem in which they were held by the Fijian people. More soldiering followed in the 1950s, when a Fiji battalion with the motto ‘Hunt and Kill’ served for four years with the British against communist insurgents in the Malayan emergency. Yet Fiji’s regular military force when the British left in 1970 was but 200 strong and played little more than a symbolic role in national affairs. Its best days seemed far behind; if it had remained in that role, the course of events in Fiji would have been quite different.

Why, then, did the military forces become dominant in independent Fiji? Nation-building by the country’s first independent government played a minor part. The force grew modestly in the early 1970s. Fiji’s first prime minister, Ratu

Mara, enhanced the size of the force somewhat by giving it a nation-building role and by establishing a trade training school, a rural development unit and the RFMF naval squadron. Peacekeeping for the United Nations did most to stimulate the growth of the force. Tens of thousands of Fijians have served in foreign theatres in almost thirty years of peacekeeping. Solid links were forged with counterparts in the British, Australian and New Zealand defence forces. The overall effect has been to boost the morale of officers and troops – especially when they are on operational duty – and to professionalize the RFMF as a military institution. Typically, Fiji's leading military officers have been better educated and more articulate than many of Fiji's civilian politicians.

The expansion of Fiji's military

The force grew from 800 to 1,300 in 1978 in order to provide a light battalion of 500 to the UN. When 2FIR, the 2nd Fiji Infantry battalion, went to the Sinai in 1982 the force grew to 1,800. By 1986, following further UN requests, the force had grown to 2,200. The RFMF's involvement in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was initially intended to last no longer than a year or so but continued uninterrupted until the end of 2002. Over the 22 years of the UNIFIL deployment, south Lebanon was temporarily home to thousands of Fijian soldiers, some of whom witnessed the Qana incident of April 1996, when an Israeli artillery barrage killed about 100 Lebanese civilians.⁴ The commitment to the Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai continues a quarter of a century later. The Fiji battalion there has a headquarters company and three infantry companies, with a total strength of 329, and maintains a number of remote sites in the region, six checkpoints and five observation posts. Over the 30 years since 1978, around 25,000 Fiji soldiers have served on overseas peacekeeping missions, bringing home an estimated US\$300 million. In recent years the Iraq War has brought more income to Fiji from the 1,000 or so Fijians who have served as escorts, guards and drivers for companies in the business of privatised security in war zones such as Global Strategies, Triple Canopy, ArmorGroup International, DynCorp International, Control Solutions and Sandline International. According to Lieutenant Colonel Mosese Tikoitoga, a former UN peacekeeper, 'our economy has no choice but to build armies, and it's a good business. There are few other foreign investments. If we didn't do this, our people would be in the street creating havoc'.⁵

The uniqueness of Fiji's peacekeeping contributions lies in the fact that Fiji is a microstate with one of the world's smallest military forces. Fiji's sister forces in the Sinai, for example, are Australia, Colombia, France, Hungary, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Uruguay and the USA, all countries that vastly exceed Fiji in population and resources. Peacekeeping has taken Fijian soldiers in small numbers to Croatia, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kuwait, and Fiji has 220 troops in Iraq, where they serve as guards for UN personnel and facilities in Baghdad

and Erbil under the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI).⁶ Fijians have served in larger numbers in regional peacekeeping missions in East Timor, Bougainville and Solomon Islands. Fijians were in Bougainville as part of a regional peacekeeping force following the end of hostilities there in 1997, and have served in East Timor under a succession of UN missions since 2000. They participated in the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2003, though Australia cut funding for the Fijian operation following the 2006 coup in Fiji.⁷

Table 1: Republic of Fiji Military Forces, 2004-5

Regular Force (2005)	Approved	Current
Headquarters RFMF	150	126
HQ Land Force Command	386	347
RFMF Navy	336	330
RFMF Engineers Regiment	500	500
3FIR	958	942
Force Training Group	201	191
Logistics Support Unit	390	396
2FIR (MFO in the Sinai)	336	336
TOTAL	3257	3137
Territorial/Reserve Force (2004)	Approved	Current
4th Battalion (Nadi)	500	97
5th Battalion (Lautoka)	500	148
6th Battalion (Nausori)	500	131
7th Battalion (Northern Division)	500	134
8th Battalion (Suva)	500	158
Navy	100	99
TOTAL	2600	767

Source; Ministry of Home Affairs & Immigration, 'National Security White Paper: A Safe and Prosperous Fiji', 2006.

The 1987 coup wrought a permanent change in the role of the RFMF in Fiji's political life. The size of the force almost trebled, to 6,000 – including the reservists who were later deactivated – and the proportion of the government budget devoted to the military forces vastly increased. The force fell to 3,571 by 1996 and the RFMF has maintained slightly below this level of strength since then (see Table 1). But the 1987 coup taught that the RFMF could easily assume control of the country if the military leadership wanted to. With a carefully preserved monopoly on the use of armed force, it was easily large enough to overwhelm the government or suppress any emergent insurrectionist group.

