



speight of violence

inside fiji's 2000 coup

Michael Field / Tupeni Baba / Unaisi Nabobo-Baba

Speight of Violence

Inside Fiji's 2000 Coup

ALSO BY TUPENI BABA

Bavadra: Prime Minister, Statesman, Man of the People —

Selection of Speeches and Writings (co-ed, 1990)

Researching Pacific and Indigenous Peoples (co-ed, 2004)

Business of Australian Aid: Education, Training and Development

*South Pacific Education profiles: A Sourcebook on Trends and
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ALSO BY UNAISI NABOBO-BABA

Researching Pacific and Indigenous Peoples (co-ed, 2004)

ALSO BY MICHAEL FIELD

Cook's Wild Strait (1983)

Mau: Samoa's Struggle for Freedom (1984)

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Inside Fiji's 2000 Coup

Michael Field

Tupeni Baba

Unaisi Nabobo-Baba

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Cover: George Speight, a convicted traitor, is escorted out of court after hearing a death sentence passed on him. *AFP Photo*

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For Junior and Mela Baba and Teuila and Palemia Field
who worried and wondered what was happening
to their parents.

*Isa Lei, na noqu rarawa
Niko sa na vodo e na mataka
Bau nanuma, na nodatou lasa
Mai Suva nanuma tiko ga
Isa Lei, the purple shadows fall
Sad the morrow will dawn upon my sorrow
Oh forget not when you are far away
Precious moments beside the Suva bay*

The phrase 'Isa Lei' emphasises one's extreme and heartfelt sense of vakanananu or nostalgia over a place, person, event, or loved one. It registers the feeling that the speaker is shedding deep emotions about their loss, grief and sense of emptiness. It encompasses the intellect, the heart and the soul.

Key events in Fiji politics

1970

October 10 (Sat.) Fiji becomes independent with Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara founding prime minister.

1985

July 1 (Mon.) Fiji Labour Party (FLP) founded.

1987

April 12 (Sun.) Timoci Bavadra's FLP wins general election.

May 14 (Thurs.) Sitiveni Rabuka stages Fiji's first coup.

September 26 (Sat.) Rabuka's second coup.

October 7 (Wed.) Fiji declared a republic.

1990

July 25 (Wed.) New, racist constitution promulgated.

1997

July 25 (Fri.) Multiracial constitution promulgated.

1999

May 19 (Wed.) Mahendra Chaudhry sworn in as Fiji's first Indian prime minister.

2000

May 19 (Fri.) George Speight seizes Fiji Parliament, taking government hostage.

May 24 (Wed.) UN special representative Sergio de Mello and Commonwealth head Don McKinnon visit Speight.

- May 27 (Sat.)* President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara sacks hostage Prime Minister Chaudhry.
- May 28 (Sun.)* Policeman Filipo Seavula murdered by rebels, Fiji TV trashed.
- May 29 (Mon.)* Fiji Military declare martial law and dump President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.
- June 12 (Mon.)* Soldiers fire at Speight at a road block.
- June 24 (Sat.)* Speight releases female hostages.
- July 3 (Mon.)* Laisenia Qarase named by military as interim prime minister.
- July 9 (Sun)* Muanikau Accord signed to end crisis.
- 13 July 13 (Thurs.)* Chaudhry and the last of the hostages freed.
- July 27 (Thurs.)* Speight and key coup figures arrested.
- November 2 (Thurs.)* Mutiny at military headquarters — eight killed.
- 2001**
- July 1 (Sun.)* Fiji Red Cross head John Scott and partner murdered.
- September 12 (Wed.)* Qarase's new government sworn in, after democratic elections.
- 2002**
- February 18 (Mon.)* Speight convicted of treason and sentenced to death — commuted to life imprisonment within hours.
- 2003**
- June 27 (Fri.)* Joe Nata and Timoci convicted of treason.
- 2004**
- April 19 (Mon.)* Mara dies.

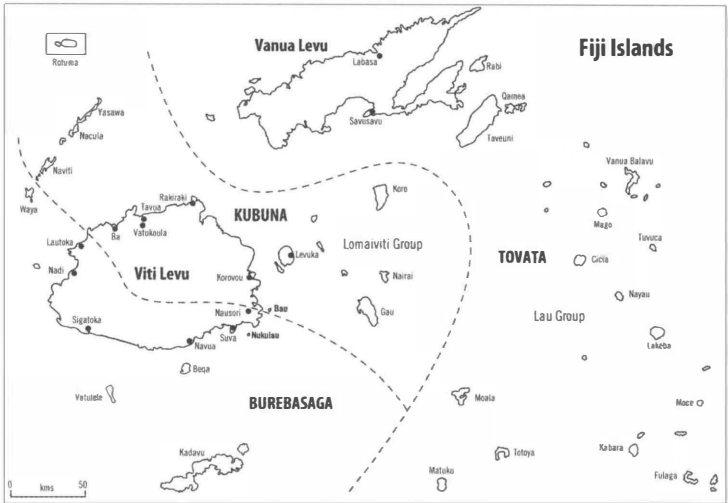
Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	11
<i>Map of Fiji</i>	12
<i>Foreword</i>	13
1 Armed strangers: <i>Friday 19 May 2000</i>	17
2 The way the world should be: <i>Vanua and taukei</i>	20
3 Kala pani: <i>Thursday 14 May 1897</i>	30
4 Military takeover: <i>Thursday 14 May 1987</i>	37
5 People's coalition: <i>Wednesday 19 May 1999</i>	54
6 Civil coup: <i>Friday 19 May 2000</i>	73
7 Speight, son of Sam: <i>'Failed businessman'</i>	91
8 Reaction: <i>Golf clubs in action</i>	101
9 Ten-day slide: <i>Chaudhry beaten</i>	112
10 Constitution's edge: <i>Friday 26 May 2000</i>	124
11 Another military coup: <i>Monday 29 May 2000</i>	133
12 Ten-point plans: <i>Through June 2000</i>	143
13 What does God want?: <i>'Forgiveness'</i>	150
14 Long days and nights in captivity: <i>Carnival at Parliament</i>	158
15 Clueless: <i>'Great' chiefs and reporters</i>	168

16	Nightmare spreads: <i>'Darkness of Fiji'</i>	181
17	Assassination or stage play?: <i>Queen's Birthday: 12 June 2000</i>	187
18	Families: <i>John Scott and the Red Cross</i>	192
19	Muanikau Accord: <i>Sunday 9 July 2000</i>	204
20	Meeting my husband's captors: <i>Monday 10 July 2000</i>	213
21	Freedom: <i>Thursday 13 July 2000</i>	216
22	Desert Island: <i>Wednesday 26 July 2000</i>	232
23	New coup: <i>Thursday 2 November 2000</i>	242
24	Death by hanging: <i>Monday 18 February 2002</i>	248
25	So what was it all about? <i>More coups?</i>	261
	<i>Further reading</i>	275
	<i>Authors</i>	277
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	279
	<i>Index</i>	281

Abbreviations

AFP	Agence France-Presse
ALTA	Agricultural Landlord and Tenants Act
CCF	Citizens Constitutional Forum
CDC	Commonwealth Development Corporation
CRW	Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit
FAB	Fijian Affairs Board
FAP	Fijian Association Party
FLP	Fiji Labour Party
FPSA	Fiji Public Service Association
GCC	Great Council of Chiefs
NBF	National Bank of Fiji
NFP	National Federation Party
NLTB	Native Land Trust Board
PANU	Party of National Unity
QEB	Queen Elizabeth Barracks
QVS	Queen Victoria School
RFMF	Republic of Fiji Military Forces
SVT	Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei
TRM	Trans Resource Management
USP	University of the South Pacific



Foreword

There are certain events in our lives that are etched in our consciousness. They affect forever how we think, how we feel and how we see the world. Until these events leave our memory, they continue to grate and fester and, like a young life in an embryo, they seek full expression through their own existence in the world. But like all births, these events or stories have their own timing and also require an appropriate environment for their full appreciation.

The three authors have had their lives affected by Fiji's 2000 coup. They have carried that experience in their consciousness while longing and waiting for an opportunity to share it with others. This book provides that opportunity and it is by coincidence that we were able to come together through a meeting with a Reed Publishing representative.

This book will be launched on the fifth anniversary of the Fiji 2000 coup, by which time many of the characters indicted will have been charged and convicted and many others will have been clearly identified and awaiting trial. But the 2000 coup is not only about these people who planned and carried it out; it is also about all those who were unfortunately the victims, like the parliamentarians and their immediate families, those who lost their work and businesses, not to mention the ordinary people whose dreams and faith in Fiji have been shaken and in many cases shattered. Many of these people have since left the country, along with thousands who have migrated abroad since the first coup of 1987.

The book also shows that a story of such an important event in a small country like Fiji inevitably features all the important institutions and offices of the land: the office of the president, the

judiciary, the Parliament, the police, the military, the Great Council of Chiefs, the churches and other civil society organisations.

Perceptions of groups, communities and individuals inevitably shape how they relate to other groups in a plural society. Fijian perceptions of their interests were drawn upon to galvanise indigenous Fijians and institutions like the Great Council of Chiefs to support 'The Cause'. All three coups in Fiji have been justified on the basis of 'Fijian interest'.

The 2000 coup has also shown that beneath the guise of pushing for Fijian interest is the real interest of those who stand to lose thousands of dollars, and in some cases millions, in unpaid tax and bad debts owed to the former National Bank of Fiji and the Fiji Development Bank. There are also those who lost power and positions through the defeat of the Sitiveni Rabuka's government in the 1999 elections. Many of those who would lose their privileges in the change of government combined and formed formidable opposition to the new government.

It is to be noted that the wheels of justice turn very slowly in Fiji, that many of those who were involved in the 2000 coup have only just been charged and convicted and many more are still awaiting trial even as we prepare to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the coup. This reflects, on one hand, the tardiness of institutions concerned with law and order and justice, and on the other, the inability of the Government by virtue of its coalition with the party of George Speight, the Conservative Alliance/Matanitu Vanua, to push for the speedy resolution of such cases. This suggests that institutions of democracy do not operate in a vacuum; in a small, ethnically and culturally diverse country like Fiji, they are not immune from pressure from the Government, even when they assert their independence from it openly and publicly.

No coup, whether in Fiji or elsewhere, can avoid the involvement of the media, especially the international media. The media,

both local and international, plays a major role not only in our understanding of what goes on but also, increasingly, in the nature and direction of the coup itself. In this respect, the book benefits from the perspective of Michael Field, an experienced journalist and writer who has lived and worked in the Pacific for more than 30 years, and has strong family connections there. He provides the book's background narrative.

Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, a Fijian academic at the University of the South Pacific (USP), brings another perspective to the book with her keen interest in aspects of Fijian nationalism, Fijian culture and development, knowledge and tradition. Unaisi is my wife, and during the 2000 ordeal she was heavily pregnant with our youngest, our son Tupeni Junior. She was involved, with other spouses and partners, with organisations like the Red Cross and the military in supporting their spouses and partners in Parliament.

