

AFTERWORD: THE DEBRIS

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This afterword to the collection places the essays in the context of current scholarship and media attention to the 2000 coup. It also provides updated information on the Qarase government and the current political situation in Fiji.

RUMORS OF A COUP had done the rounds of the kava bowl around the *koros* of Fiji for some time, intensifying as protest marches against Mahendra Chaudhry's Peoples' Coalition government gained momentum in late 1999 and early 2000. The Taukei Movement, revived by Apisai Tora, the quintessential chameleon of Fiji politics, orchestrated the rebellion. "Trust is like a mirror," Tora said of the government. "Once broken, it can't be restored." Arresting imagery but unconvincing coming from someone of his checkered political background. Unconvincing to the believers in rational discourse, that is, but not to Fijian nationalists and others variously aggrieved with the government, amidst worsening poverty and unemployment caused by structural reform policies of the Rabuka government of the 1990s and a deep, unarticulated fear of being marginalized (see studies in Lal 2000b). The protest leaders tapped into this unsettling reservoir of fear, resentment, uncertainty, and confusion with promises of better things to come once the Chaudhry government was out of the way.

On the other side of the island, in Suva, a group of men began to plan the precise method of ending the life of the Chaudhry government. The full truth may never be known, but some things are clear now. The desire to derail the Chaudhry government had been expressed soon after the 1999 elections by a few prominent politicians who had lost in those elections;

many of them had been active in 1987. They courted like-minded nationalists, leaders of the powerful Methodist Church, traditional elders and chiefs, and some senior officers of the armed forces. They all agreed that the government should go, but how? On that question, there was no consensus. Nor, as it happens, was there much agreement on who should lead the putsch. At the very last minute, George Speight, a part-Fijian failed businessman sacked as chairman of the Fiji Hardwood Corporation by the Chaudhry government, articulate, athletic, harboring political ambition and eager for the limelight, stepped forward, leading a group of armed gunmen into Parliament on May 19, the first anniversary of the Peoples' Coalition government (Lal 2000a).

Speight sought to portray himself as an indigenous Fijian patriot, a dutiful son of the soil trying to secure what his people desperately wanted: political power to determine the future of Fiji. He spoke no Fijian, though, which dented his authenticity, despite invoking his Fijian name, Ilikini Naitini. But Speight by any other name was still Speight. His past record of commercial failures also caught up with him. Most people, including Fijians, saw him as a front man for other interests, institutions, and individuals. George Speight was no Sitiveni Rabuka, the 1987 coup maker, who could be believed as an authentic Fijian cultural hero, a dutiful commoner rallying his people behind him. That was one significant difference between the 1987 and the 2000 coups.

There were others. In 1987, the then Royal Fiji Military Forces claimed responsibility for the coups and were, in turn, held responsible for them. For that reason, the army ensured law and order, thus preventing widespread looting and arson. In 2000, however, the army dithered and was hobbled by internal divisions, indiscipline, and insubordination. Some soldiers, especially from the elite Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit, participated in the coup, but the army itself refrained. When riots broke out and arsonists torched sections of Suva, the army failed to intervene in a timely fashion, as did the police, commanded by Isikia Savua, a former soldier, who was accused of complicity in the coup but later cleared by a closed-door tribunal. The integrity and professionalism of both the army and the police forces were impugned (Lal 2002). It was similarly the case with Fiji's judiciary. In 1987, the judges of the high court stood firm on the side of the constitution purportedly abrogated by the coup and advised the governor-general to do likewise. They refused to join the revolution (Lal 1988:81). It was a different story in 2000. Now, the chief justice, Sir Timoci Tuivaga, accepted "as a matter of political reality" that the constitution had indeed been abrogated and used the authority of his office to lend legitimacy to the coup, drafting a decree abolishing the highest court in the land, the Supreme

Court. Tuivaga's controversial judgment, overturned later by the Fiji Court of Appeal, embroiled the judiciary in a bitter public debate.

Only the press came out of the crisis with its reputation intact (Dobell 2001). In 1987, the military shut down the two dailies, the *Fiji Times* and the *Fiji Sun*, for a week, plunging the country into news darkness. The only source of objective information about what was happening in the country came from overseas, principally from Australia and New Zealand. In 2000, the daily press not only reported freely, or as freely as might be expected in the circumstances, it also reproduced articles from overseas critical of the coup and its perpetrators. Many major newspapers from Australia and New Zealand had their own reporters on the ground. Their harrowing reports of looting and thuggery portrayed a side of Fijian ethnonationalism the world had not seen before. Indigenous nationalism, the message came through, could be just as brutal and repressive as white racism. The reports also portrayed the unfolding tragedy of Fiji as a complex struggle for power within sections of the indigenous community in which race was used as a scapegoat. There was no television in Fiji in 1987. In 2000, television was a major source of news for most urban households, carrying live pictures of the events taking place at the parliamentary complex at Vieuoto. Speight himself was a regular feature for weeks, slick, bantering, taunting, teasing, but, in the end, unconvincing as a champion of the indigenous cause. Not with a name like George Speight.