The subsequent career of Sitiveni Rabuka, the originator of Fiji's coup culture, tends to obscure the significance of the first post-coup years, 1987–1990. Under Rabuka, the army intervened not once but twice, transforming what might have been a temporary lapse in constitutionality following the first coup into a permanent change of political direction. Fiji became a republic and was expelled from the Commonwealth; the prefix 'Royal' was removed from 'Fiji Military

Forces'; military men occupied key positions in government; the military strictly policed Methodist Sunday observance; a security decree gave the military extraordinary powers over those suspected of disloyalty; soldiers arrested and detained journalists. The military forces absorbed an ever-increasing proportion of the national budget – rising from \$8 million to \$38 million in three years – while educated, highly skilled citizens, mostly of Indian origin, left Fiji in their thousands, depriving it of the human capital that had once made its government and economy exceptional for the South Pacific. People had been leaving Fiji in moderate numbers since independence but the flood that started with Rabuka's coup – 66,000 by 1994 – has never stopped, each coup convincing more to leave.

The shifting constitutional position

A 1989 submission by senior military officers to the Manueli Committee, which was charged with preparing a draft constitution, reveals a shift in military thinking that did not go away. The officers talked of Fiji needing a 'very strong and firm government even if we have to temporarily sacrifice Constitutional Government until all remedial, corrective and upgrading actions are finalized in favour of the indigenous people of this country'.⁸ Such a strong government, in their opinion, should remain in power for 15 years. The officers did not get their way. Fiji adopted a new constitution in 1990 and held an election in 1992. But the seeds of future military interventions into politics had been sown, and the military had displayed its impatience with the compromises of democratic government.

Rabuka left the military forces, and was selected by Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) as leader of the *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT) party in preference to Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's wife, the high chief of Burebasaga, Ro Lady Lala Mara.⁹ At the helm of this new mainstream indigenous party he won two elections, remaining prime minister until 1999, while Ratu Mara was selected by the chiefs as President of the republic. Schisms emerged within the SVT, leading eventually to the formation of the Fijian Association Party, with Ratu Mara's clandestine blessing. Power struggles in the mid-1990s were dramatized as a feud between Ratu Mara, figuring as the archetypal Polynesian chief, and the 'commoner' Rabuka, as the self-made Melanesian big man.¹⁰ In office, Rabuka's thinking about the primacy of indigenous rights moderated, and his government commissioned a review of the constitution. The review was 'a fundamental, wide ranging exercise', covering the composition and functioning of parliament, the electoral system, 'the relationship between the executive and legislative branches, institutions of government and the mechanism for improving accountability and transparency, the administration of justice, citizenship, ethnic and social justice issues, rights of communities and groups, the operation of local government bodies, public revenue and expenditure, emergency powers and a

Bill of Rights'.¹¹ The 1997 constitution adopted by parliament was equally comprehensive.

However detailed and wide-ranging the provisions of the 1997 constitution might have been, no constitutional issue mattered more than control of the military forces, though this was less obvious at the time than it is now. As Fiji's 1997 Defence White Paper put it,

[the] starting point in any free democracy is that the military is one of the functions of the central national government and must be the servant of its policies and priorities. The ethics of the profession of arms must always include, as it does in all established democracies, total loyalty to the government in power and must reject as unacceptable any active political endeavours by servicemen either collectively or individually to act otherwise than as directed by the government.¹²

The constitution-makers thought the same way. They wanted to return Fiji permanently to Westminster-style parliamentary supremacy, and to subordinate the military forces to the democratically elected government as had been the case before 1987 – and they assumed this would happen. And so they included the usual Westminster safeguards: The President is the commander-in-chief of the military forces (Section 87), he appoints the military commander 'subject to the control of the minister', and parliament may make laws relating to the military (Section 112).

Bainimarama and the link with the Mara dynasty

In 1999, in accordance with these requirements, the Fiji government under Rabuka appointed army chief-of-staff and former navy commander Captain Bainimarama as the new military commander.¹³ His name was suggested by Brigadier General Ratu Epeli Ganilau, who was resigning as commander in order to contest – unsuccessfully as it turned out – as a candidate of the newly formed Veitokani ni Lewenivanua Vakarisito (VLV – Christian Democratic Party). The VLV was a chrysalis for Fijians aggrieved at Rabuka having usurped the leadership of the chief's party and having compromised with the Indians. It gained the backing of the Methodist Church, called for a ban on Sunday trading and opposed the 1997 constitution's concessions to multiracialism. The VLV's core support was in the Tovata confederacy, including Lau, where President Ratu Mara's daughter, Adi Koila Mara, won a seat, and Macuata, where his illegitimate son, Poseci Bune, took the Fijian communal seat. It was the VLV's 19.4 per cent of the Fijian vote, and its strength in the marginal urban constituencies, that sank Rabuka's SVT.¹⁴ Ratu Epeli Ganilau, although unsuccessful in his election bid in Rabuka's home constituency of West Cakaudrove, was a contender for his father's Tui Cakau title, the highest in Cakaudrove (on Vanua Levu). His wife was another of Ratu Mara's daughters.