The third voice is mine. I have the unfortunate opportunity of having been involved in all the coups. I was in Parliament in 1987 and was taken prisoner for seven days, and again in 2000 when we were incarcerated for 56 days. In the latter I was deputy prime minister and minister for foreign affairs and external trade and, worse, I was on my feet addressing the House of Representatives when George Speight and his armed thugs took over Parliament.

This book is a vehicle for the expression of the three perspectives in the belief that a complex event like a coup in a small but ethnically and culturally diverse country cannot be fully understood from only one or two perspectives, even if they are from the inside. We have tried therefore to provide various inside perspectives in the hope of creating greater understanding for all our readers. If we succeed, even in part, our hopes of sharing our experiences, which have been etched in our consciousness for some five years now, will have been fulfilled.

We feel there is also the need for other insiders, especially those

who live in Fiji, to tell their own stories on the coups and other aspects of life in Fiji. These perspectives must be heard if genuine reconciliation is to begin. Here the words of Maxine Greene come to mind: 'It may be that education can only take place when we can be friends of one another's minds. Surely, there will be much to discover if we put our stories next to the stories in this book . . .' (*Stories Lives Tell*).

Dr Tupeni Baba
Auckland
2005



1

Armed strangers

Friday 19 May 2000

A tragedy that was to cost many lives and bring chaos to thousands more had a precise opening sequence, recorded in the Hansard of the Fiji House of Representatives on a hot, clear Friday, 19 May 2000.

‘The House met at 10.40 am pursuant to adjournment,’ begins the Hansard record where, Shakespearean-like, the actors’ names are capitalised.

‘MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.’

As the prayer was unchanged and set down in parliamentary rules, it was not included in the daily Hansard.

‘Almighty God, who in Thy wisdom and goodness hast appointed the offices of rulers and Parliaments for the welfare of society and the just Government of Men,’ Speaker Apenisa Kurusaqila prayed, ‘we beseech Thee to behold with Thy abundant favour us Thy servants, whom Thou hast been pleased to call to the performance of important trusts in this Land. Let Thy blessing descend upon us here assembled, and grant that we may treat and consider all matters that shall come under our deliberation, in so just and faithful a manner as to promote Thy honour and glory, and to advance the peace, prosperity and welfare of this land and of those whose interest Thou hast committed to our charge.’

For an assembly made up of people who disagreed over

whether the Ultimate Truth was in the Bible, the Bhagwad Gita or the Koran, it was a fine prayer, but theological debate was not what some people had in mind. Coalition Government backbench member Timoci Silatolu knew what was about to happen: George Speight had just phoned him to say he and a gang of highly trained First Meridian Squadron soldiers were about to burst through the door.

Hansard, personified by note-taker Serei Moucavu, noted the minutes of the day before they were taken as read. Four papers were laid on the table; annual reports of the Higher Salaries Commission and the Lami Town Council.

'HON. DR. T.L. BABA (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs). — I have pleasure in laying on the table the Report of the Joint Sector Committee on Social Services and the Legal and Consequential Legislation on the Social Justice Bill (Bill No. 3 of 2000).

'Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee had its first meeting yesterday in about less than two hours from 11.00 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. when we reached a consensus.'

Dr Tupeni Baba called on the House to pass the bill and was noting some of the committee's recommendations. Hansard, in a kind of parliamentary stage whisper, emphasised by italics which it used for commentary, Fijian and one foreign word, scripted the disaster:

(At this point (10.45 a.m.) several heavily armed strangers (one wearing balaclava) stormed into the Chambers, kicked and jumped over the Bar shouting: 'Sit down, sit still and remain calm!')

MR. SPEAKER. — (Standing up) What is this?

STRANGER NO. 1. — This is a civil *coup*. Hold tight, nobody move!

MR. SPEAKER. — Yes?

STRANGER NO. 1. — This is a civil *coup* by the people,

the *taukei* people and we ask you to please retire to your Chamber right now, Mr. Speaker. Please co-operate so nobody will get hurt.

STRANGER NO. 2. — *Toso ike; o iko toso mai ike!*

(Move here; you, move here!) (Speaking to the other strangers) *Dua me toso mai ike. Dua me tu mai kea. Totolo!* (One to move here, one to stand over there. Quickly!)

STRANGER NO. 1. — Hold your seats.

STRANGER NO. 2. — *Dabe! Dabe i ker!* (Sit! Sit there!)

MR. SPEAKER. — (Still standing) *Na cava:* what is this?

STRANGER NO. 1. — This is a civil *coup*, with arms and ammunition, by the people and for the people. Please just tell them not to get up!

MR. SPEAKER. — It is an illegal act, you know that!

STRANGER NO. 1. — Mr Speaker, please, we do not want anybody to get hurt. Please do not make things difficult for us or I will be forced to use this (brandishing a gun). Would the Members of the Opposition leave the Chamber with the Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER. — (Still standing, and pointing a finger at Stranger No. 1) If you have to shoot anyone in this House, you shoot me first!

HON. RATU I. KUBUABOLA. — (Still seated) No, we will not leave without our Speaker!

(At this point, Stranger No. 2. fires two shots towards the ceiling of the Chamber.)

(Mr. Speaker leaves the Chamber with the Leader of the Opposition and Opposition Members. All the doors to the Chamber are immediately closed and guarded by the armed strangers. Government Members and six Parliamentary staff remaining in the Chamber.)

The House was unceremoniously adjourned at 10.55 a.m.



2

The way the world should be

Vanua and taukei

‘Fiji, the way the world should be’ is an advertising slogan that has survived three coups. If you tell the rest of the world often enough that this place is a Pacific paradise, then it becomes hardly surprising when you start believing it, and developing the view that nothing much needs fixing. The nineteenth-century ‘Cannibal Isles’ label has deftly been turned to a point-of-difference for resort owners competing against other paradises and ‘bula’, a Fijian word of greeting, has little sincerity left in it. Slogans, myths and ideologies paint a romantic picture of Fiji, hiding from view the difficulties which, as a nation, it should be trying to resolve.

Fiji is on an ethnic and cultural fault line; its land shared by both Melanesians and Polynesians. The difference has always been debated but in Fiji, geography works the equation. The early Polynesian of Fiji settled on the eastern islands of Fiji, particularly the Lau group, around 3500 years before present. Recent contacts with Tonga compounded their influence on social and cultural life. Melanesians came by a different route, first settling on the Coral Coast in southwestern Viti Levu, perhaps 1000 years after Polynesians were in Lau. Among archaeologists and anthropologists, this kind of thing causes bun-fights. What

is important is that among what are called indigenous Fijians, there is a diversity of language, culture and politics which is at the core of a tragic cycle of conflict over power among relatively small groups of people who are either jealous of their rivals or anxious they are about to lose power to the pretenders. Critical to understanding this are two words: *vanua* and *tauvei*.



Unaisi Nabobo-Baba explains their setting:

Pivotal to the Fijian's life is his *vanua*, an all encompassing word that is inclusive of land, people, air, seas, rivers, non living and all living things, spirits, religion, history and kinship ties within a defined tribe.

Everyone belongs to a piece of earth, a place they can call home, that they own with their relations and that they are guardians of so that their *kawa* (future generations of the same clan) can also have the same place to live. Conversely in the Fijian mind, everyone belongs somewhere. Among Fijians one hears: 'kai Jaina' (one from China, belonging to China), 'kai Idia' (India), 'kai Kilivati' (Kiribati) or 'kai Peritania' (Britain).

All Fijians belong to a clan and their lives are inextricably linked to that of their tribal grouping. Their ultimate value or worth depends on how their own clan members evaluate it. Besides all other groups one joins in life, the clan is the ultimate, the base that all Fijians belong to. No one can claim they are clan-less. The clan is their comfort zone. A person is protected within the group, but is expected as well to be responsible for the group's survival. All things that happen in life come in the context of *vanua*, its history, social structures, *mana*, strength and weaknesses. The individual takes responsibility for the group, is concerned about the reputation of the group and gains a lot of support and pride from belonging to the clan-based group and vice versa.

Clans are given certain tasks in the village or in the *vanua*. A person is born into a clan and its customary roles. Though preparation for the



The friendly face of Fiji – school girls from Adi Cakobau School in Sawani waiting to perform a meke or dance of welcome.

Michael Field

different roles has waned among some Fijians, the fact remains that all articulate their belongingness while in the vanua. There is a strong belief among indigenous Fijians that God predestined their vanua. There is a direct connection between human belief and performances on earth and the blessings one's vanua gets from God. The vanua and humans in it can cause the right effects from God if both parties revere God and perform their roles as identified in the culture of the Fijian.

Fijians see the world in terms of a clear dichotomy between taukei, people who are of the land, own the land and therefore look after the land, and vulagi, visitors. Visitors are taukei elsewhere: everybody is taukei somewhere. Those who are vulagi are seen as not belonging, therefore may not necessarily feel responsible for the land and its resources. Taukei and vulagi discourses are a common occurrence in Fiji both in daily life and in ceremony.

'It is good to always remember that in Aotearoa, we are visitors and will remain so,' Dr Ilaitia Tuwere, a Fijian theologian and academic, told Fijians in an Auckland sermon in 2004. 'It does not matter how long we have been here in New Zealand, whether it has been for 30, 40 or more years, we are and will always remain visitors here; we are however taukei of Fiji.'

The taukei to a vanua are expected to always have the best interests of their vanua at heart. The concept of vanua is all encompassing. It is inclusive of a people who belong together and are related because of blood. Most of them live in a defined area on land which has been passed down through generations. Land is communally owned and is a very important element of identification. It is the home and a heritage. It is very exclusive in nature. Belongingness is defined at birth and is therefore restrictive. This sense of belongingness is further emphasised when at birth children are recorded in the Fijian birth register, 'Vola ni Kawa Bula', which is kept by the Native Lands Commission.



Life is simple for the highlanders of Viti Levu; the village of Nabutautau, near the seized Monasavu dam. Michael Field

Fiji is a former British colony, which became independent in 1970. Fiji has about 320 islands, of these about 150 are inhabited. These islands are scattered over an area of 650,000 square kilometres. The two biggest islands, Vanua Levu and Viti Levu, have a combined land area of some 16,000 square kilometres.

Indigenous Fijians comprise a little over half of Fiji's population of 800,000. About half of these Fijians live in rural Fiji in some 1040 villages and surrounding areas, while the other half live in urban areas. Fijian villages belong to colonially created districts which were based, in part, on the traditional Fijian vanua set-up, but in some cases broke up people of the same vanua into different districts. Districts combine to form the 14 provinces of Fiji. The provinces are a later introduction. Similar to this were the creation of confederacies and the institution of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC or Bose Levu Vakaturaga). All were put in place to facilitate the administration of the colonies and to make life easier for the colonial administrators. These organisations forcibly united the otherwise multiple groupings of Fijians. It was easier to administer Fijians if the colonial administration had to deal only with three heads of confederacies instead of the 140 or so vanua chiefs who, during the coup and while the hostages were still being held, had a meeting in Parliament, attended by Speight. Vanua chiefs rule over one or more villages in a district. They have a defined territory under their jurisdiction and tend to be the most influential chiefs in the daily lives of Fijians.

