

THE STRANGE SAGA OF SPEIGHT'S SIEGE IN SUVA

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Fiji's media were rare institutional winners out of the strange saga of Speight's siege in Suva. Fiji's journalists were one of the few groups to gain stature during the 56 days that George Speight held MPs hostage in the Parliament compound.

The role Fiji's journalists were able to play in 2000 is a significant contrast to the two military coups of 1987, when they were closed down or muzzled. The professionalism of Fiji's media during the long period of intense pressure caused by Speight's siege was a high point in the often-sorry tale of South Pacific journalism. And it washed away some of the bitter taste lingering from the abuse of Fiji's media 13 years earlier.

When Sitiveni Rabuka took power in 1987, the army closed down newspapers and a military censor controlled the news broadcast by Radio Fiji. One of the few light moments of the heavy-handed censorship regime came when Commonwealth leaders ejected Fiji from the Commonwealth. That news came through early in the morning and the army officer on duty couldn't raise any of his superiors to get a ruling on how the information should be broadcast. He thus refused to approve or reject any copy on the Commonwealth decision. The editors preparing Radio Fiji's main morning bulletin came up with a solution, which did not directly break censorship guidelines. They took a direct feed of the hourly bulletin broadcast from Melbourne by Radio Australia. So, the news that Fiji had been cast out of the Commonwealth was preceded by the ABC news theme and conveyed by an Australian reporter. It symbolised the helpless state imposed on Fiji's media.

In the 2000 crisis, by contrast, there was no censorship for the domestic media and no attempt by the Ministry of Information to control international reporting. This time, Fiji was served by three newspapers (*The Fiji Times*, *The Post* and *The Sun*), two radio networks (Radio Fiji and FM 96) and the television service, Fiji One. This time the internet was a factor, influencing both international and national agendas. (George Speight, inside the Parliament compound, could log on to the web to check how he was being covered.) This time, Fiji's reporters were able to keep working. The rumours sweeping Fiji had to compete with real news. The international reporters, too, did a better job because they were working from a solid basis of information provided by Fiji's media.

Each of Fiji's media outlets made inevitable mistakes in reporting a prolonged crisis produced by deep ethnic and political forces. But the overall coverage gave Fijians timely and accurate information. Other key institutions — the Parliament, the army, police, Fiji's legal system and the Great Council of Chiefs — were notable for how they stuttered or failed in dealing with the crisis.

George Speight produced more than a terrorist siege. There were Pacific rhythms at work and political interests at play. The voice Speight projected, via the media, illustrated a leadership and institutional paralysis. Elements in the army, police and the chiefly structure were backing Speight overtly or covertly. And Fiji's media gave Fijians much of the news needed to interpret these forces.

The Prelude

The May edition of Fiji's monthly magazine, *The Review*, was published in late April, more than three weeks before Speight's group seized the Parliament on 19 May. *The Review* marked its eighth birthday with the cover headline 'Operation Chaos', and an illustration of a 'To Do List':

1. Shut down all essential services
2. Mobilise protest marchers
3. Remove Mahendra Chaudhry as PM
4. Restore Fijian leadership
5. Control Fiji

The article by deputy editor Tamarisi Digitaki anticipated a legal campaign of civil disobedience waged by the Fiji nationalist Taukei Movement to topple the Chaudhry government elected in May 1999. The cover story (like Mahendra Chaudhry himself) downplayed the idea of violent action because the army was proclaiming its loyalty: 'Another military coup seems an unlikely option at this stage. [Military chief] Commodore Frank Bainimarama has already denounced allegations of the army's involvement. In fact, the army personnel whom *The Review* talked to agree that if there is another coup, then blood, and lots of it, will be shed this time. That alone makes it a very unattractive option. On the other hand, it shouldn't be forgotten that no one thought military intervention was possible in 1987.'

The key factor in the scenario painted by *The Review* was the real threat of violence. The article did not directly anticipate the split in the military, with Parliament seized by the army's specialist force, the Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit. But Tamarisi Digitaki accurately caught the jittery mood in Suva because of 'the similarities between the events leading up to Rabuka's first coup in 1987 and the current situation. Political unrest prevails now as it did back then and political correctness aside, more and more Fijians are resenting the fact that an Indian is in power.'

The judgement of Australia's top diplomat in Suva, Sue Boyd, was that unease was so widespread, Chaudhry was only days away from being overthrown by his own MPs when Speight struck. Australia's High Commissioner told the ABC: 'What is actually ironic is that our friends in the Fiji Labour Party told us that they themselves had decided that Mahendra Chaudhry had to go.' Boyd said the Party planned to replace Chaudhry with his deputy, Tupeni Baba, an indigenous Fijian. Others in Suva were sceptical that the party room revolt would have disposed of Chaudhry. The Prime Minister had previously overcome his colleagues' questions and doubts. In the words of one Suva journalist: 'Mahendra was always the strongest one there. He would have just stared them down again and they would have shut up.'

