

## 27. Reflections on Fiji's 'coup culture'<sup>1</sup>

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Discussions about Fiji's politics inevitably revolve around military coups. For many years Fiji was preoccupied with the turbulence and aftermath of the two coups in 1987. Then it was the 2000 coup that preoccupied people. Now we have another coup to analyze, to explore, to use as our current reference point; one which took place in December 2006. This installed a military-backed and led interim regime, with the purported mandate of the President.

The periodic upheavals we have experienced over the last twenty years have given rise to the perception that we have a 'coup culture'. Whether this 'coup culture' is something we can overcome is perhaps the greatest challenge facing us as a nation. The notion of a 'coup culture' suggests a pattern of instability that is repeatedly being played out. However, the latest coup has been portrayed as different from the previous ones; according to its supporters it is the coup that will end once and for all the 'coup cycle'.

### **Was the December 2006 coup 'different'?**

Previous coups were carried out in the name of indigenous rights and were broadly popular among ethnic Fijians and Fijian institutions (including the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) and the Methodist Church). The 2006 coup, by contrast, was carried out by the military in the name of good governance and anti-corruption. It was not even called a coup by the military: It was called a 'clean-up campaign'. Moreover, the coup-leader has expressly defied – if not ridiculed and marginalized – traditional Fijian institutions. Apart from suspending the GCC, there has been a suggestion from the interim regime of a non-indigenous President, and the formation of a state-based land use commission. Perhaps the most compelling feature of this coup has been the deafening silence of Fijian nationalism. The nationalist voice has been shut out. But the question remains for how long – given the highly emotive nature for indigenous Fijians of issues such as land, the presidency, and chiefly structures.

Previous coups put into office governments that pursued a nationalist (some would say racist) agenda (such as affirmative action for indigenous Fijians and land reform favouring Fijians). According to the current military commander, this nationalism – and the fact that it fuelled a culture of corruption – was the problem with the previous government. The 2006 coup was – ostensibly – against nationalism, racism and affirmative action; it installed an interim government comprising people who have been the voice of multiculturalism and political moderation.

Previous coups led to the abrogation of the existing constitution – usually to allow for a more pro-indigenous, racially-based constitution. This happened in 1987 (September). The constitution was also purportedly abrogated in May 2000 by the military, but the courts subsequently ruled that the constitution still existed as there was no legal basis for abrogating it. This time the military has not attempted to abrogate the constitution, claiming instead that all their actions have been about preserving it. There has even been a legal document drawn up purporting that the coup was legal because it overthrew an illegal regime (that events dating from 2000 were in violation of the constitution).<sup>2</sup> It remains to be seen, however, whether it becomes necessary to abrogate the constitution sometime in the future. We are also yet to see the outcome of any court challenge to the takeover.

Previous coups alienated the minority and non-indigenous races; in particular they were seen as ‘anti-Indian’ and they tended to unleash an anti-Indian backlash, manifesting at one level in attacks on rural Indian communities or on Indian businesses. The 2006 coup has been welcomed by many Indo-Fijians (grateful that at least this time they are not the targets). It is not that that this coup is seen as pro-Indian (although that is how some might see it); it is that this coup has been seen as redressing past injustices and grievances committed against Indo-Fijians in previous coups. And that this somehow makes it right. But that does not mean the backlash won’t happen. The great concern now is that the Fijian nationalist elements that have been side-lined represent a potentially dangerous and volatile force.

Previous coups created what appeared to be a fairly stark, if false, dichotomy in Fiji’s political culture – promoting indigenous rights on the one hand and the rule of the law on the other. There has been a strongly held view amongst Fijians that the government or the State should remain in indigenous Fijian control in order to safeguard Fijian interests and lift Fijian socio-economic standards (such as through affirmative action programs). That was the motivating force and rationale behind past coups: To put back into power a Fijian leadership that had been removed by the ballot box. The rule of law was secondary to Fijian rule. Moreover, individual human rights were viewed as antithetical to the more communal traditional Fijian authority.

This coup has thrown up a different – but also ironic – dichotomy. This time it is between social justice and good governance on the one hand, and the rule of law on the other. Past anti-coup/pro-democracy activists appear to have become transformed into sceptics of the relevance of legal democracy in Fiji. The arguments that are being heard now take the line that ‘It seems regrettable that those who condemn the military takeover are obsessed with the ‘violation of democracy’ perspective and fail to recognize the anti-racist and pro-people aspects of the takeover’. This could be termed the ‘social justice’ perspective.