What was truly revolutionary in 2000 was the Internet. Events happening in Fiji were relayed to the world in real time. Speight himself trawled through the Internet to prepare himself for daily press conferences. The Internet was a great democratizer. Victims of the terror and violence in Muaniwani had their story documented and relayed to the world. Numerous chat sites enabled people from various viewpoints to engage in debate (and trade insults and abuse). A number of Fiji Web sites appeared—mushroomed—carrying commentary, discussion, and propaganda. The Internet thus became both a source of information and a tool of resistance. Sitting in Canberra, I could access Web sites in Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji, and read stories on the Fiji coup published in all the major international newspapers. It was the availability of raw, unprocessed information that enabled people to make up their own minds about the reasons for the coup in Fiji. It was one reason why there was lack of sympathy for the "Fijian cause" this time around compared to 1987.

Much of what appeared on the Internet at the time of the coup is now lost to history, depriving future researchers of a sense of how people perceived events as they unfolded. We tried to capture some of the reaction as

the gun was still smoking, so to speak, in *Coup: Reflections on the Political Crisis in Fiji* (Lal and Pretes 2001). The contributions are initial, often anguished reactions, pieces from the heart, while the hostages were still incarcerated in the parliamentary complex, people trying to make some sense of the unfolding events as madness engulfed their lives. Most of the pieces in the book, and indeed in the media, both print and electronic, were highly critical of George Speight and his actions. Only a handful of correspondents attempted a justification of the coup. I suppose, for supporters, there was no need to defend the overthrow of the government: Action spoke louder than words. For the targets, words were their only instrument of resistance.

Scholarly analysis of the 2000 coup has been late in coming. This, too, is in marked contrast to the 1987 coups (Lal and Peacock 1990). There was something about the 1987 events that took people by surprise. Until then, Fiji had been hailed as a model of multiracial democracy that functioned despite all its faults, the verdict of the ballot box respected. Sitiveni Rabuka's intervention changed all that. It was the Pacific Islands' first modern coup, and for that reason, among others, it elicited much scholarly interest. People tried to make sense of what went wrong. But a similar interest in George Speight's coup thirteen years later is lacking. Perhaps it is the fatigue factor. Perhaps it is an index of general disenchantment with the events in Fiji: If the people of Fiji cannot see the havoc coups wreak, if they cannot get their act together, there is little the world can do to help. Perhaps some see the Fiji crisis as a symptom of the Melanesian malaise, when institutions of good governance break down and tribalism triumphs at the expense of the nation-state, as leaders revert to the law of the jungle or the club. And there is no quick remedy in sight.

This collection of essays, the first of its kind to deal with the 2000 coup, fills a gap in our understanding. Written by anthropologists with extensive field experience in Fiji, the contributions to the volume attempt to give us some sense of how the unfolding events in Suva filtered down to the rural areas out of touch with the modern world of instant communication. They raise and seek to answer important questions. How and why was someone like George Speight, a public nonentity, a failed businessman, not even a "true" Fijian, transformed overnight into a savior of "his people"? Why did Fijians support him in such large numbers when privately they doubted his method and his mission? How was "grassroots" support mobilized? The contributors' careful reading of local texts and contexts suggests a more complex picture than macrolevel analyses portray. The coup was not a simple conflict between two ethnic groups. People perceived national events through the prism of local loyalties and traditional affiliations, and responded accordingly to calls for ethnic and political solidarity. The manner in which such

culturally powerful and traditionally respected institutions as the church orchestrated Fijian public support for the coup through selective references to the Old Testament, for example, is important in understanding how Fijians understood the meaning of what was happening in Suva.

This collection, more than most recent commentaries and even scholarly analyses, also offers a look at how the coup was understood by its victims, principally Indo-Fijians, in areas terrorized and ransacked by the rebels. These were people who had lived side by side with the Fijians, who spoke their language, who understood the protocols of indigenous culture, who worked and played together, and, yet, at a critical moment in their lives, they felt deserted, or worse still, set upon, by their Fijian friends and neighbors. Many Indo-Fijians in Muaniwani, Dawasamu, and surrounding areas in southeastern Viti Levu fled their homes of several generations to refugee camps in Lautoka. Others sought the support of friends and family. In other places, hundreds found themselves evicted from native leases they had lived on for several generations. Their future is grim. Since the coups of 1987, nearly 80,000 Indo-Fijians have migrated to North America, Australia, and New Zealand. Emotionally uprooted and made to feel unwanted, many more will leave, draining the country of skills and talents it cannot afford to lose. Their hopes and aspirations deserve attention.