Many suspected that Ratu Mara's dynastic ambitions included both gaining control over the top Fijian chiefly titles and maintaining a firm grip over the senior command of the Fiji military forces.¹⁵

As President, Ratu Mara was the commander-in-chief of the RFMF. He sympathized with the Labour-led People's Coalition government that won the election in 1999 – probably more due to contempt for Rabuka than enthusiasm for Labour policies. But the marriage between the Mara dynasty and the People's Coalition government was not sufficiently strong at that point for Ratu Epeli to accept an appointment through the Senate as minister of home affairs.¹⁶ Instead, the post went to the less-than-convincing Jioji Uluinakauvadra. Out of the limelight, the RFMF remained quiet. But it was well known in Fijian circles that Bainimarama, like Ratu Epeli, was a 'Mara man'. Ratu Epeli was later to describe Bainimarama's performance as head of the military as 'excellent'.¹⁷ Bainimarama reciprocated after the 2006 coup by appointing members of the Mara dynasty to key positions – including Ratu Epeli Ganilau, first as minister for Fijian affairs and later as minister for defence, national security and immigration in the interim government; and Ratu Epeli Nailatikau (Adi Koila Mara's husband) as minister of foreign affairs.

The political turmoil of 2000 focused attention more on splits in the military than on control of the military. About 30 rebel soldiers from the 80-strong Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit (CRW) directly supported George Speight's 'civilian coup', but they were soon eclipsed by an army intervention, which was widely welcomed for restoring stability and returning the country to civilian government. When the military took control on 29 May, Bainimarama said it did so 'with much reluctance'.¹⁸ And when he announced the new cabinet to the press early in July, people saw a military stepping back in favour of a civilian interim government, rather than a military commander acting as kingmaker.¹⁹ Following the army mutiny in November 2000, when rebel soldiers conspired to kill Bainimarama, it was he who announced that 'there would be no more coup d'états in Fiji'.²⁰ The *Fiji Daily Post* went as far as naming Bainimarama 'Man of the Year' at the end of 2000, on the grounds that he had stood fast against those who broke the law.

Yet many people overlooked the extent to which Bainimarama had directed events – from abrogating the constitution and ensuring that Ratu Mara stood aside as President, to determining the way in which a new government would be appointed and who would head it. In effect – though few said so at the time – Bainimarama had conducted his own coup in 2000. While Bainimarama took key decisions behind the scenes, the military presented an acceptable face to the world through its articulate and presentable spokesmen, Lieutenant Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini and Major Howard Politini; both appeared regularly on TV news bulletins to explain developments. Tarakinikini, in particular, was the

hero of many of those who opposed Speight after the May 2000 coup, until he fell out with the commander and left the country. News reports indicated that the RFMF favoured a modernist political trajectory, offering solutions, for example, to the vexatious land leasing controversy, and wanting an orientation that might elevate ethnic Fijians from their disadvantaged economic state.²¹ This led the RFMF to warmly endorse Qarase's 'Blueprint for the Protection of Fijian and Rotuman Rights and Interests and the Advancement of their Development' presented to the GCC on 13 June 2000.²²

The November 2000 army mutiny, when disgruntled CRW soldiers made a second attempt to take over Fiji, appears to have profoundly affected the senior command in the RFMF. By then, George Speight was in detention on Nukulau Island but the instigators of the mutiny were determined to finish what he had started by killing the commander, deposing the interim government he had installed, and replacing it with a strongly pro-Fijian regime that would restore the political influence of Bau and the Kubuna confederacy in the affairs of the nation.²³ The mutiny failed. Eight soldiers were killed and 28 were wounded, with the government declaring a curfew that lasted 36 hours. In the years that followed, Bainimarama would not forget the attempt on his life and would vow to ensure that those responsible were brought to justice and not given lenient treatment.²⁴ The ideology that inspired the mutineers of 2000 – with its appeal not only to the special rights of indigenous Fijians but also to the cause of one group of Fijian chiefs over another – came to be anathema to him. Meantime, however, he talked sympathetically of improving the lot of indigenous Fijians and saw the restoration of the Chaudhry government as a threat to national security. In an affidavit to the High Court in 2001, the military commander said the RFMF believed that 'in order to uphold the rule of law, maintain the credibility of the RFMF and ensure national security the nation cannot be allowed to revert to the pre-19 May 2000 status and must be projected forward as directed by the President'.²⁵ When the courts upheld the constitution, against the wishes of the commander, the RFMF hoped that the President would not opt for fresh elections, but restore the 1999–2000 parliament – although with an ethnic Fijian, Dr Tupeni Baba, replacing Labour leader Mahendra Chaudhry as prime minister.²⁶ It was the decision in favour of an election that, above all, opened the schism between Bainimarama and the man he intended only to serve as a technocrat and facilitator, Laisenia Qarase. As Bainimarama envisaged the post-coup future of Fiji, Qarase would prepare the way for a restoration of parliamentary democracy and then depart the stage.