While it is common to hear Fijians speak of belonging to their provinces, a closer reading shows that the Fijian first and foremost regards his vanua as the entity that he identifies with, in terms of land ownership, language, relationships and all related customary obligations.

While most are of Melanesian stock, there are those to the east, especially, who are Polynesian, who have Tongan and, to some extent, Samoan physical and cultural characteristics. Among Fijians, there are therefore a lot of variations in terms of language, religion and colour

(Fijians in the east are referred to as the fairer lot). There are, however, general ideological and cultural values that define them as a people.



Many of the events around the coup that overwhelmed the government of Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry were linked, not necessarily to Indians themselves, but to the older blood and soil of Fiji itself. Abel Tasman, James Cook and the *Bounty's* William Bligh all visited Fiji but had little impact. Significant contact followed when, in 1800, crew of the American schooner *Argo*, shipwrecked on Vanua Levu, discovered sandalwood, which was then fetching gold-like prices in China. Small settlements built up around traders, who eventually married local women and began creating a community of part-Fijians. The arrival of the Europeans led to pressure for a centralised political system around a 'king'. How the chips fell in the wake of the arrival of commerce and muskets has been well explored by historians. The essence of it all is that in the late eighteenth century there were seven vanua: Rewa, Verata and Bau in southeastern Viti Levu, Lakeba in Lau and Cakaudrove, Macuata and Bua on Vanua Levu. Lau was under Tongan suzerainty while Bau was a small fishing island just off the Viti Levu coast. Its power grew as a result of a policy by its chiefs to marry into the chiefly families of Rewa and Cakaudrove. Bau's ultimate power was exercised by the Vunivalu or high chief, Ratu Seru Cakobau, one of Fiji's foremost chiefs over 50 years. European observers were often shocked by his war-making, cruelty, cannibalism and cunning ability to dominate the islands during the 1840s.

Tongan missionaries had arrived in Lakeba in Lau in 1830, where the chief, the Tui Nayau, refused to have anything to do with them. When Wesleyan missionaries arrived in 1835, they came with the approval of the newly Christianised Tongan

paramount chief Taufa'ahau. The Tui Nayau was obliged to accept the Wesleyans but was slow in becoming a Christian himself. Tongan dominance increased in Lau when Henele Ma'afu, cousin to Taufa'ahau, joined with the Tui Nayau to expand Lau's interests into Cakaudrove. By the 1850s he was in control of the eastern half of Fiji.

The war diet saw Cakobau's power diminish. The US commercial agent John Williams claimed to have purchased the small island of Nukulau for \$30 in 1846. In 1849 his house on the island was accidentally burnt down and then looted by local Fijians. He tried billing Cakobau for the lost property and the claim, backed up with imperial American power, was a constant threat to Cakobau. He found it useful to become a Christian and formed a new alliance with Taufa'ahau and in 1855 they crushed Rewa. Cakobau found himself restored to his self-proclaimed position as Tui Viti or king of Fiji, but the position was by grace and favour of Tongans.

Taufa'ahau's governor in Lau, Ma'afu, was the most powerful person in Fiji. A kind of national government with Cakobau at its head and including white planter John Thurston was formed in 1871, with Levuka as the capital. But Cakobau lacked authority over the country and won little cooperation from Ma'afu. With a civil war threatening between Fijians and the growing white population, and Cakobau unable to contain the growing Lauan power, he appealed to London and, with the signing of the Deed of Cession on 10 October 1874, Fiji became a British colony.



Unaisi Nabobo-Baba notes that under colonialism Fijian life was bound by the Fijian administration system:

Indigenous Fijians were 'supervised' by the Native Land Trust Board (NLTB) and the Fijian Affairs Board (FAB), which included the GCC. In

1944, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, a Bau paramount chief, spoke strongly of the need to retain chiefs in the ruling of the country; Sukuna was not keen on the idea of democracy.

All matters regarding land leases were and still are looked after by the NLTB, while the FAB looks after all other indigenous interests. Increasingly the NLTB has come under scrutiny and in some cases has been taken to court by groups of Fijians who proclaim they do not need an in-between bureaucracy to make decisions for them.

All Fijians identify with a village (usually that of their father or, in cases of children born out of wedlock, their mother). This means that with most Fijians it is obligatory to contribute to village developments even though they may not be resident. It's a norm that Fijians return to their villages for various events. Village elders call on their kinsmen in the urban centres when there are fundraising drives in the villages, districts or provinces. This means that in the case of a couple there are two places that they are obliged to contribute towards or, as Fijian say, *mate vakarua* (to die twice). It is not unusual therefore, to fork out hundreds or even thousands of dollars towards such obligations. For instance, a huge aspect of the Methodist Church in Fiji's yearly conference is the provincial donation that opens the *solu* or fundraising event; each province takes it in turn to open and close the event. In 2003, the Lau Islanders, where Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase and the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara hailed from, were strongly 'reminded' of their contributions.

Fijians subscribe heavily to such notions of provincial, island and *vanua* 'belongingness' and will give their all to honour the name of their respective *vanua* or provinces. For other ethnic groups in Fiji, such notions are not easy to understand, and may even appear illogical. To try and explain this in economic terms is futile. Indigenous Fijians of different *vanua* and provinces bond together and there is stubbornness to keep up with one's *vanua* and province-related obligations against the very dictates of modern-day economics.



The first colonial governor of Fiji, Sir Arthur Gordon, and Thurston, who was his successor, decided the easiest way to run Fiji was through the existing chiefly system, thus cementing in place and institutionalising the tensions that had existed between Ma'afu and Cakobau. The tensions were passed down through the generations and reemerged with a vengeance around Speight's coup. He wanted to install a Cakobau as president, replacing a descendant of Ma'afu, the modern Tui Nayau, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. Cakobau's Bau was part of the Kubuna confederacy, which included Tailevu where Speight had roots. The modern Cakobau title, the Vunivalu, has been vacant since 1989, leaving the clan leaderless. A lawyer and judge, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi (in 2004 he was named vice-president) is, as the Roko Tui Bau, the kingmaker of the clan but his inaction suggests he has seen no worthy candidate. Among the pretenders who would feature in the coup was Litia Cakobau who in 2000 was the GCC deputy head. These connections over time between the 2000 coup and events in Fiji's past were not just interesting coincidences; they were integral to what happened.

Mara's marriage to Lala, the highest chief of the third confederacy, Burebasaga, was seen as part of the strategy of domination, giving the couple control over two thirds of the country. Mara described it as 'a dynastic marriage' ordained by his grandmother when Lala was a girl. The desire for more power continued too, and Mara's people were pushing for former army commander Epeli Nailatikau to be the new Vunivalu. Such an arrangement would be useful as his wife was Koila, Mara's daughter.

The GCC's membership has always been a question of debate and today the council is made up of several *ex officio* members,

including the president, the minister of Fijian affairs and the heads of the Kubuna, Burebasaga and Tovata confederacies. It included 20 members selected by the heads of the confederacies jointly plus five members nominated from business and the professions and 14 members elected by provincial councils and one each from Rotuma and Rabi. That gave it a maximum membership of 46, although there were and always will be cases of members meeting more than one appointment category. Although limited to simply advising the government on any matter relating to the wellbeing of the Fijian people and matters affecting the nation as a whole, and nominating a president, the GCC exercises influence beyond its constitutional definition. It tends to duplicate the work of the unelected senate. When the GCC fails to perform or to recognise its higher calling, then the whole of Fiji is in serious trouble, as was proved in 2000.



3

Kala pani

Thursday 14 May 1897

Media shorthand defines Fiji as a place of smiling, friendly natives confronted, thanks to British colonialism, by aggressive intruders from India. The Indians are erroneously portrayed as insular and awkward with an unhelpful attitude against mixed race marriage and an unwillingness to accept Pacific culture. Indians were late on the scene, forced by economic circumstance to move from one part of the British Empire to another.

London ran Fiji as an ethnic museum, anxious not to change the habits and customs of the indigenous people, and wanting to avoid trouble over land. Fiji never had any strategic or imperial significance to Britain and the grand civilising mission was left to missionaries. But Fiji was suitable for one of the great global cash crops, sugar. It was labour intensive and Britain did not want Fijians working in it, preferring that their way of life be preserved. With slavery's abolition, the only alternative was to use indentured labour.

On 14 May 1879, the ship *Leonidas* arrived at Nukulau Island on the eastern side of Suva, with 497 people from India's Uttar Pradesh. Between May 1879 and November 1916 around 45,439 Indians served 90 days in quarantine on that small island. They signed a contract and it was a corruption of that word which gave the workers their name: 'giritiya'. The pay and conditions on the mostly Australian-owned sugar plantation

'lines' or rows of barracks ranged from poor to brutal, and they were grim. The Indian Government had insisted that for every 100 men sent to Fiji, 40 women should also go. The arrangement was not maintained, leading to troubled lives. Violence was often meted out on the workers. Most intended to return to India after five years, but many could not. For some crossing kala pani or black water had resulted in a loss of caste and identity and little prospect of making economic lives for themselves back in India.

Indenture ended in 1920 and the mills bought cane from Indians who farmed land leased for up to 99 years from Fijian owners. Better than the indenture, it contained a fatal flaw: neither farmer nor owner negotiated directly on a fair price. The dealing was carried out by the NLTB which took a cut from the rent. Fijian landowners seldom received true market worth, a problem which continues still.

Under British rule there was very little contact between girmitiya and Fijian. The Indians were kept on the plantations and the Fijians in their villages. It was two worlds in one small Pacific archipelago. When they touched, the relationship was often good. The *Handbook of the Colony* in 1941 advised: 'Relations between the Indian and Fijian people are, generally speaking, very friendly. Each race seems in some way to supply what the other lacks — the Indian his steady industry and frugality, the Fijian his light-hearted freedom from care.' The 1956 edition of the *Pacific Islands Year Book* records: 'The Indian is a thrifty, hard-working colonist in the tropics, and 90 per cent of Fiji's sugar output . . . is produced by Indians.'

Once the Indian community found something approaching a normal life, population grew quickly. Of Fiji's 198,379 people in the 1936 census, nearly 43 percent were Indian and by 1946 the 120,874 Indians outnumbered the 118,083 Fijians — although the latter did not include Rotumans and 'Other Islanders'. By 1954 Indians made up 48 percent of the total population,

indigenous Fijians 43 percent and Indians had a higher birth rate and lower death rate.