Speight's intervention has clearly changed Fiji's political landscape. The new prime minister, Laisenia Qarase, has promised to enshrine Speight's nationalist agenda. He has, for instance, signaled that he will review the 1997 Constitution to entrench Fijian political control. He has justified this agenda by invoking some curious arguments. Fijians own 83 percent of all land in Fiji, and this fact, he asserts, must be reflected in the composition of Parliament. It is an argument that appeals to many Fijians, but it will be rejected by the international community. The idea of a property-based franchise is both obsolete as well as obnoxious. Why privilege landed property, one may well ask, when one could easily note other contenders such as gender or the amount of tax the different communities pay? There are other problems as well. Sooner rather than later, those Fijian provinces that have more land (western Viti Levu, for instance) will demand greater representation precisely because of that fact at the expense of the smaller, scattered maritime provinces. Where will the fragmentation end?

But the Qarase government is undaunted. They have put in place race-based programs of affirmative action exclusively for indigenous Fijians and Rotumans under the banner of a "Blueprint of Rotuman and Fijian Interests" (for more discussion, see Lal 2002). The government also proposes, under the "Blueprint," to transfer all Crown and state land to the Native Land Trust Board, to set up a Land Claims Tribunal to "deal with long-

standing historical land claims," to establish a Development Trust fund for Fijian training and education, to increase royalties to Fijian landowners for mineral and other natural resources extracted from their land, the compensation to be determined by the cabinet and not through an act of Parliament, to exempt Fijian-owned companies from company tax for a period of time, and to reserve 50 percent of licenses (import, permit) for Fijians as well as 50 percent of government contracts for them. Similar schemes have been tried before, many ending in failure. Qarase himself, as head of the Fiji Development Bank for nearly two decades, was in charge of many of these programs, and he knows better than most people that throwing money at the deep-seated problems facing the Fijian people trying to enter the commercial sector is not the appropriate answer. But he is not concerned with the economic viability of his programs; he is much more concerned to consolidate his support among Fijians.

Preserving Fijian support behind his party and promoting Fijian political unity in general is the paramount policy objective of the Qarase government. To that end, the prime minister has worked hard to bring all shades of Fijian political opinion under one umbrella irrespective of how divergent the political stance of the different factions might be. And so Apisai Tora—the perennial Fijian political dissident, a champion of western Fijian interests, the founder-leader of the ultranationalist Taukei Movement—received a position in the Senate. The elite of the Kubuna Confederacy, such as Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, received plum positions. Ratu Finau Mara, the unemployed son of the former president, was appointed Fiji's Roving Ambassador to the Pacific Islands. The coup-supporting former president of the Methodist Church, Rev. Tomasi Kanailagi, was rewarded with a place in the Senate, where he has intensified the call for Fiji to be declared a Christian state. The list goes on.

Qarase's strategy is understandable. His political survival depends on rallying Fijians to his side. But the co-optation strategy and the politics of patronage will soon run their course. What then? The social and economic problems facing the Fijian people are more deep-seated than many leaders are prepared to acknowledge. And to speak of "the Fijians" in the singular is as misleading as it is dangerous, for the community is ridden with class, regional, social, and rural-urban cleavages and tensions that have surfaced in recent years as the the fear of Indo-Fijian dominance has receded with the lower birth rate and increased flow of migration. The real question is not whether there should be a Fijian head of government but which or what type of Fijian will be acceptable to the militant minority. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was a Fijian, and he was unceremoniously removed from office after being ridiculed by Speight and his supporters. Sitiveni Rabuka was a Fijian,

and he was rejected by the Fijians (and later became an intended target of an assassination attempt). Commodore Frank Bainimarama is a Fijian, and some Fijian soldiers tried to kill him. Laisenia Qarase is a Fijian, and he was the target of a kidnap attempt led by Speight supporters. In short, all Fijians are not peas in the same pod. Many Fijians reject democracy—"demon-crazy" they call it—as a foreign flower unsuited to the Fijian soil. But what are the alternatives? Theocracy under the tutelage of the Methodist Church? Monarchy headed by the Cakobau family? A military dictatorship? An apartheid arrangement based on the discredited and discarded South African model? The truth is that, as the community grows and its various subterranean tensions become increasingly apparent, hastened by globalization and the stark realities of living in a complex, multiethnic society, liberal democracy, with all its faults and failings, may turn out to be the only way out of the hopeless cul-de-sac the country finds itself now in. There seems to be no other way.

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