Divergent trajectories

The pressures arising from the 2000 coup, and even more importantly, the March 2001 court ruling, led Bainimarama and Qarase in different and increasingly opposed directions. Qarase's 'Blueprint' and most of his interim government's

policies were aimed at placating indigenous discontent, and avoiding a recurrence of the Speight uprising by appeasement. By winning the 2001 election, Qarase gained political legitimacy in his own right, and lost the need to be beholden to his patron. Qarase's new SDL party won more seats than the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) – 31 to 27 – but, in order to gain a parliamentary majority, Qarase turned to the six elected members of the ultra-nationalist Conservative Alliance–Matanitu Vanua (CAMV) party (one of them George Speight, who had been elected from prison), some of Bainimarama's bitterest enemies. The CAMV drew its support from Vanua Levu and northern Tailevu, precisely the areas where the RFMF had firmly clamped down in the wake of the May 2000 coup. Having gone to the election promising to deliver amnesty for George Speight and for the army officers who had conspired against their commander in the mutiny of November 2000, the CAMV now sat in government, a permanent affront to Bainimarama, the man who had been acclaimed for saving Fiji from just such people the previous year. Worse than that, the vice-president of the SDL was Naitasiri paramount chief, the Qaranivalu Ratu Inoke Takiveikata, who was charged with involvement in the 2000 army mutiny and was later to be convicted.

For Bainimarama, the exigencies of consolidating influence in the RFMF, and decisively eliminating those forces that had backed the mutiny of November 2000, suggested a quite different course of action. Loyal officers had suppressed dissident chiefs and villagers in mid-2000, and critics within the armed forces had been dismissed, sent on leave or consigned to token jobs under the commander's close gaze at military headquarters in Berkley Crescent. In the wake of the 2001 election, Qarase's government was politically tied to reinforcing and elevating into office precisely those forces that the commander felt he had to suppress and bring to justice. As Bainimarama told the UN General Assembly in 2007, 'a prominent High Chief connected to the ruling SDL Party incited a mutiny within the Military, and attempts were made, not only to remove me, but also to eliminate me'.²⁷ Relations between commander and Prime Minister deteriorated steadily from the time of the 2001 election. Bainimarama was reported as asking Qarase why he had stood for election when he was only an interim prime minister, and as calling on Qarase to resign if the Supreme Court ruled against him in 2003 on the issue of sharing power with the FLP as required by the constitution.²⁸

One issue dramatized Fiji's fundamental problem of civilian control of the military: The government was determined not to extend Bainimarama's contract as head of the military when it came up for renewal in February 2004 – the commander was equally determined to stay for another five years. In the end the military won. Bainimarama refused to accept that the minister for home affairs could replace him and directly confronted the permanent secretary of Home Affairs, Jeremaia Waqanisau, over the issue. The government not only conceded Bainimarama's demand for another five years at the head of the armed

forces, it also removed Waqanisau from his position and sent him to Beijing as Fiji ambassador. At the same time, Bainimarama purged the top ranks of the RFMF of officers he considered disloyal. They were, former chief-of-staff Colonel George Kadavulevu, together with colonels Alfred Tuatoko, Samuela Raduva and Akuila Buadromo, and commander Timoci Koroi.²⁹ They claimed Bainimarama had urged them to arrange a coup, then demanded a personal pledge of loyalty. When they pledged loyalty only to the RFMF, he asked them to resign.

The new acting chief-of-staff was Lieutenant Colonel Jone Baledrokadroka. He had been in charge of storming the Kalabu District School in 2000 to arrest the fleeing remnants of Speight loyalists after they had left the parliamentary complex, and he was seen as a Bainimarama loyalist. In 2006, Baledrokadroka became land forces commander, but within three days he too fell victim to the Commodore, who relieved him of his duties after accusing him of conspiring with other senior officers to take over the military. 'There was an instant when he threatened my life', Bainimarama said. 'He threatened to shoot me but I hope that threat will have gone away by now.'³⁰ Rather than risk the disloyalty of another land force commander, Bainimarama then appointed two chiefs-of-staff to occupy that position under his direct supervision. They were Lieutenant Colonel Pita Driti and Captain Esala Teleni, and both were to benefit considerably from their commander's patronage after the 2006 coup. Driti was Bainimarama's choice to become Fiji ambassador to Malaysia (though Malaysia declined to accept him) and Teleni, newly promoted from captain to commodore, became police commissioner, ensuring RFMF control of the police.

All attempts by the Qarase government to rein in the military proved futile, partly because the commander proved able to exert strong influence through military appointees in the Office of the President. Nothing about the government pleased the commander, who considered it his duty to campaign publicly against the Prime Minister and in particular against the Promotion of Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity (RTU) Bill introduced into parliament in 2005. The RFMF responded with hostility to official attempts to reform it. The RFMF offered little cooperation to a 2004 national security and defence review and rejected outright its principal recommendation, which was to halve the size of the force. The idea surfaced again in the government's 2006 National Security White Paper, though the re-elected Qarase government was quick to reassure the RFMF that it would not seek to reduce its size.³¹

The White Paper, reflecting the views of the Qarase government, argued that, while the military could support the police in times of unrest, it:

... can in itself be a threat to national security by interfering with the due processes of government as it did in 1987. The involvement of rogue elements in the military in the May 2000 coup, and the internal

insurrection at the military camp which resulted in a number of fatalities, has caused a loss of confidence in the military by the public, and the spate of exchanges between the military and the government, as recently reported in the media, is doing nothing to improve the image of the RFMF.