After World War Two Britain turned its back on its Pacific colonies but departure from Fiji was complicated by fears Indians might take control. So the country was bestowed with a complicated electoral system designed to protect Fijian land and custom. Indians could see little reason why they should be denied full democratic participation as they produced much of the wealth. The counterpoint was that they were doing it on land owned by Fijians, for which they were not paying a full commercial rental. The protracted negotiations over independence — marshalling Mara's Alliance Party against Siddiq Koya's Federation Party (now the National Federation Party (NFP)) — ended in deadlock occasionally, mostly over the voting system to be used in the new nation. The 1970 independence constitution agreed on two houses: a Senate and a House of Representatives. The Senate was made up of 22 members, eight of them coming on the nomination of the GCC, seven by the prime minister and six by the leader of the opposition and one from the Council of Rotuma. The Senate's function was to look at legislation and suggest amendments. It could delay bills, not veto them. The House was made up of 52 members: 22 Fijians, 22 Indians and eight general seats. It was not that simple however as the cross-voting system required that 12 Fijian, 12 Indian and three general representatives were elected on communal rolls, while 10 Fijian, 10 Indian and five general representatives were elected on a national roll.

On 10 October 1970 Prince Charles handed independence over to a somewhat reluctant Fiji, led by the patriarch Mara. As the Tui Nayau he came with enormous traditional power as well as political power as head of the Alliance Party. He was king and prime minister at the same time, although with great flourish, Fiji paid allegiance to Queen Elizabeth II, whose representative in Fiji was Governor-General Ratu Sir George Cakobau.

After independence the Indian issue grew, for the NFP was not inclined to yield on their calls for fair representation. The nature of the debate in Fiji tended to claim that Indians were robbing Fiji and getting rich by exploiting indigenous land that they did not pay a fair rent for. Seldom mentioned was the reality that Britain had done little for Fiji and left it in 1970 with high levels of poverty, across all races, and very little development. It was a perfect setting for suspicion, misunderstanding and myth.

In 1975 the leader of the minority Fijian Nationalist Party, Sakeasi Butadroka, moved a parliamentary motion calling for the repatriation of Indians. Mara lodged an amendment 'to reaffirm the credit due to Indians as well as Europeans and Chinese and Pacific Islanders for the role they have played and are playing,

An Indo-Fijian family fishing in Suva bay – in front of the media's favoured place of accommodation, the Centra Hotel.

Michael Field



and will assuredly continue to play in the development of Fiji'. Butadroka's motion was lost but, coming just after Idi Amin had expelled Indians from Uganda, the debate was an ill omen.

In 1977 Mara lost the general election to NFP but they could not agree on Koya as their leader. Cakobau invited Mara to form a new government. Indian division cost them leadership on that occasion; Fijians would do that other times. Mara's governments certainly moved Fiji on from the backwater colonial economy Britain had left it in, but beyond Suva, poverty and anger were deepening. It was economic, not racial.

Suva, the de facto capital of the South Pacific, is a sweet, ramshackle crossroad of Melanesians and Polynesians, Indians and Chinese. It has always been an appealing city for its sense of life, conspiracy, drama, worldliness and warmth — despite its often wet and dreary weather. A cosmopolitan city, it offers a rich array of bars and nightclubs, and a population that has a particular ability to enjoy itself. Coffee shops are common these





Suva street scene. Michael Field

days, serving a sophisticated clientele from all races and the increasingly mixed race or ‘fruit salads’ who call Suva home.

By world standards the city, with its population of 170,000, is a small place. It’s not a particularly good place for a city, being a hilly peninsula around 6 kilometres north to south from the Queen’s Highway entrance to Suva Point, and around 5 kilometres wide. Its population lives on around 20 square kilometres of country cut by streams. Its main attraction for early white settlers was its relatively sheltered harbour and proximity to the fertile Rewa Delta. There were villages already there — Tamavua, Suvavou and Raiwai — and even today their chiefly rule influences the wider city.

Suva Harbour, with its high mountain ranges around and the distinctive Joske’s Thumb volcanic outcrop, is a treat. Most visitors drive into Suva from Nadi and know they’ve reached it by the overwhelming stench of the city dump on the mouth of the

Tamavua River. Across the bridge the first part of the city includes the old Suva Cemetery and the Suva Prison, opposite the Royal Suva Yacht Club. Most of the residential areas of Suva are in the middle of the peninsula, on the higher parts of the hills. The central business district is on the western side of the peninsula and faces the prospect of becoming jammed up with traffic attracted to the port, the market and the government institutions.

The coup spread out across all parts of the city and action and roadblocks were a feature for everybody in the city. When gunfire broke out, most people heard it and were often in range of stray rounds. A darker side of Suva grew in the wake of the coup with increased crime, including home invasion and murders. As was demonstrated during the coup, Fiji's sulu-wearing police might look picturesque but their wages are only marginally above the poverty line.



4

Military takeover

Thursday 14 May 1987

The Fiji Labour Party (FLP) was formed in 1985 with retired community health specialist Dr Timoci Bavadra as its head and hard-negotiating trade unionist Mahendra Chaudhry among its officials. He was general secretary of the Fiji Public Service Association (FPSA) and the National Farmers Union, made up of the sun-blackened canegrowers. FLP joined with the NFP in a coalition on the understanding that, given the country was not ready for an Indian leader, should they win, the premiership would go to Bavadra, who was critical of Mara. Bavadra asked, in what looked like a commoner attacking a chief some Fijians regarded as nearly a walking god, how Mara, on a prime minister's salary and the legitimate perks of a high chief, had managed to amass a personal fortune estimated at between \$4 and \$6 million, and how he and his wife had acquired so many business interests.

On 12 April 1987 FLP won the general elections and Bavadra became prime minister, with lands minister named as Mosese Volavola, labour to Joeli Kalou and education, youth and sports to Tupeni Baba. The Coalition won 28 seats to Mara's Alliance of 26. Of 14 cabinet positions, seven went to Fijians, including the key posts of prime minister, home affairs and Fijian affairs. An associate of Mara, Militoni Leweniqila, agreed to be speaker. Angry Alliance supporters claimed the new government was Indian-run with the Fijians as puppets.

By 1987 the Indian population made up 48.2 percent of Fiji's total number, with Fijians making up 46.4 percent. Indians dominated commercial and professional life. Fijians looked to New Zealand Maori, who had lost their lands to whites, and feared that was their fate too. With the slogan 'Fiji for the Fijians' an indigenous or Taukei movement was formed and engaged in a campaign of protest. On 24 April 1987 they held a march through Suva attracting 6000 people. There was another agenda behind a particular kind of Fiji discontent with Bavadra — the fact that he came from western Fiji and the powerful eastern Fijians were not ready for a western leader.

At the same time the Royal Fiji Military Force's third in command, Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, was discontented with his career and seeking out a new job. Around the grog or kava bowl with friends and allies Rabuka had shown a political interest, already hinting at the intra-Fijian power struggle to come. It was time, he claimed, for a new generation of Fijians to assume leadership in the community. Rabuka had a number of connections, including the Methodist Church, and it was in their Epworth House offices that the 1987 coup had its beginnings. The plotters involved openly admit what happened, although the love of conspiracy and rumour in Fiji always ensures that a new, previously undisclosed version still pops up — some of them from Rabuka himself, who has yet to settle on a consistent story. No one is worried about self-incrimination as Rabuka skilfully had an immunity-from-prosecution clause inserted in the constitution. Participants included Alliance secretary-general Viliame Gonelevu and Alliance candidate Jone Veisamasama. Alliance campaign manager Inoke Kubuabola, who claimed to have conceived the name of the Taukei movement, said the decision on launching a coup was taken in his office and was made before Rabuka came on the scene. He told *Island Business* magazine in 1998 that the key moment was on 19 April 1987.

‘By four (pm) we spent some time in prayer and options and we asked Rabuka to prepare his side of things, you know, the military option. And all the things we were doing were the lead up. We asked Rabuka to prepare that side and when we reach a stage when he must step in, he must be ready to step in.’

Rabuka’s latest approved biography, John Sharpham’s *Rabuka of Fiji* (2000), claimed Mara sanctioned the 1987 coup. On a golf course Mara was said to have told Rabuka: ‘The only way to change the situation is to throw the constitution out the window’ to which Rabuka was said to have replied: ‘I can do that, sir.’ Rabuka said Mara volunteered to take care of the United States and Britain. Mara tried unsuccessfully to block the book’s release. He did admit to playing golf with Rabuka four days before the coup but said the uprising was not discussed.

‘I’m very surprised that this has been raised at this stage and (Rabuka) raised it in such a way that completely overturns what he stated after the coup. He had been training soldiers for three weeks before the coup,’ Mara said.

An Easter meeting followed at the home of Methodist minister Tomasi Raikivi. The list of those who attended was intriguing for what happened, not only in 1987, but again in 2000. Rabuka and Kubuabola were there, as was Finau Mara, the paramount chief’s eldest son. Opposition backbencher Filipe Bole, former (and now current) Attorney-General Qoroniasi Bale and George Kadavulevu, son of Sir George Cakobau were at the meeting too. Taukei chairman and MP Taniela Veitata attended and so did one of the oddest characters on the Fiji political stage, Apisai Mohammed Tora. He had given a public speech in Viseisei, Bavadra’s home village, claiming Indians were depriving Fijians of the paramountcy of their interests.

‘Our independence is now shattered. Upon us is imposed a new colonialism, not from outside but within our own country by

those who arrived here with no rights and were given full rights by us, the taukei.'

For what was called Operation Kidacala (Surprise) Rabuka drew up an operational order entitled 'The Neutralisation of the Coalition Government of Fiji'. The new government aimed to take control of the military and act against the interests of the military: 'You will see that the sit. in Fiji is dangerous and will develop into something much worse and resembling Lebanon.'

Earlier in his career Rabuka had studied at the Indian Army's staff college near Ooty and it was there that he wrote a paper on military coups, later prompting Mara to claim Rabuka 'had a degree in coups'. He was methodical in his planning, and in his operational order he included detailed timings and deployments of units.

In 1987 Parliament met in the Government Buildings on Queen Elizabeth Drive, just across the road from the Grand Pacific Hotel and the new Travelodge, which would put its old neighbour out of business. The sprawling concrete Government Buildings were built in 1939, replacing wooden buildings. The House of Representatives, a large box-like room that gave away nothing to local culture and character, was upstairs, accessed by stairways through a clock tower and past a bronze bust labelled 'A Fijian, a gift and work of Margaret M Vandercook 1938'. Husband John wrote detective novels which included *Dark Islands* and *Murder in Fiji*. In Parliament on 14 May 1987 Veitata was giving a rambling speech which included a reference to Mao Tse-tung's power coming from the barrel of a gun: 'There is no gun, but our chiefs are there.'

As the clock struck 10, armed soldiers moved into the chamber and a man wearing a balaclava announced: 'Sit down everybody, sit down. This is a takeover.' Rabuka, who had been sitting quietly in the public gallery, joined them and, facing Bavadra, said: 'Mr Prime Minister, please lead your team down to the right . . .'