So this is seen as a 'pro-people' and 'anti-racist' coup, which somehow makes it legitimate.

Furthermore, it has been generally claimed that the deposed government clearly showed how democracy could be manipulated to serve narrow Fijian nationalist interests. In other words, our democracy was not real democracy. It was deeply flawed and corrupt. Such a flawed democracy is not as legitimate and needs to be questioned and re-thought.

The third line of argument – following from this – is that democracy, as measured by elections, is not the panacea. Before we have elections we need to address many deep underlying issues. To do this, one person has even argued that we need a 'benevolent dictator' in Fiji to solve our problems. Until then we are not ready for democracy.

These arguments underpin the rationale for the promotion by the interim regime of the National Council for Building a Better Fiji. Its task is to develop a 'People's Charter' which would provide a roadmap for taking the nation forward, 'to transform Fiji toward better governance, sustainable participatory democracy, equity, stability, peace and progress'.

## **A coup is a coup is a coup**

Nevertheless, for all the differences between the various coups, there are still some striking and troubling parallels.

The argument that Fiji was not ready for democracy has been heard each time we have had a coup. In 1987, the popular refrain of Fijian nationalists was 'democracy is a foreign flower'. What Fiji needed, they argued, was a Fijian state, based on the prior rights of the indigenous Fijians, and elevating their institutions and their faith above others. Following the 2000 coup, the newly installed prime minister, Laisenia Qarase, suggested that Fiji was somewhere in the middle of a journey between communal democracy (or traditional governance) and liberal democracy – adding that it would be better if Fiji never fully reached its destination. In the latest coup, some outspoken critics of previous coups started to make similar utterances: Fiji was not a real democracy and perhaps we are not ready for democracy; perhaps what we need right now is a 'benevolent dictator' who will 'heal the cancers of corruption and racialism' so that 'normal legalities can truly be reasserted'.

Another parallel is the political role of the military. This is the obvious common thread throughout. Whether the military is acting for or against indigenous rights, whether it is called a clean-up campaign or a coup – the common element is that the military and its leaders have arrogated to themselves a political role, above and beyond that prescribed by law. This pattern began in 1987, it seemed to subside in the 1990s, but the events of 19 May 2000 catapulted the army back onto the political stage, however reluctantly. Since 2000, the military has not

fully departed this stage. It has been a political force, sometimes at the forefront, sometimes in the background, but always calling the shots (or trying to). The reason for this lies in the fact that the army (especially its current commander) sees itself as the saviour of the nation, having prevented the country from teetering over the brink of anarchy in 2000. The army – and, again, its current commander in particular – also experienced a bloody wake-up call with the mutiny attempt in November 2000. To them the enemy (radical nationalists and corrupt chiefs) – the threat – was still out there. That is why they seized power – to stamp out the threat once and for all. Moreover, it was the army that, after the 2000 coup, installed the leaders who ran the country from 2001 to 2006. This also gave the military the belief that they had the right to remove those same people (irrespective of the two elections that had subsequently confirmed them in office).

The third parallel relates to the human consequences of coups, whatever the cause they are promoting. We are all aware of the clampdown on certain freedoms (such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of movement) that almost always accompanies a coup. In 2000 the crackdown on freedom of speech was perhaps less notable. However, there was widespread terrorizing of (mainly) Indo-Fijian rural communities by (Fijian) civilian groups (sometimes working with police collusion and protection). Following the 2006 coup, the military showed no tolerance for dissent. Critics – whether real or imagined – were detained and ‘given a warning’ not to cause trouble. Two men, so far, have died as a result of this ‘warning’. Many have been intimidated (rather harshly) into silence. Human rights violations have been justified on the grounds of national security. This is a familiar catch-cry of military dictatorships that see any criticism as a potential threat to their control. More broadly, each of the coups we have experienced has created a new wave of injustice – people who have been wronged; people who have been victimized. This coup is no different. Injustices will breed resentments and conflicts and the need for yet another attempt at building reconciliation and nation-building.