The White Paper recommended that the term of the commander be reduced from five years to three years, and added: 'This will also prevent the military as an organization from being associated with the persona of a commander, a situation which more often than not could result in the retardation of organizations'.³² Far from accepting government direction, the RFMF adopted Bainimarama's own strategic plan, which called for the force to 'maintain military capability to deter, respond and react to any contingency' and 'to maintain capability that responds effectively to internal crisis'.³³

Bainimarama came to see his original handover to civilian government in 2000 as having been conditional: 'As Military Commander, I played a key role in the handing over of executive authority back into civilian hands in the wake of the 2000 coup. This rested on a number of critical pre-conditions being met, in taking Fiji forward.' They were: That new elections be held; 'all of the perpetrators of the May 2000 coup, including the military rebels, would be prosecuted'; and that 'the 2000 coup would be publicly renounced as racially motivated'.³⁴ That conditional empowerment of Qarase and his interim cabinet by the RFMF was deemed a firm mandate, unlike that arising from popular endorsement at the polls. As for the 2001 and 2006 elections, both of which returned Qarase and the SDL to power, Bainimarama dismissed them as 'not credible' and 'characterised by massive rigging of votes'.³⁵ So too did Mahendra Chaudhry, whose FLP found itself with a similar share of seats at both elections (See Fraenkel, chapter 8, for an assessment of the accuracy or otherwise of these claims). Ratu Epeli Ganilau headed a new party in 2006, the National Alliance Party of Fiji, but it gained only 2.9 per cent of the national vote and not a single seat. In between the two elections, Ganilau had been chairman of the GCC, but had been removed after controversies about his moderate orientation. Ratu Epeli Nailatikau had been speaker of parliament, but lost that position after the May 2006 election. He had been nominated for an overseas diplomatic posting by the new Qarase government, until the December coup landed him the foreign affairs portfolio. Election-driven hostility to the incumbent government, coupled with a rapprochement driven, above all, by opposition to the RTU Bill, permitted the FLP, the Mara loyalists among the eastern chiefs, and the military to come together in support of yet another coup in Fiji.

Good governance by militarization

Bainimarama's ideological strategy for justifying his seizure of power has been to embrace the good governance agenda, disown preferential treatment for Fijians, and argue for multiracialism. As he told a gathering at the Lautoka Chamber of Commerce in October 2007, Fiji's leaders needed to 'accept the fact that the vast majority of Fiji's people aspire for governance that is characterised by stability, transparency and accountability.' Fiji needed to become 'a more progressive and a truly democratic nation in which its leaders at all levels emphasise national unity, racial harmony and the social and economic advancement of all communities regardless of race or ethnic origin.' Bainimarama's fellow officers sing the same tune. Chief-of-staff Lieutenant Colonel Mosese Tikoitoga told *Fijilive* that the SDL government had wanted to lift indigenous Fijian standards 'by giving Fijians giveaways, giving them preferential treatment in all government policies, preferential treatment in scholarships, and preferential treatment in the way they can get loans from the Fiji Development Bank', but the only result had been to make elite Fijians richer. 'We are telling them to work harder and they will not get handouts. They have to sweat because the bible tells they have to sweat first to get their food.'³⁶

The 2006 coup entailed a considerable militarization of government. Military patronage gave senior officers a direct personal stake in the new order. With traditional officer-training in Australia and the USA barred because of the coup, the interim government sent officers to India and China. Bainimarama consolidated power by dismissing numerous public servants and heads of government boards and organizations, and giving the military direct control of the police, prisons, immigration, justice, the postal service and fisheries. He ensured that a military appointee was in charge of airports, and posted others to diplomatic positions. In the words of land force chief-of-staff Mosese Tikoitoga, Fiji's 28-member military council advises the interim prime minister on 'anything and everything', including the declaration of states of emergency.³⁷ The military council, he said, had advised the government to reintroduce the public emergency decree in September 2007 'after their intelligence reports showed that some people were influencing the increasing public statements against the military and the government'.³⁸ Senior public servants drawn from the RFMF served on the council, such as Police Commissioner Commodore Esala Teleni, immigration director commander Viliame Naupoto and Justice permanent secretary Lieutenant Colonel Pio Tikoduadua; while other key council members were Ratu Mara's son Colonel Tevita Mara, the commanding officer of the 3rd Battalion Fiji Infantry Regiment, the land force commander, Colonel Pita Driti, and the commanding officer of the force training group, Colonel Inia Seruiratu. Reacting to criticism of the militarization of the civil service, Viliame Naupoto said:

Military officers should be accommodated into nation building like me right now. I feel the military has been used too much like a tied watchdog with a tag return to barracks after the job and 2000 was an example ... That is what the Constitution says and [it] was a bad use of military officers ... Military officers have proven they can come in and be assimilated into society and do well and you just have to look at senior military officers who have held posts to prove that. Military people are useful and it is my answer to killing the coup culture. If you keep using the military as a watchdog the chain might break and bite people.³⁹