Baba, related to Rabuka, shouted, 'What kind of joke is this?'

Outside, army trucks were pulled up and the MPs were loaded onto them. Baba resisted again. Rabuka took a submachine gun from a soldier, pointed it at the men and said 'Move'. Baba stood firm until told by Bavadra to follow him to the truck.

Rabuka said the coup was the only way to 'safeguard the Fijian land issue and the Fijian way of life' and long claimed God moved him in that mission. As the politicians were taken to the Queen Elizabeth Barracks Rabuka headed to Government House to see the Governor-General Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau. Rabuka told him he was going to set up a Council of Ministers, made up mainly of Mara's defeated cabinet. Ganilau refused to bless the enterprise but Rabuka plugged on, suspended the constitution and fired his two military superiors. Mara quickly agreed to join the new council.

Rabuka's coup was mostly about race but other issues bubbled through. He was serving with the Fiji forces in Sinai when the FLP emerged and he saw it as part of an international socialist movement he did not approve of. As a military officer he had received US intelligence briefings full of doom-laden warnings on Soviet and Libyan influence in the Pacific. The FLP looked socialist to Rabuka. The coup was also partly about sex: Bavadra was married to a woman who had been married to one of Rabuka's officers who had, it seemed, taken the marriage breakup badly. In the tight little world of the military, that made Bavadra the enemy.

As the coup was unfolding an airport worker in Nadi hijacked an Air New Zealand Boeing 747 aircraft on the ground but a flight engineer hit him over the head with a big whiskey bottle. That was Amjad Ali, who would be back in the 2000 coup.

After the coup Rabuka became home affairs minister in the council and Mara foreign minister. The rest of the membership

was mainly made up of defeated Alliance members who then sought to dump Rabuka. On 26 September 1987, just as Ganilau was about to announce a new government of national unity, Rabuka staged a second coup, scrapped the constitution and declared himself head of state. Fiji became a republic. His new government included the extremists Tora, Bole and Butadroka. Rabuka understood he had gone too far and on 5 December 1987 appointed Ganilau as the first president and Mara became prime minister. Mara, a high chief and intelligent, had a vanity about him that meant he was willing to squander his international reputation on becoming prime minister in disgraceful circumstances. Rabuka



Fiji's first coup-plotter and later prime minister, Sitiveni Rabuka.

Michael Field

was not beyond vanity either and promoted himself to brigadier and then major-general.

Surprisingly he did not appreciate what would happen when Indians left. Fiji was never destined to be a great economic powerhouse, but it had resources, land and skilled people to ensure a significantly better quality of life for its entire people. Rabuka's coup saw the economy dive 11 percent, the Fiji dollar devalued 33 percent, wages cut, food prices go up and poverty become the issue it still is today. Over 19,000 Indians left Fiji in 1987 and between 1986 and 1996 around 58,300 Indians left for Australia, Canada and New Zealand, where they seamlessly integrated into the new way of life. Bavadra, a broken man who spent months on the international road trying to get recognition for the injustice he had suffered, died of cancer in 1989. Over 60,000 people attended his funeral. Chaudhry took over leadership of the FLP. Kuini Vuikaba became party president while Chaudhry became secretary-general.

In 1990 the GCC approved a new constitution which created a 70-seat House of Representatives elected on racial lines and gerrymandered to give dominance to the eastern chiefs. Only indigenous Fijians could take the posts of president, prime minister and army chief. Christianity became the state religion.

With elections looming Mara bowed out of the premiership while Rabuka, out of the army and into fulltime politics, became head of the new Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) party. In the 1994 elections it won 30 of the 37 Fijian seats while the 27 Indian seats were divided, with NFP taking 14 and FLP 13. Needing partners, and knowing early on that politics make for odd bedfellows, Rabuka won backing from the FLP to form a government on a promise to review the constitution and land leases. Thus FLP, knocked out of office by Rabuka, put him into office. Ganilau died of leukaemia in 1993 and Mara was named president.

With good looks and an elegant turn of phrase that successfully camouflaged his underlying message, Rabuka was a political celebrity. His sexual antics had a certain legendary quality about them. In 1994 a row broke out in the Fiji press after a journalist proclaimed her affair with Rabuka. He admitted it and told his caucus that his wife and pastor had forgiven him. Just before the 1999 elections, after an open-air sex incident labelled the Fiji Golf Club 'Kama Sutra', Rabuka denied he was the male participant but then went on to say 'I'm a carnal man.' And then there was another journalist who had a child by him and he paid only a modest maintenance for the boy after being dragged all the way through the courts and DNA testing. In a more sophisticated society this would perhaps have gone unnoticed or unmentioned but Rabuka was forever on about God and morality — he even admitted to saying a prayer following each transgression outside marriage.

Rabuka's political legacy, other than two constitutions, was a high level of corruption. The National Bank of Fiji (NBF) collapsed in 1995 with debts in excess of \$220 million, owed by politicians and Fiji chiefs who had used it as a cash cow and did not repay loans. Only a few incidental players were ever arrested over it and much of the money was written off. A journalist at the time who played a key role in revealing the names of illicit beneficiaries was one Josefa (Joe) Nata, who would go on to a key role in the 2000 coup.



Tupeni Baba was in at the birth of the FLP and in Bavadra's government:

When the Labour Party was formed on 1 July 1985, it was clear to those of us who were closely associated with it that its success would depend on the extent to which indigenous Fijians would support it. Ethnic politics had been divisive since independence. Even the Alliance

Party, under Mara, attempted to involve all racial groups in Fiji, but was anchored on its Fijian base, in the Fijian Association and its traditional links to the Fijian hierarchy and the GCC. The Alliance was basically a Fijian party and appealed to the Fijian population as it involved its paramount chiefs. The other two parallel structures include the Indian Alliance, which continued to struggle to get Indian support, and the General Electors Association, which included all those who were neither Fijian nor Indian: Chinese, part-European and others.

In the election of 1987, the Labour Party had a coalition with the NFP and although it won 28 seats, it had only about 10 percent of the Fijian votes. All the Fijians elected from the Labour Party were in the cabinet.

When Rabuka's coup took place, the main reason flaunted was the protection of Fijian interests: the Fijian populace appeared to have quickly identified with the cause. This included the GCC, which endorsed Rabuka's actions. Following the overthrow of the 1970 constitution and the imposition of the military-backed 1990 constitution, Fiji had returned to dominantly ethnic politics. This was reflected in the non-participation of Fijians in the Labour Party and among Labour representatives in Parliament. The Labour Party had also become dominated by its Indian constituency which had shifted from the trade unions to the sugar plantations and the politics of Chaudhry. Although its president was still a Fijian, Jokapeci Koroi, its overall support in the Fijian constituency was considerably weakened. Its prominent Fijian supporters, who were professionals, academics, trade unionists and others, went back to their respective professions. So while Labour's philosophy during these years remained multiracial, it had increasingly become ethnic Indian in focus and practice, especially with Chaudhry as the parliamentary leader.

The introduction of the 1997 constitution and its embedded multiracial tenet provided for a multiracial, multiparty cabinet. This provided the Labour Party supporters the opportunity and challenge to work towards the political inclusion of other races, especially Fijians,

who by that time were the dominant race with about 51 percent of the population. This was the atmosphere that encouraged original founders of the party like myself to come back to politics.



Rabuka decided he was wrong about Indians and sought to repair the damage in a 1995 review of the constitution, headed by former New Zealand governor-general Sir Paul Reeves, who had the virtue of being Maori, joined by Australian-based Indo-Fijian academic Brij Lal and Fijian politician Tomasi Vakatora. Their 800-page report, *Toward a United Future*, presented in September 1996, recommended a constitution that would encourage the emergence of multiethnic government. Rabuka declared he was committed to equality for all his country's citizens: 'We have removed all vestiges of discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, gender or economic status.'

The striking line in the report was the statement that 'trying to keep a predominantly Fijian government in office in perpetuity may not be the best way of securing the paramountcy of Fijian interests'. Mara told a joint senate and house session that the report was 'a very significant moment in our nation's history' and said 'a distinct feature of Fijian culture that there is a procedure for reconciliation' and a sympathetic response was required.

'We will talk a lot about multiracial harmony. Harmony comes from the blending of individual notes and voices, each having their own value and identity . . . We want to recognise our different races, customs and cultures.'

The report noted indigenous Fijians had become an absolute majority in Fiji. It said in 1986, the year before the coups, Fijians were 46 percent of the population, Indo-Fijians 49 percent. By 1997 they estimated the breakdown at 403,288 Fijian or 50.7 percent of the population of 796,078 people, while the 346,523

Indo-Fijian amounted to 43.5 percent. Since independence around 150,000 Indians had left Fiji. At the 1996 census, the most recent, the Indian population totalled 337,650 or 43.7 percent of Fiji's total population of 772,655. By 2000 the ballpark figure for Indians was around 400,000 although it was likely their percentage of the total population had gone down. Indians were not only leaving; those in Fiji had around half the birthrate of indigenous Fijians.

Like many nationals, the people of Fiji had contemplated what to call themselves. The Reeves report came up with 'Fiji Islanders' for all the people of Fiji. For *Island Business* publisher Robert Keith-Reid, this led to the creation in his *Fiji Times* column of 'Rotfians' or 'Republic of the Fiji Islanders'. 'Indo-Fijian' gained currency. It loosened the connection with India. Brij Lal, who noted the first scholarly use of the term was in 1963, said he preferred 'Indo-Fijian' because 'it captures best for me the composite nature of our personality and cultural heritage, western, Indian and Fijian. I am not a Fijian but neither am I an Indian!' Taukei Senator Litia Cakobau more recently called for the criminalisation of 'Indo-Fijian' although the logic of this was not easy to pick.

An obscure politician speaking for the largely unsuccessful Vanua Tako Lavo party, Iliesa Duvuloco, said the Reeves report was sickening: 'We reject the report outright because it is being cunningly designed to take away the rights of Fijians to govern their country.' His was a name to remember. The GCC gave its unanimous approval to the new constitution which took effect in July 1998 and then it was on to a general election in 1999. Rabuka warned balloting was likely to 'sharpen intra-racial' feeling.

The Reeves report made no recommendation on the amnesty granted in the old constitution for Rabuka's action in the 1987 coup. Brij Lal said the team got no explicit instruction from the

government how to handle the issue in a new constitution and did nothing: 'So we let sleeping dogs lie.'

Much of what happened in 2000 was a result of events around the elections a year earlier when alliances were created along with enemies. A raw and unresolved question was who should be prime minister if Labour won.