Chaudhry's treatment of Fiji's media was sometimes as brutal as his treatment of his own MPs. Soon after being elected Prime Minister he

attacked the *Fiji Times* for its 'distorted and doctored news'. The international journalists' group, Reporters Without Borders, commented that Chaudhry was irritated by the paper's close ties with the former Prime Minister, Sitiveni Rabuka. Chaudhry accused the *Fiji Times* of encouraging 'subversive actions and provoking racism and sedition'. In November 1999, the Chaudhry government announced a proposal to set up a media court to enforce professional standards and punish offenders. The Pacific Islands News Association responded virulently: 'Mahendra Chaudhry will become the first civilian dictator of a South Pacific Island if he maintains his threat to legislate against press freedom.' Fiji's political and media climate was becoming febrile.

The Drama

The US 'gonzo' journalist, Hunter S. Thompson, once observed: 'When the going gets weird, the weird turn professional.' During the Speight siege, there was a lot of weirdness in evidence, and it seemed to infect many of those who should have been giving professional service. To illustrate the roller coaster ride, I offer scenes from three consecutive days. In their cumulative effect, they were both dramatic and bizarre.

It is Saturday, 27 May, just over a week after the seizure of the Parliament on Friday, 19 May. During the previous week the Great Council of Chiefs has met, called for the release of the hostages and backed the President, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. George Speight — the self-proclaimed champion of indigenous rights and traditional power — has told Fiji's highest traditional body he will not accept their chiefly order or obey Ratu Mara.

The police, saying they can't maintain order, have handed over to the army, which has set up control points around the Parliament. On Saturday morning the first gun battle occurs. A mob of Speight supporters clash with army troops near the front entrance of Parliament. Army soldiers fire volleys of shots into the ground sending people screaming in all directions. Two soldiers and a TV cameraman are wounded.

In the afternoon we go from gunfights to Government House. Ratu Mara calls reporters to his official mansion overlooking the bay, only a few

kilometres from the Parliament. The President announces that he has dismissed the Chaudhry government because it can no longer perform its duties. He will take executive power and seek to resolve the crisis. Mahendra Chaudhry may not be able to return to office, even after he is freed.

The next day, Sunday, 28 May, after church, more than a thousand Fijians — all in their best outfits, clutching their Bibles — visit Parliament for what amounts to a celebration, a revival service of singing and speeches praising indigenous rights. It's a beautiful day and the singing, clapping, dancing and preaching take place in the parking area of the Parliament, in sight of the chamber where the Fijian MPs are held, backing onto the Ministerial offices where the Indian MPs are held separately. One of the gospel songs has as its chorus the line, 'I don't care what people say, what the world may say or do'. It is an apt line for a Fiji which is turning inward. There are several layers of irony in this joyous expression of Christianity and Fijian identity. The reverse side, the dark side, comes later the same day in the evening, when a mob of about 200 Speight supporters come rampaging out of Parliament to attack Fiji's television station. Fiji One's Sunday night current affairs program, Close-up, has carried some less than complimentary observations about Speight. The mob crash into the studio. Fifteen minutes after the mob, I find the front door locked but all its glass smashed out. Every piece of glass in the offices and studio has been shattered. It truly looks like a bomb has exploded, but there is no sign of blast marks or smoke. It is an amazing feat of ingenuity and dedication that the station is back broadcasting within a matter of days. In a confrontation a couple of hundred metres away a policeman is shot several times and murdered. The first shooting death.

On Monday 29 May, Fiji is in shock. The weekend toll is one policeman murdered, two Fijian soldiers wounded and one TV cameraman wounded. A full military curfew is announced. That night, after the 8pm curfew, the military escorts the domestic and international media out to the Queen Elizabeth Barracks. The military commander, Frank Bainimarama, announces that Ratu Mara is gone. The military leadership has gone to the President and told him that he is not up to the task. They don't think he can resolve the crisis, and for his own safety he should head back to his

home island. The military has taken over. We are back to the future — back to 1987. So in a week and a half Mahendra Chaudhry is overthrown three times ... by Speight, by Mara and then by the military.