In addition to the top-level post-2006 coup military appointments to the commanding heights of the state apparatus, there was a longer-run trend towards absorption of former officers into the civil service. After the 2000 coup, former soldiers were demobilized into the police force and the ministry of works and energy.⁴⁰ For many years, reservists had been positioned throughout the ministries and state-owned enterprises, and particularly in those with a security role. The growing economic impact of the RFMF, as a vehicle for training and mobilizing Fijian labour, was cherished by the commander in his 2008 annual speech to the rank and file. Pointing to the global trend towards 'contracting out of defence and security operations', Bainimarama extolled the virtues of Homelink, the Port Security Unit and other such military-brokered domestic employment agencies, hoping that they would become 'an extended arm of the RFMF in the execution of its defence, security and nation building occupation'.⁴¹ Such activities also presented possibilities for accommodating the regular RFMF busting of budgeted spending limits, as, for example, when soldiers after the 2006 coup secured for the RFMF a lucrative \$320,000 contract supplying security services at Suva's port.⁴² When challenged about the award of that tender, the commander responded that the decision had been taken by the Ports Terminal Limited board and had been transparent and based on merit, omitting to mention that the board had been purged and restructured in the wake of the coup.⁴³ To consolidate the RFMF's expanding influence in core parts of the civil service, Brigadier-General Timoci Lesi Natuva was appointed as the new minister for works and transport as part of a cabinet reshuffle in early 2008.

The military overspent its budget in every year from 2003-2007 – in total by \$118 million over the five year period.⁴⁴ Total spending reached \$100 million in 2006, well ahead of the budgeted \$76.5 million, and some of this money was used to campaign against the government. When Telecom Fiji paid the RFMF \$1.5 million to install telephone satellite stations in villages, the commander drew on those funds to pay for his truth and justice campaign against the Qarase government's RTU Bill.⁴⁵ The pattern continued after the 2006 coup, but without the earlier restraints. 'We did bust our budget', admitted land force chief-of-staff Lieutenant Colonel Mosese Tikoitoga, 'but that was a national necessity for us'.

The army had responded by cutting rations, severing pay for reservists and cancelling training programs, he explained, but admitting also that shortages of funds had meant that 'we had to go borrow all the government vehicles'.⁴⁶ Such belt-tightening did not extend to the senior command. In mid-2008, Bainimarama received \$184,740 payout from Finance Minister Mahendra Chaudhry for leave not taken extending back to 1978.⁴⁷ Around 40 other senior officers also received substantial sums in backpay.⁴⁸ For the junior ranks, rewards were not quite so generous, but – as the economy slackened and urban jobs were lost under the impact of the coup – even salaries for the rank-and-file contrasted favourably with those received elsewhere in the civil service. In total, the RFMF staffing establishment received a 39 percent increase in salaries. Funds budgeted for the Ministry of Health were allegedly raided to pay for the military's budget blowout.⁴⁹

When the commander handed the presidency back to Ratu Josefa Iloilo in early January 2007, the President's 'roadmap' included a commitment to 'facilitate all legal protection and immunity, both criminal and civil, to the Commander, Officers and all members of the RFMF'. Under the heading of 'Accountability and Good Governance', the 'roadmap' was to take 'into account the aspirations of the military and the Interim Government'.⁵⁰ The 1990 constitution had given an 'overall responsibility [to] the Republic of Fiji Military Forces to ensure at all times the security, defence and well being of Fiji and its peoples'.⁵¹ Prior to the 2006 coup, the commander had claimed that this was still in force, despite the subsequent introduction of the 1997 constitution. Now less troubled by those constitutional restraints, the military claimed for itself an ever-expanding role in such activities as 'nation-building', disaster relief, 'maritime research', 'youth training' and 'infrastructure development'.⁵² Despite this expanded domestic role, Lieutenant Colonel Mosese Tikoitoga still claimed in October 2007 that there were 'over 10,000' reservists able to go abroad on peacekeeping missions.⁵³ Two weeks later he acknowledged that the RFMF was stretched, and that the rapid promotion of junior officers to fill the gaps left by those who joined the civil service meant 'we have lost a lot of mentoring with our younger officers'.⁵⁴

Those civil society organizations that supported the 2006 coup out of hatred for the Qarase government lauded the military's actions as harbingers of a corruption-free and multiracial Fiji. Their vehicle was the 'National Council for Building a Better Fiji' (NCBBF), established by John Samy and other ex-Asian Development Bank consultants at the behest of Mahendra Chaudhry. For the more moderate participants, however, the autonomy of the NCBBF's deliberations was critical to their objectives. Proceedings got off to an inauspicious start after the initial 'training' exercise took place at the RFMF camp, and when the commander declared himself co-chair along with the Catholic Archbishop.⁵⁵ Undeterred, participating civil society activists pressed ahead, insisting that the

NCBBF would provide an 'exit strategy' for the commander and applauding the NCBBF inclusion of deliberations centred on the 'role of the military' in fostering Fiji's 'coup culture'.⁵⁶ In this the commander happily acquiesced, clearly perceiving an opportunity to further entrench the RFMF's role in the governance of Fiji.