Tupeni Baba believed he would be prime minister:

The Labour Party had a series of discussions in 1998 on how to increase its Fijian representation and how it would link with other parties in the 1999 elections. Two parties believed in multiracialism and were considered as possible partners: the new Party of National Unity (PANU), founded by Apisai Tora, was mooted in the western part of Fiji; and the Fijian Association Party (FAP) led by Adi Kuini Vuikaba Speed, Bavadra's widow, founding president of the FLP. With the increasing foothold of Labour in the sugarcane areas through its National Farmers Union, Labour focused its work on the support of indigenous Fijians. Such support would, in itself, have an impact also on Indian support. Given 1987's events, this seemed to be a sound strategy. Strong pressure was exerted on me not only to be involved in the development of strategies for the next election but also to stand as a candidate. I was brought back as an active member of the management board which handled administrative decisions and the national council and a number of other committees dealing with discussions and negotiations in preparation for the elections.

Our discussions with PANU were centred on how we might work together and particularly on sharing our preferences for candidates. It was suggested by Tora that in the west, particularly around Nadi/Lautoka/Ba, for the national (or cross-voting) seats where there was a high proportion of Fijians, Labour should only field token candidates; this would give a PANU candidate a greater chance of being elected.



Fiji's new prime minister
Mahendra Chaudhry in
May 1999. Michael Field

Similarly, for communal seats, PANU should field Fijian seats and Labour the Indian communal seats. We agreed on this and gave our assurance to PANU that we would honour this principle. When it came to the actual naming of candidates for certain seats in the west Tora was very unhappy that we named strong candidates in some national constituencies in which Tora considered we should only field token candidates. Tora's seat, Nadi Open, was one such constituency and as a result he lost the seat and our Labour candidate Parduman Raniga won. This led to acrimonious debates and accusations but Chaudhry was insistent he did not agree to this principle in the first place, and, of course, both of them disagreed on each other's version of the agreement. This was one of the reasons Apisai Tora was strongly against Chaudhry and, unfortunately, Labour. He said openly that he would do whatever was in his power to bring down Chaudhry and the

People's Coalition. During the election in April 1999, four members of PANU were successfully elected to Parliament: Ponipate Lesavua, Meli Bogileka, Eloni Goneyali and Akanisi Koroitamana.

Our discussions with the FAP focused on how we might work together and also on how we could exchange preferences in the seats where we would both field candidates. FAP was unlike PANU in that its support base was not in any particular region; it was an older party and its leader, Kuini Speed, was previously the Labour president. She resigned on marrying Clive Speed, with some pressure from the Labour management that she was selling out the interest of the party. Speed was an Australian who had been associated with Mara's Alliance Party and its perceived capitalist interests.

In terms of party preferences, it was agreed that we would exchange our choices whenever our candidates were fielded together in the same constituency. The FAP did not push the issue as strongly as Tora and did not field strong candidates in national constituencies where Tora's group had candidates.

It was accepted, however, that senior party leaders like Kuini Speed and senior Labour leaders should not be standing against strong candidates from other partner parties.

In the initial discussions, the issue of leadership was raised in a general way and there was an understanding that a Fijian would be prime minister. This became clear during the campaigns from all sections of the community. But in the initial discussions with other parties, each party tried to maximise its gains from the proposed cooperation. Underlying these discussions was the recognition that the party in a partnership or coalition that had the most elected members would provide the leadership of the whole group. It was obvious in our discussion with the FAP that there was some expectation on their part at least that Kuini Speed would be a contender for the post of prime minister. It was clear in our discussions with our Fijian coalition partners, FAP and PANU, that they would expect a Fijian to be prime minister, if we won.

Tora invited me to his hotel in Suva and raised the issue of a Fijian prime minister. At that time, we had not met with the Fijian Association and the issue had not really become prominent. Tora talked about the important things that would be required of a prime minister and went on to stress experience. He then said that his strongest point, compared to people like Kuini Speed or myself, was that he was a veteran politician who had led the trade union strikes in the late 1950s and 1960s while we were still at school. He had formed new political parties as well as joined many parties, including being a minister of the Alliance government of Ratu Mara. I listened but I did not want to take issue with him at that time since the issue had not really been discussed openly with all the partners together.

As a result of the discussions we agreed to form a coalition. The central themes of that coalition were multiracialism, democracy, social justice, concern for the ordinary people and improvement of their quality of life. There was an attempt in the manifesto to reach out to every community.

The election campaigns opened with the launching of our manifesto in the Girit Centre in Lautoka about a month before the general elections in 1999. But before this, I had been asked by Labour to visit some of the more difficult areas in Lautoka and Nadi which had been the strongholds of the NFP in the previous elections of 1994. The leadership in some of these Indian communal areas was not keen to see people like Chaudhry visiting them and they requested that I come and address their meetings. I visited other Indian constituencies in Vanua Levu, including Labasa, Bua and the Savusavu area. I remember the visit to Sigatoka and Navua, and other requests from Labour candidate, Pratap Chand, to address Labour groups in the Nasinu and Nausori areas.

In addition to visiting the Indian constituencies, where we were met enthusiastically, I made time to visit the Fijian constituencies across the country. In Bua, where I campaigned for a week, Fijians were enthusiastic about Labour's message and its promises. The Labour Party

was new in Fijian areas and there was an attitude of suspicion towards it from Fijians following the 1987 coups, which had damaged Labour's image very badly.

People asked about leadership. Again and again I was asked who would be prime minister if we won. I avoided answering but the senior members of the party who were with me told the people that a Fijian would be prime minister and then my name was mentioned.

I had been with the party since its inception in 1985 and was one of its founding vice-presidents. I had not been involved in elections in 1992 and 1994 because I was unhappy with the discriminatory nature of the 1990 constitution but as soon as the constitution had been changed I was happy to support it. At an important vakatunuloa or open-air meeting in Ba in 1999, I was asked to speak first. After I finished speaking to a crowd of about 600 people, I was escorted to a waiting car which would take me to the next meeting in Lautoka. As I was entering the car, I heard loud applause and clapping. I pretended I did not hear what was said over the very loud public address system. Mahendra Chaudhry, who had been with me as I spoke to the crowd, announced that they had just heard the address of their future prime minister. I encountered this on the campaign trail a few times and I knew that the same message was making a tremendous impact in all communities.

PANU and FAP contributed balance across the communities to our team during that election. The message of unity in the proposed coalition was especially significant for the Fijian communities who, in previous elections, had seen Labour favouring the Indian community.

As I went to Bua province, a rural and traditional Fijian constituency that was previously a stronghold of the Alliance Party under Mara and later the SVT under Rabuka, I gathered that their leading villages were interested in the Labour message. I recall my encounter with one of its traditional leaders, Ratu Dovi, chief of Dama (Buli Dama), who was very influential in that area both in his capacity as traditional leader and in his position as a leading member of the SVT. I sent a message

saying that I wanted to visit his chiefly village and its surrounding areas and he left a message with his matanivanua or herald that I should be welcomed appropriately. He excused himself from attending because he was still the key man for the SVT. Ratu Dovi had attended the same secondary school as me and was well educated.

Our message was received enthusiastically and, as a result, the Labour candidate Manoa Bale was elected from there. I had a strong feeling as we moved into traditional Fijian areas that their expectation was that I would be leading Labour and its coalition as prime minister. There was nothing I had encountered in the discussions at various levels that was not consistent with this expectation.

As we campaigned with the most senior Indo-Fijian Labour leaders like Krishna Datt and Pratap Chand, both members of the Labour Party management board pushed the same message, especially in their constituencies.

I was prepared to resign from my position as professor of education at USP if elected, if it meant I could help bring political stability to the country and resolve economic bottlenecks in industries such as sugar. As I visited indigenous Fijian villages, I realised that their concern about political parties with a substantial proportion of people of other races was that they had somehow been left out or not benefited from the fruits of development. In particular I wanted in some way to ensure that the indigenous Fijian people had greater access to means of development, which would not only improve their quality of life but enable them to utilise their huge natural resources in land, forests, sea and minerals. The fact that they had not received the necessary government services that were available and were taken for granted in urban areas and by other communities was an indictment of the much vaunted so-called 'Fijian governments' that had been in place before. I was willing to devote my next five-year term in Parliament to this work.





5

People's Coalition

Wednesday 19 May 1999

Rabuka linked up with opposition NFP leader Jai Ram Reddy in a show of multiracial constitutional cooperation and understanding for the elections, and both were wiped out by unimpressed electors. SVT took only eight of the 71 seats while NFP won none. Rabuka told biographer reporter Stan Ritova he was defeated by the alienation of Fijian people, the Methodist Church and traditional chiefs. The GCC had accepted the new constitution but then they worried that Rabuka was rising too far, creating jealousy: 'As a result they had to put me in my right place. They took their stand behind the 1999 general elections with the Methodist Church against the SVT.' Rabuka said the Fijian culture of respect was 'false because when you look critically at our show of respect, it's almost farcical — it's a very bad façade, it's a cover-up . . . We continue to be driven by politicians who have very narrow personal objectives and aspirations and use the noble idea of the promotion of the indigenous Fijian people.'

Rabuka had not even won among his own people. Among those in the new Coalition Government were Kuini Speed and Mara's daughter Koila Nailatikau. Also there was hijacker Amjad Ali. Nationalist Iliesa Duvuloco lost his seat. Amid the news, Reddy warned, 'Fiji is not yet ready for an Indian prime minister.'



Tupeni Baba, who believed he was likely to lead, recalls what happened:

On election night as the results began to come out on the TV and radio, it was clear there was a swing to Labour. Among the early winners was Labour's Pratap Chand. A Fiji TV reporter asked him, 'Who will be your prime minister if Labour and its coalition get the majority?' He replied soothingly, 'That is a matter we will discuss . . . there is Dr Baba who is eminently qualified.'

Later in the evening as seat after seat fell to Labour, it was obvious that we were witnessing an unprecedented swing to Labour. Our other coalition partners, PANU and FAP, were also doing very well. Labour alone had 37 seats, which meant we had the majority of seats in a 71-member House of Representatives. FAP had 11 seats from nothing previously and PANU had four members. The original coalition won 53 seats, a majority of 18 seats. The Veitokani ni Lewe ni Lotu Vakarisito or the Christian Alliance, who consequently joined the People's Coalition, won three seats. Their Fijian communal member for Bua, Mitieli Bulanauca, won on the strength of our Labour preferences and so did their leader, Poseci Bune, who stood in the neighbouring seat in Macuata. Mareta Rigamoto won the seat for Rotuma and she wanted to join our coalition. Altogether, the coalition won 58 seats out of the 71 seats, more than three quarters of the house, enough to make constitutional changes. I was quite conscious and even worried about the enormous responsibility that was handed to us.

On Tuesday 18 May, when most of the results were finalised, I received word of a meeting of the management board in the Public Service Board Room at 4 pm. Chaudhry, while an MP, also held the post of secretary of the FPSA, secretary of the Fiji Cane Growers Association and secretary-general of the FLP. We therefore had access to the facilities of the FPSA. The meeting was attended by party president Jokapeci Koroi, Pratap Chand who was also secretary-general

of the Fiji Trade Union Congress, Krishna Datt who was the founding FLP secretary-general, Sachida Sharma whose son was married to Chaudhry's only daughter, Chaudhry and myself.