The fourth parallel is that this coup, like all others, has exposed the deep divisions within our society – and created new ones. The divisions are racial; they are class; they are regional. But ultimately, they are political – and in a post-coup environment these political divisions run very deep. What makes a post-coup situation so unstable is the absence of any peaceful channels by which to resolve or bridge these divisions. One side holds the guns and that is why they have power. The other side must be silent. In the absence of democratic institutions, there are no obvious ways – short of violence – of redressing this situation.

New divisions have also manifested themselves in this latest coup. I alluded to this earlier when I mentioned how some human rights and civil society activists who have traditionally stood against coups have come out in support of (or at

least in sympathy with) this one. This is due to their animosity towards the deposed government (and its policies). Some members of the legal fraternity have also given their support to the new regime. As a result, the judiciary is divided; so is civil society – traditionally two of the most progressive forces in society.

The final parallel relates to the negative economic fallout of the coup stemming in part from the hostile response of our traditional allies and partners, and in part from the crisis in investor confidence engendered by the political instability and uncertainty. As the economy contracts (or at least stagnates), there is growing pressure – both international and domestic – to return to a constitutional democracy, within a clear and definite timeframe.<sup>3</sup>

## **Where to from here?**

I have reluctantly come to the view that perhaps the best thing we can hope for (work towards) is that the current regime (however illegitimate it is) succeeds. By succeed I mean that it safely steers the nation back to democratic rule. I don't believe that the commander will step aside voluntarily – and perhaps there are dangers if he does. I believe that a failure of this regime is the far worse option because it suggests – most likely – a fragmentation of the military and a violent power struggle erupting within the country.

My view of the future is a mixed one. On the positive side, we have always managed to muddle through and to find a way out of the political mess left by a coup. Sometimes it has taken years and the toll has been high (for example, in economic terms and in 'brain drain' terms). But there is a resilience about Fiji that defies the most pessimistic prognoses. There have been some hard lessons learnt but there have been some positive outcomes as well. For example, in the wake of the 1987 coups – in the decade that followed – Fiji witnessed a flourishing of civil society organizations stepping into the gaps left by a political establishment weakened and tainted by the military coups of 1987. These have, for the most part, been a positive force in Fijian society. The fact that they appear weakened by the latest coup is a cause for concern but this does not spell the end for civil society activism.

I also believe that two of the core policies of the Bainimarama regime hold the key to our future development as a nation. One is the campaign against corruption – corruption that in turn has been fostered by the mismanagement and abuse of affirmative action programs over the years. The failure to deliver on the part of our leaders because of corruption continues to fuel discontent and frustration, especially among our more marginalized Fijian communities which have been led to expect much more.

The other policy is the proposed removal of the communal-based electoral system that has encouraged racial polarization in elections and has caused politicians

to employ racially divisive and nationalistic tactics. I do not believe we will ever progress politically if we continue to be tied to the communal voting system; I don't think we will see truly national leaders (as opposed to parochial, ethnic leaders) emerge within the confines of the current communal system.

But for change to come about – whether it is change to eliminate corruption or change to remove communal voting – there has to be acceptance and understanding of the need for change. The charter process has so far not succeeded in building that necessary consensus. In fact, it is only reinforcing a coup-tendency to impose solutions by force.

On the negative side, then, the outlook for a coup-free future does not look very promising. If anything, the latest coup may have virtually sealed our fate as a coup-prone society. It would take a huge leap of faith to believe that somehow the coup 'solution' will never again be contemplated by a future military commander, or even his junior officers. Such a fate is shared with other countries in our wider neighborhood, such as Philippines and Thailand.

Moreover, while many people in Fiji appear to be ambivalent about democracy, there is also confusion over how a coup may be portrayed as 'right' or 'legal' when it is clearly a violent and destabilizing act that erodes the rule of law. We are becoming a nation that is increasingly unable to distinguish between right and wrong.

The means to carry out a coup will always be there (so long as we have a military). What needs to change is the belief that carrying out a coup is a justifiable (and just) political option. As the latest coup revealed, support (whether tacit or explicit) for a military takeover of a democratically elected government is widespread. This reveals the enormity of the challenge facing our society. Until we as a society – and our leaders in particular – can categorically renounce and reject the use of violence in our political life – democracy has little hope of becoming an entrenched force in our lives. And we will never realize our full potential as a country.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper presented to the Leadership Fiji program, Suva, 21 March 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See Cox, Chapter 18 this volume

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the economic impact of the 2006 coup on Fiji, see Chand, chapter 7, this volume.