The divergence between those motley civil society activists and the RFMF/interim government participants on the NCBBF became increasingly apparent. John Samy emphasized both his opposition to the coup and the inclusive nature of the NCBBF proceedings, insisting that seats at the negotiating table remained vacant awaiting Qarase's SDL party and the Methodist Church, should they choose to participate. Bainimarama, by contrast, told the media that 'if anybody with Qarase-like policies comes in [to government], the charter will automatically remove them'.⁵⁷ Former police chief Isikia Savua, who had once been army chief-of-staff, was commissioned by the NCBBF to write a report on the RFMF. This contained proposals for a new role for RFMF soldiers to 'clear bushes and plough the land with their machines for the villagers to plant cassava' and for a 'white water navy to operate within the reefs and monitor *qoliqoli* or fishing grounds'. But after objections to his participation – probably because of Savua's seeking of a position in Speight's post-2000 coup government – he was unceremoniously dropped by the NCBBF technical secretariat.⁵⁸ Savua responded by telling the media that the proposed 'People's Charter' was similar to the military's post-1987 plan, anticipating that it would 'contain the prescription that the military wants subsequent governments to follow'.⁵⁹

Something of Savua's concept remained in the draft People's Charter released in August 2008. In the 'new dawn', 'new day' and 'new way' envisaged for Fiji the military was not going to return to barracks, a predictable recommendation from a charter co-signed by the military commander. Instead, the military's role would be developmental as it moved closer to the people and realized its 'professional, technical and social potential'.⁶⁰ The *Fiji Sun* called the charter 'a blueprint for military dictatorship'.⁶¹

Relations between the police force and the ministry of home affairs and the RFMF were also transformed in the wake of the 2006 coup. As previously mentioned, the commander had resisted his constitutional obligation to answer to the minister of home affairs from the 2000 coup onwards, and even engineered his own re-appointment against government opposition. He was convinced, moreover, that Qarase was strengthening the police force in order to weaken the military. Qarase was the prime minister who appointed the Australian Andrew Hughes as police commander, and under Hughes the police became a better disciplined and more professional organization with a strong sense of accountability to the elected government. The police had been run-down since the late 1980s and the military had therefore routinely usurped police functions.

The military did not like the resurgence of the police and complained that there had been a move under Qarase 'to replace the RFMF with a reinvigorated and robust police force'.⁶² In response, the military ensured that Hughes would not return to Fiji and appointed one of its own, Teleni, as police commander. By 2008 the military had engineered a major change in Fiji's bureaucratic arrangements by creating a new super-ministry of defence, national security and immigration under Ratu Epeli Ganilau. The ministry was to absorb more than 10 per cent of government outlays with a budget of \$157m, \$81.5m for the military and \$70.5m for the police. The key advance from Bainimarama's viewpoint has been to put military and police under one roof with the new minister (who is himself a former military commander), and to remove the military from the supervision of the minister for home affairs. When the 'Pro-poor and for Economic Growth' 2009 budget was released in November 2008, it included proposals for further a \$15 million hike in expenditure on the RFMF. Under Qarase, the accountability of the RFMF to the elected government atrophied; under Bainimarama, the military's accountability only to itself was to become enshrined in Fiji's administrative arrangements.

Conclusion: Military futures

Despite this, does Bainimarama enjoy the complete support of his officers and men? In his message to the troops in January 2007, Bainimarama spoke of the 'RFMF family' and linked it to family values, 'I would like to remind all service personnel of one of the core values of the RFMF which is the 'FAMILY'. As the larger RFMF family we need to re-look at our goals for our individual families and what we hope to achieve at the end of this year'.⁶³ The RFMF plays the role of a 'new *vanua*' for ordinary soldiers, whose first loyalties in former times would have been to their chiefs and provinces. It offers lucrative salaries to ethnic Fijians who might otherwise be trapped in their villages or be part of the urban and peri-urban unemployed. Many expected, at the height of the 2000 crisis, that the RFMF would splinter along provincial lines and disintegrate. In fact, the army cleverly avoided pitting province against province, sending soldiers from Tailevu to suppress villagers in Wainibuka (Tailevu) in July 2000, and soldiers from Naitasiri, Rewa and Tailevu to arrest Speight's supporters at the Kalabu School outside Suva (in Naitasiri). Since then, Bainimarama has worked assiduously to unify the RFMF, first by abolishing the CRW unit and, since, by repeatedly purging the force of dissident officers, and offering soldiers support with their problems and difficulties. The result is that when chiefs appealed to soldiers to return to their provinces after the RFMF takeover in 2006, most remained in the barracks (even if the reservists showed little enthusiasm for the call to duty). Tui Namosi Ratu Suliano Matanitobua was one of a number of chiefs who called on his people to abandon the RFMF:

To all the sons and daughters of Namosi serving in the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, please consider the vanua of Namosi, think well of the wellbeing of the people of your country and leave the barracks and discontinue the activities you are doing against our people ... Now is the time for you the sons and daughters of Namosi to leave the barracks and return home to your people.⁶⁴

The RFMF responded by forging ties with dissident lineages in Namosi, and establishing provincial groupings of soldiers to denounce the opposition to the coup, a strategy which had considerable success.