At this point the siege was less than a quarter way through its eventual course. Yet Fiji was already past its point of no return. Speight's original outrage was compounded and expanded by significant Fijian institutions, and by flashes of violence and lawlessness that ran throughout the saga. The longer the crisis ran, the more it became clear this was a fight between indigenous Fijians. Along with the carnage inflicted on the economy, the greatest damage was done to indigenous Fijian institutions. In 1987, the prestige of the Great Council of Chiefs and the army — as expressions of Fijian power — was enhanced. This time, George Speight opened splits in the Fijian community, exposing tensions between regions, rivalry amongst the chiefs and the confused loyalties of the army. By removing Mara, the army opened a complicated struggle among the chiefs about future traditional leadership. This time, Fijians could not really pretend they were struggling solely with Indo-Fijians. Really, they were struggling with each other. In Speight's daily press conferences, his attack increasingly turned from Indo-Fijians to the failings of Fijian leadership. The version offered by Speight was that Fijian leaders had helped the spread of Western ideas of democracy, which eroded the rights and power of indigenous Fijians. Here is one example of Speight's musings to the media, from week six of the siege:

You know it's a problem of leadership, more than anything else really. This country has been in Fijian leadership for 29 of the last 30 years. And that's 29 of the last 30 years of so-called emergence into the 21st century. It's been in Fijian hands, our leadership. Mahendra Chaudhry just came in the last five minutes, but he certainly didn't help by what he did. So, Fijian leadership over the last 29 years, and I speak specifically of his former excellency Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and Sitiveni Rabuka; they pursued a style of leadership that did nothing but perpetuate the philosophies and social attitudes that the English left us in 1970, when we became independent, after 96 years, almost a century of British rule in this

country. And I dare say they should have taken the opportunity then to do what I'm doing now in the year 2000. It's almost 30 years too late. But that's my point precisely. Better 30 years too late than not at all.

George Speight used Rabuka's old coup script and expected the army to play its 1987 role, to fall in behind the coup. Speight's whole approach was predicated on the army legitimising the seizure of Parliament. In the end, the army endorsed the overthrow of Chaudhry, but would not directly embrace Speight. Thus, Speight sat and waited to see what would turn up. He became emboldened by the weakness of the institutional responses and the media attention. In the end Speight made the mistake of believing his own publicity, and overplayed his hand after the hostages were released.

Speight was selected as the rebel figurehead because of his media skills. He quickly became a face known around the world because of his daily press conferences. So the domestic and international media were weapons in the political struggle waged from behind the parliamentary gates. The *Fiji Times* made an important point about the rebel media strategy midway through the siege, when it stopped referring to Speight as the coup leader but as the coup spokesman. The *Fiji Times* editor, Netani Rika, said Speight was chosen by those organising the coup attempt because he knew how to articulate the message in ways useful to print, radio and TV: 'I'd say the best call we made was to stop calling George Speight the coup leader when it became obvious that he wasn't. And I think that started the move towards finding out exactly who the mystery person or people were behind this whole charade.'

During the weeks of standoff, it became clear that in negotiations with the military Speight had to refer to others for approval. Inside the compound, a veto was held by the former special forces commander, Ilisoni Ligairi. Outside the compound, chiefly backers emerged, plus important players such as the former head of intelligence, Colonel Metuisela Mua, who had been dismissed by Mahendra Chaudhry. Less constrained in some areas than the Fiji media, foreign reporters were sometimes able to provide important profiles of such figures from the shadows of the coup.

The free access of the media in and out of the Parliament compound virtually throughout the siege was an extraordinary experience. Partly, the access was possible because this was not just a terrorist crime. It was also part of a political process. The military regime proclaimed an exclusion zone around the Parliament but it was never enforced for the media until the last few hours before Mahendra Chaudhry was released.

The international media contingent covering the coup came mainly from Australia and New Zealand. At the height of the story there were more than 100 reporters, camerapeople, producers and tape editors in Suva. Almost all stayed at the one hotel, the Centra. One or two phone calls to the Centra were all that was needed to get the international contingent for a press conference in Parliament or at military headquarters, the Queen Elizabeth Barracks. Speight was a ready performer, providing hundreds of interviews at news conferences, via the phone and in 'simsats' for the TV cameras. The word simsat stands for a 'simulated satellite interview'. A crew would go into Parliament equipped with TV gear and a mobile phone. The interviewer in Sydney, London or Atlanta would talk to Speight who would hear the questions via an earpiece in the mobile phone. Speight's answers were then sent by satellite to home base where they were intercut with vision of the interviewer's questions to produce the interview.

To travel to the siege involved a short journey through a number of military roadblocks. A reporter would leave the Centra, turn right and drive 300 metres to the first checkpoint. After being waved through, the drive went past Government House on the left and the harbour on the right. After a further kilometre, there was another slowdown to pass through the next army checkpoint. Go another kilometre, turn left up the hill and enter via the rear entrance of Parliament. Each visit meant handing over a licence ID or pass with a photo (in my case, the pass I use to get access to the press gallery in the Australian Parliament). Equipment was searched, names listed, and then media were waved in to the assembly area where Speight held his regular press conferences. Usually, the only areas reporters could not visit were the chamber and executive offices where the hostages were held.