After the opening prayer and pleasantries, we discussed the leadership of the party. Koroï expressed surprise and asked Chaudhry to explain his change of view as to who was to lead. It was obvious she had heard that he wanted to be prime minister, which at that point I had not heard. Chaudhry explained that in terms of the tradition of democracy, the parliamentary leader who led the party into election was normally expected to be the prime minister if the party won. He went on to say that if we did not give him the post of premiership it would be tantamount to giving him a vote of no confidence. He continued that already people were calling him prime minister. Koroï turned to other members, especially Pratap Chand and Datt. I sat there composed and interested in the viewpoints of my other close colleagues. These were the people with whom, and in whose defence, I had faced imprisonment, abuse and persecution from my own Fijian people in 1987 – including having a close Fijian relation, Rabuka, pointing a gun at my head because of my belief in a united Fiji through multiracialism, democracy and social justice, the central tenets of the Labour Party.

Up to this day, I cannot recall anything of any significance in their contributions to that discussion. Here were the people in the Indian community I had respected and shared many moments of joy with; I had known their families and relations. Both had publicly stated who should lead if Labour won. I could not believe they could be too tongue-tied or scared to express their views, unless they felt intimidated by Chaudhry. They had a record in Fiji of being articulate and forceful speakers but they remained quiet. I could not expect anything different from Sachida Sharma; I knew he would 'echo his master's voice'.

Now that I had heard their views, I said, 'I am ready to lead if you want me.' I explained what we had promised the people and what the people expected of us. We sat for two hours; later we heard that the members of the Labour Party caucus who had been waiting for the

result were beginning to suspect we had disagreed on the leadership. This had happened to the NFP when they won the general elections in 1977. They debated for four days and the governor-general then called on Mara, the defeated leader, to become an interim prime minister and another election was called to resolve the matter.

A number of alternatives came to mind. I knew that if we were to vote on the issue, it would be the Fijians (Koroi and I) against the Indians, but I thought that for such an important issue, voting was hardly appropriate. Other ideas came to me – my mind was furiously turning as we talked. Should I resign or should I walk out and express my disgust publicly? But this would break up the party. I recalled the faces of the people in Bua and Dama and the hundreds of villages and settlements I visited during the campaigns telling me with one voice: stay. I could hear their requests for electricity, for better medical facilities, for better schools, for running water, for better transport in the small and remote islands and for Fijians, Indians, Islanders and other races.

I had made my point. Now the party members of the management board had to accept the responsibility of their decision. They offered me the post of deputy prime minister and Krishna Datt suggested switching the post of prime minister in one year; it was all to appease their own conscience; they were searching for something they could say to the Fijian people. I remained detached from the rest of the discussion, as I had lost respect for some of my close associates – in my estimate, they had already destroyed their own credibility. I wondered how they could serve the party henceforth!

As the management board meeting was about to end I was asked to move a motion in the Labour caucus that Chaudhry be made prime minister, to be seconded by one of my colleagues. What a suggestion, I thought – it showed an ignorance of Fijian protocol! Koroi, an indigenous Fijian and president of the party looked at me and I could read her mind. She too was in turmoil. She would have to deal with her own struggle. Despite my long years as a professional educator and

academic, I was a Fijian grounded in Fijian deep sense of veirokorokovi or respectfulness based on our honest dealings with each other. This had been breached – and no wonder; there had been no genuine cooperation between the two major racial groups in politics, certainly not in practice in the Labour Party at that point.

Koroi and my senior colleagues knew only too well that if I did not move the motion as suggested, a major discussion would be opened up and if I got involved in the discussion, it would split the party and even break it up, as happened to the NFP in 1977.

As I moved the motion, I knew from the faces of the seven Fijians out of the 37 elected members present that we had a hard job ahead of us. Joeli Kalou, the most senior of them, looked me in the eye and he did not have to express it. Given the disposition of Chaudhry, both Kalou and I knew that the job would be next to impossible.

The pleasantries that followed that caucus meeting soon faded into insignificance for many of my Fijian colleagues. As the news broke out, our phone lines became clogged and we started to explain (and even justify) how the spirit of the Fiji Labour Party had died.

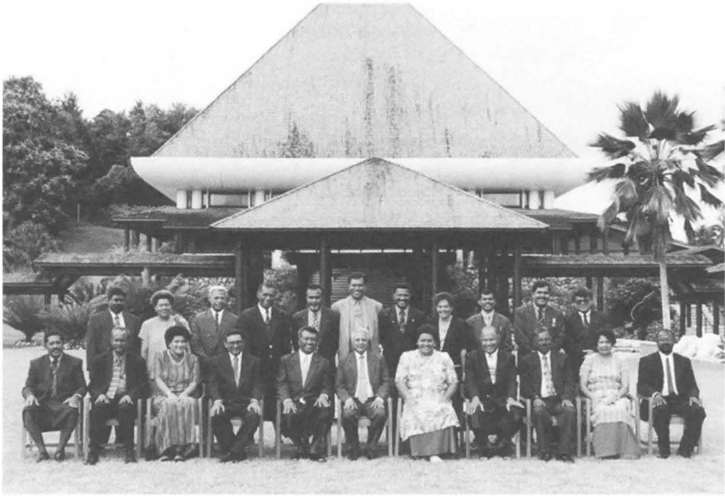


Chaudhry was not to be denied, though, and insisted on taking the leadership. The Government was sworn in on 19 May 1999. He proudly said of it: ‘I have to put the constitution to the test.’



Unaisi Nabobo-Baba remembers that time:

On the campaign trail typical Labour promises were made: employment, union power and recognition by government, reduction of poverty, good housing, roads and hospitals; less of the evils and a brighter future for the masses and the poor. Among the promises was one that Tupeni would be prime minister.



A new cabinet in 1999 – and most to become hostages in 2000. Front row (from left): Tevita Momoedonu, Pratap Chand, Koila M Nailatikau, Anand Singh, Tupeni Baba, Mahendra Chaudhry, Kuini V Speed, Mosese Volavola, Shiu Sharan Sharma, Lavenia Padarath and Ganesh Chand. Back row: Anand Kumar, Ema Tagicakibau, Isimeli Cokanasiga, Ponipate Lesavua, Manoa Bale, Poseci Bune, Meli Bogileka, Marieta Rigamoto, Lekh Ram Vayeshnoi, Ahmed Gaffar, John Ali. Absent: Joji Uluinakauvadra. *Ministry of Information, Fiji*

Tupeni could not have been prime minister, however, for a number of reasons. Firstly, in the morning after the victory announcement, before the world was awake, I received a telephone call from Chaudhry's house asking Tupeni to attend the swearing-in of Mahendra Chaudhry as PM. Tupeni was requested to bring along the other two attendants requested by Mahen: Jokapeci Koroi and Joeli Kalou. Kalou declined, giving reasons that this was not the promise made to the people during the campaign. Koroi as party president and Tupeni attended, not before Tupeni got an earful from me about the fact that the other two Fijian parties in the new coalition had not been summoned for a joint meeting over the choice of the premiership.

By eight o'clock that morning, Tupeni and Koroi entered the Government House for the swearing-in. It was not to be, however. Tupeni returned saying the president was not ready and could they kindly return at 11 o'clock when his office staff were ready for duty.

I prayed, hoping that what my Vugalei upbringing taught me would not materialise; returning like that was a bad omen, a sign that life needed to be closely guarded. But again it could have been that I was just smelling a rat; one never is sure in politics about the political goings-on, they confuse more than anything, and some politicians clearly have more mastery over such an art than others.

Chaudhry decided that the official residence where Rabuka had lived for five years was too small and constricted compared to his own house. He suggested that the official residence be given to the vice-president, Ratu Josefa Iloilo. This was reported in the press and drew



Tupeni Baba is sworn in as a minister in the Chaudhry Government in May 1999. Ministry of Information, Fiji

criticism not only from Rabuka but also from other Fijians. It implied that he was passing the house to the vice-president, a high chief, because it was not good enough for him.



Soon after taking office Chaudhry met a cool GCC at the seedy Tradewinds Hotel in Lami. The council was deeply divided with an Indian leading Fiji and thus ex officio member of the council. Litia Cakobau moved his ejection from the council while Mara defended his inclusion. No decision was taken; nothing in Fiji ever happens in a hurry.

A fierce press war against the government broke out, not helped by Chaudhry's arrogant behaviour. One headlined incident was the way Chaudhry went around standard public service procedures and hired his son Rajendra as personal secretary.



Mahendra Chaudhry meets with the Great Council of Chiefs for the first time as prime minister. Tupeni Baba sits beside him. Michael Field

It looked like nepotism. Renovations to his somewhat modest house caused a flurry in the media which, as the year went on, grew quite hysterically hostile against Chaudhry. The Rupert Murdoch-owned *Fiji Times* decided, almost by default and as a result of one particular reporter, that they were going to get rid of Chaudhry. Reporter Margaret Wise tore into Chaudhry with many an unsourced story which the paper had no qualms about publishing.

What was known to the newspaper, but not shared with readers and now a matter of court record, was that she was also Rabuka's lover and had a child by him. In a bigger place none of this might matter, but in December 1999 Wise and the *Fiji Times* gleefully made an issue over Chaudhry transferring his tea lady, Torika Uluiviti, out of his office after she was said to have seen something that she was not meant to see. The incident involved Chaudhry and freelance journalist Asha Lakhani. The two had a longstanding close relationship. In small-town Suva this incident created high moral tone. The whole thing stank of a set-up job. Where else in the world could a tea lady afford to take out a full page advertisement in the major daily newspaper to recount her version of what she thought she saw?

Wise was eventually fired, but long after Chaudhry had been brought down. A one-time close associate of Rabuka and now a civil rights advocate, Joni Dakuvula, told journalism lecturer David Robie the *Fiji Times* agenda 'was to de-legitimise the elected government by creating a climate of scandal, loathing and fear so the Fiji Labour Party, at least, would not be able to effectively implement its manifesto'.

Chaudhry said journalism faced a crisis of ethics: 'Since taking office, my government has had occasion to be extremely disgusted by the antics of some elements in the media who have used the medium of the newspaper and television to further their own personal agendas to discredit the government. When, day after

day, a particular reporter writes nothing but anti-government stories with facts manipulated and distorted to discredit and embarrass the government, one is left in little doubt as to what the agenda of that particular reporter is . . . It makes one wonder whether there is not a conspiracy at work here between that particular reporter and these anti-government elements.'