On the other hand, there is reason to doubt that Bainimarama has succeeded in convincing his force of the rightness of his multiracial and modernizing philosophy. Fijians have traditionally looked to the RFMF as their protectors in a multi-ethnic society and regarded their soldiering as an ethnic Fijian achievement – a view confirmed in both 1987 and 2000, when military intervention had the effect of returning the country to ethnic Fijian government. Yet in 2006 the mostly Fijian officers and soldiers were asked to believe that the country's problems arose in large part from the fact that the government was favouring Fijians too much. They were called upon to support a commander who denounced Fijian institutions such as the GCC and the Methodist Church as threats to national security, and who installed Fiji's leading Indo-Fijian politician as a senior minister in the new government. The military remained loyal to their commander, but there were also hints of discontent. Former Papua New Guinea defence force commander Jerry Singirok, who once had ties with the RFMF leadership, said he thought 'about 90% of the officers within the Fiji military force would like to see Fiji go back to democratic government' but were not in a position to influence events.⁶⁵ A number of key senior officers left the RFMF in the wake of the 2006 coup.⁶⁶ Coup opponent and human rights advocate Angie Heffernan also claimed that there was a danger of a split in the military.⁶⁷ The subtext was that a return to democratic government would mean a return to power of Qarase and his pro-Fijian SDL party, something many soldiers might be expected to welcome.

Bainimarama sees both himself and the nation as under siege from threats of all kinds. At the UN General Assembly he told the world that he had overthrown the Qarase government in 2006 with good reason:

There have been critics of that decision. In response to this criticism I say this. Fiji has a coup culture – a history of civilian or military coups executed in the interests of a few and based on nationalism, racism and greed. To remove this coup culture and to commit to democracy and the rule of law, policies which promote racial supremacy and further the interests of economic and social elites must be removed once and for all.⁶⁸

The coup culture was a threat, so was the Qarase government and its corruption, and so too were Australia and New Zealand because they failed to support his decisive intervention on behalf of good governance, the very thing they had demanded from Fiji for so long. As if those threats were not enough, the interim government claimed in November 2007 to have uncovered a plot to assassinate Bainimarama and a number of his ministers. Police arrested sixteen alleged conspirators, whose names read like a who's who of people against whom Bainimarama had a grudge: They included Naitasiri paramount chief, Qaranivalu, Ratu Inoke Takiveikata and his brother-in-law and former land force commander Jone Baledrokadroka, Colonel Metuisela Mua, SDL national director Peceli Kinivuwai, a number of soldiers from the disbanded CRW unit that had supported the coup in 2000, and the millionaire businessman Ballu Khan, a New Zealand citizen who suffered a skull fracture from injuries inflicted by the police after his arrest.⁶⁹

Whether the assassination plot was genuine, or whether Bainimarama orchestrated the arrests on trumped-up charges – as seems more likely – there is no doubt that he and his military force want to recast the constitutional order in a way that both justifies past and legitimizes future military intervention. When a general election occurs again and when an elected government takes office, the RFMF seems likely to continue to exercise power in the affairs of Fiji, maintaining the option to intervene again whenever it deems fit. When the civil society groupings that attached themselves to the NCBBF demanded, for the sake of true neutrality, that the constitutional position of the RFMF be under consideration in the deliberations, the army's top brass welcomed this, seeing it as an opportunity to establish permanent control over the ministry of home affairs. The elected civilian government that eventually returns to power will have a tough job carving out for itself anything like the autonomy of its predecessors.

ENDNOTES

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³ Howlett, R.A. 1948. *The History of the Fiji Military Forces 1939-1945*, Crown Agents, London, p.148.

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⁹ For more details, see Fraenkel, J. 2000. 'The Triumph of the Non-Idealist Intellectuals? An Investigation of Fiji's 1999 Election Results', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 46(1): 86–109.

- ¹⁰ Garrett, J. 1990. 'Uncertain Sequel: The Social and Religious Scene in Fiji Since the Coups', *The Contemporary Pacific*, 2 (1): 87–88.
- ¹¹ Lal, *Another Way*, p. 60.
- ¹² Parliament of Fiji, 1997. *Defending Fiji: Defence White Paper 1997*, Suva, 1997, par. 6:30.
- ¹³ Bainimarama was born 27 April 1954, on Bau island. He joined the Fiji navy on 26 July 1975. He went through the ranks from able seaman in August 1976 to midshipman in December of the same year. He was commissioned sub-lieutenant in 1978 and lieutenant six years later. He took his first command appointment in February 1985 when he assumed the command of the HMFS *Kikau*. He was promoted temporary lieutenant commander in early 1986, and later that year served a tour with the Multinational Forces and Observers in the Sinai. From 1988 to 1997 he held the post of commander, Fiji Naval Division and was promoted to commander and, in 1995, captain, which is equivalent to the military rank of a full colonel. He was appointed acting chief-of-staff in November 1997 and confirmed in that position in April 1998. He was named commander of the Army on 25 February 1999, to replace Brigadier General Ratu Epeli Ganilau, who resigned to enter politics. In 2002, Bainimarama assumed the temporary rank of rear admiral in an unsuccessful bid by the government to win him a United Nations post in Kuwait. (Source: Michael Field 'Bainimarama standoff a dangerous drama in Fiji', *Pacific Islands Report*, 1 January 2004.)
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- ³⁰ 'Fiji military chief says officer threatened his life', *The Fiji Times*, 15 January 2006.
- ³¹ 'Fiji Minister says no military cuts', *The Fiji Times*, 9 June 2006.
- ³² National Security White Paper *A Safe and Prosperous Fiji*, Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration, 2006.
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