To answer Speight's media profile, the military regime, in seizing power, had to create its own face. The military had to fight a rolling stream of Speight interviews and pronouncements. The chief spokesman used in this role was Lieutenant Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini, who eventually achieved an international media profile close to that of Speight. Tarakinikini was a coolly professional voice for the military in answering Speight (an ironic role because of persistent questions about how much knowledge Tarakinikini had of the plans to seize Parliament).

Tarakinikini said the military regime's media policy was not to gag reporters but to counter Speight by telling the truth; 'The tug of war was based on the fact that we knew what he was trying to sell to the people was not true, was not credible, and was not going to hold up in time. The challenge was for us to ensure that we get to the people and get them to believe that what we stood for was the truth ... What George Speight was coming up with was racist, was discriminatory, was against our principles and was not going to work for them.'

Q: Why did the military not do what it did in 1987? Why did you not close down the newspapers, impose censorship and put military officers in the radio stations to control what was broadcast? Why did you do it differently this time?

Tarakinikini: Because we did not believe in it. We did not believe that the way it was done in 1987 was correct. There was nothing to be gained from gagging the media. And the media is now a powerful force in the world and we had to get the media on side. Without the media then our message couldn't get out to people and to the world.

Q: What lessons did you draw from the 1987 experience?

Tarakinikini: I'm not privy to the reasoning of the decision makers in 1987 but certainly this time round we had learned from 1987. The stance the military took from day one is that we were not going to lie to our own people. We were going to tell them the truth. We were not going to sweep anything under the carpet.

The commitment to truth was partly a response to the range of media outlets within Fiji (which could, in theory, have been censored), but also internet sites which could not be controlled. The military spokesman said many of the web sites outside Fiji were being fed information from Fiji. 'Generally the media handled the situation quite well,' Tarakinikini said. 'What was disturbing was the web sites on the internet that were publishing a lot of information based on rumours and which was being accessed by a sizable number of Fiji watchers outside Fiji in the international community. This is where we could not censor anything and it was quite disturbing the amount of damage that was done by the internet sites.'

In the 1987 coups, Fiji did not have television. By 2000, villagers were used to seeing their own TV news and also TV news services from New Zealand, Australia and the British BBC.

The editor of the *Fiji Times*, Netani Rika, reflected on the media awareness found even among villagers who staged land occupations or blocked roads: 'People know just how powerful the media is when it comes to putting your message across. That was reflected in how both the security forces and the rebel got their message across, not only here but overseas. There were even times when smaller rebel groups around the country refused to talk to the local journalists, saying "We want to see the BBC people. We'll only talk to the BBC people". It was only when the foreign TV crews came onto the scene that they would speak both to the foreign crews and then to the local journalists.'

Q: So there was an element of media management even out on the blockades. When villagers threw up their roadblocks?

Netani Rika: Yes, while it was frustrating for our staff at times that these people didn't want us at first, it did provide an element of humour in otherwise trying times.

Q: Do you think there is a greater respect for journalism and what journalism can do for Fiji? Or was it merely a pragmatic judgement that it is harder now to control the various media outlets? Was it principle or pragmatism?

Netani Rika: I think it was pragmatism. These guys had to get their message across. They had to use the media to do it. They had to state what they were fighting for in the case of the rebels. In the case of the military they had to show the public they were in control so they made practical use of the media.

Acting on the time-honoured journalistic principle that reporters catch and kill their own, some of the strongest criticism of the performance of the 'international hacks' came from within the ranks in the Centra. The experienced South Pacific correspondent for Agence France-Presse, Michael Field, wrote a couple of features on the press corps. One, republished in the local papers, ended with an ironic comment on the foreign reporters rushing sheep-like after each other: 'If you really want to bug the international media, get a camera and notebook and run like hell through the lobby of the Centra. Dozens of reporters and cameramen will run after you — because you will look as if you know what the next story is. We of the international media don't have a clue.'

In a piece headed 'Farewell to coup coup land' after Chaudhry was released, Michael Field pondered how the media used and were used by the rebels: 'Obviously George Speight was something of a ringmaster at this game, and for a time he became our monster, our property. He could whistle us up to Parliament in a shot and we'd be there, listening to his endless raves. He would try, too, to engage reporters in friendly banter — but fortunately most of us resisted the idea of backslapping and laughing with a man holding a gun at others.'