Chaudhry's first year of what should have been a five-year term can be said, from this distance, to have been successful. Marking the first anniversary in office, Lakhan, in an Agence France-Presse (AFP) piece, wrote that Chaudhry's first year in office had been 'people-centred development'. Four months into office, he scrapped the 10 percent value-added tax and reduced duty on selected staple food items, among them flour, rice, cooking oil and canned fish, to provide relief to the poor. Early in May 2000 he put 17 everyday consumer items on price control. On health grounds he banned the importation of New Zealand's junk-meat mutton flaps and he clamped down on the banking sector, moved to regulate commercial bank fees and charges and set up a banking services commission to monitor the activities of the financial sector. Investor confidence appeared to return with \$300 million worth of hotel construction contracts signed, some of which had been pending for years. The economy in 2000 was expected to grow at around 4 percent. On the international stage Fiji was destined for major success with the 77 African, Caribbean and Pacific nations linked to the European Union agreeing to meet in Suva on 8 June 2000 to sign what would have been known as the Suva Convention. Heads of states would be in town, including, it was rumoured, Fidel Castro of Cuba. A *Fiji Times* poll six months after elections rated Chaudhry the most popular leader at 62 percent approval, surpassing Rabuka. It was not a bad performance, particularly given that he had been elected on a five-year term and could be expected to take the more unpopular decisions early in his government.

A high-profile issue in Chaudhry's first year was a decision on how to handle one of the world's largest mahogany plantations, 43,600 hectares valued at US\$68 million. During the Rabuka term a battle over the right to mill it had centred on the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) and a US company, Trans Resource Management (TRM). CDC won approval because they had money upfront, but before the deal could be settled Chaudhry came into office. One of the critical players was a local businessman known for some of his questionable practices, who was chairman of the state-owned Fiji Pine Ltd and Fiji Hardwood Corp — George Speight. The incoming government sacked him. TRM chairman, Seattle businessman Marshall Pettit, had in March 1988 hired Speight as a 'consultant' on a proposed deal over Fiji's pine plantations. Chaudhry went ahead with the CDC deal but TRM threatened legal action and a significant political row blew up. The government put a full-page advertisement in the *Fiji Sun* on 4 April 2000 outlining the deal and saying that TRM was misleading people over the CDC offer.

Fiji TV revealed that TRM had paid US\$5000 into Speight's Brisbane bank account while he was still on government boards. Speight responded that the consultancy fees paid into his account did not amount to a conflict of interest, saying he had acted 'in a responsible manner and with absolute integrity'. The issue was still being fought the week the coup took place; Speight had good financial reasons for wanting Chaudhry out.

The toughest issue was land and the complex ownerships and leasing arrangements in the Agricultural Landlord and Tenants Act (ALTA). Chaudhry was obliged, as were Rabuka before him and Laisenia Qarase after him, to confront the issue. Around 83 percent of Fiji's land is in inalienable indigenous ownership. Most of it is rugged jungle land while the arable land is mostly under sugar, leased for 30 years under ALTA to Indian farmers. Under Rabuka, leases were expiring, but Chaudhry faced a more



New prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry just in the job in May 1999. Looking on (left) is Fiji TV's Riyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, who would star in one of the coup's key events. Michael Field

drastic problem in that 28 percent of the leases would end in his term of office, while nearly half of them would go in 2011. It had economic consequences: land going out of lease was also mostly going out of sugarcane production, draining the country's economic growth. It was a constituency issue for Chaudhry and the FLP. Many Indian farmers were going off the land with no compensation for the investments they had made in it — mostly housing — while those able to win new leases were being made to pay significantly more. The system made the situation very complex anyway with the owners unable to deal directly with the farmers. Everything had to go through the bureaucratic and inefficient NLTB. The farmers were Chaudhry's people from the National Farmers Union and he looked after his own, promising those moved off their land between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a farmer. In the eyes of Fijian landowners, many of whom made

very little out of the leasing in the first place, this was a case of the rich getting richer.

Chaudhry wanted an extension to ALTA. Landowners opposed this. Several key chiefs, including Tui Sabeto, Kaliova Lumuni and Tui Ba Adi Seinimili, said Chaudhry was being one-sided, while the Cakaudrove Provincial Council rejected it outright. Chaudhry moved too quickly on the land issue and was driven by the heady sense of dynasty that landslide poll victories give; in the case of ALTA Chaudhry was digging his own grave on moving ground. The September GCC meeting threw out Chaudhry's ALTA plans.

Things were going wrong elsewhere and on 23 September 1999 Youth Minister Ponipate Lesavua, a former police inspector, revealed that meetings had been held around the country seeking the removal of the government. Tora, whose PANU party was in coalition with Chaudhry, had hosted one meeting in his home on 13 September 1999. Chaudhry said he knew there were moves to



Taukei politician Apisai
Tora. Ministry of Information

topple the government but that they had no teeth. Tora threatened to use the Taukei Movement to 'topple the government before the year is out' through protest marches, demonstrations and civil disobedience campaigns. He accused Chaudhry of being arrogant and disrespectful of traditional Fijian institutions: 'He is telling the Great Council of Chiefs you go and get stuffed. Somebody should remind Chaudhry that he is running a government and not a union.'

Tora said Fijian landowners were being taken for a ride as Chaudhry played the 'politics of race'. Land, said Tora, was sacred for Fijians, 'an extension of their soul, mind and being, given to them by God spiritually and otherwise. It can only be understood by Fijians and those that understand their culture. I am singing out for the landowners and it is their right to protest. If Mahatma Gandhi could do it in India why can't I do it in Fiji, my own country? They can put me in jail but they can't kill the idea.'

Rabuka, out of Parliament, became GCC chairman while Kubuabola, the 1987 coup-plotter, became SVT opposition leader. A SVT paper revealed the party set up a committee that would 'devise strategies to bring down the government, set up an interim government, change the 1997 constitution and hold a general election under a new constitution'.

In the period following the election Chaudhry allocated five portfolios to himself, in addition to being prime minister. There had been the attack on the media and a vendetta against certain local businessmen who did not agree with Labour's policy and these laid the basis for a prolonged war against Fijian interest. He rewarded Indian farmers whose leases were not renewed, but not the Fijian landowners who wanted to refarm their land. Tupeni Baba describes this time: 'After a honeymoon period with the nation, the voices of dissent, particularly from sections of the Fijian people, were heard and with numerous sources of

discontent fused and ignited, protests were mounted and the Government was in a state of siege. Our dreams and the pledge we made to our people became distant as we were becoming concerned with the survival of our own government.'

Suva was again alive with rumours, particularly that the Coalition Government was about to break up and that Chaudhry, unpopular in his own party, was going to be dumped. Rumours of pending coups were also common by April 2000, although this was hardly a surprise in a town given to a high degree of political gossip and experience of earlier coups. Among the best informed it was just a matter of time. *Daily Post* editor Mesake Koroi was alert to more than just rumour. A Lauan, he was later to become an adviser to Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, with whom he had a chiefly tie. A couple of columns in April were prophetic. On 8 April 2000 he noted the reemergence of Tora had driven the devil's fear into the Indian community in Nausori, north of Suva. Shopowners told him people were no longer buying goods and those on leasehold land were scared. On 17 April 2000 he asked how genuine was Chaudhry's resolve to help the indigenous Fijian community, saying he had created a lot more foes than friends. He blamed the land issue: 'Land is also regarded as sovereignty, something to be defended to the death, like honour.'

Koroi said Fijian political thinking had been unpredictable and split and noted Mara had twice fallen victim at elections: 'But will history repeat itself again through another disruption of parliamentary rule? I hope not. But the signs are that [Chaudhry] is in for a rough ride unless he moves as far away from the land issue as soon as possible.' He added that 'the same players are again at work'.

On 6 April 2000 Tora said Chaudhry was inviting an uprising, although Tora said he did not want one: 'We have been through that . . . But whatever we do will be done within the bounds of the law. Call it what you like, civil disobedience, marches,

demonstrations. These are all within the law and the Taukei movement will remain within the bounds of the law.'

Two days later RFMF Colonel George Kadavulevu said the military had no intention of staging another coup: 'The present government was nominated by the majority of the population and therefore the military must only be used to support and promote the ideas of the government so nominated.'

With hindsight it is obvious what was coming, but at the time the intrigue was background noise in a city used to political gossip. Chaudhry on 18 April 2000 flew to Canberra to meet Prime Minister John Howard for talks over clothing tariffs. It was a significant issue for Fiji with around 18,000 jobs likely to disappear as Australia, under World Trade Organisation rules, eased tariffs on other imports, cutting into Fiji's advantage. Hollywood actor Tom Hanks was at Monuriki Island near Nadi filming *Castaway* and Fiji's tourism was booming.

Taukei staged a march in Suva on 21 April 2000 but only around 500 protesters turned up. The SVT leadership, other than Kubuabola, were prominent in a march on 28 April which attracted more people; the *Fiji Sun* estimated it attracted 5000. Assistant Police Commissioner Jahir Khan said around 1500 people took part in the march, but his boss, Police Commissioner Isikia Savua, warned that if the protests continued police resources would be stretched to the limit, implying the numbers were much greater. Savua called on government to hold talks with the protesters he described as 'a group of society that have grievances'.

'I really don't believe we'll continue to have peaceful marches if their grievances are not heard,' Savua said in what sounded a lot like a threat. It was a numbers game and Savua was milking imagined bigger numbers to create crisis. The numbers were not that great even by Fiji standards and could have readily been established by the news media.

Savua was an unlikely man to be police commissioner. He went to Queen Victoria School (QVS) at Matavatuou, a school which has thrown a long destabilising shadow over Fiji. He joined the military straight out of high school and served 18 years, leaving with the rank of lieutenant colonel. He joined Fiji's Foreign Affairs Ministry in 1998, with the highlight being a six-month post as consul general in Sydney. He transferred to the police in 1992 as deputy commissioner and six months later became police commissioner under fellow QVS Old Boy, Rabuka.

On 30 April 2000 Chaudhry told the *Fiji Times* that the Fijian community would not be fooled a second time by unruly elements out to topple the Government. Ordinary citizens did not want a repeat of 1987 and protest marches organised against the Government were the work of disgruntled politicians who had lost the general elections: 'They will use any excuse to whip up emotions. We have been through this in 1987 and look where the country had come to after those events. The ordinary people paid a heavy price for that and our economy was in tatters. It took a long time to rebuild and the economy is now poised to take off. And we are having the same sort of thing again.'

On 5 May 2000 Home Affairs Minister Joji Uluinakauvadra said no more protest marches would be allowed with the exception of one already approved for Friday 19 May, organised by Iliesa Duvuloco: 'Their application was approved last week but as of today there will be no more approvals for protest marches.'

On 15 May 2000, just four days out from a coup, Koroi wrote in the *Daily Post* that the thirteenth anniversary of Rabuka's coup had just passed unnoticed: 'But what is ahead is still a mystery.'

'Word has it that the Nationalist/Vanua Tako Lavo march planned for Friday May 20 [sic] is likely to be a bloody affair. My guru "Daucina" said there was talk of bloodshed among the perpetrators of the march at a meeting held in Suva on Friday night. There were also talks of burning and looting. However,

there were some moderates who thought that the last thing the marchers would want to do is to turn their peaceful demonstration into a blood bath. We can only plead with the organisers and hope that common sense will prevail.

'Incidentally, the May 20 [sic] march is no longer limited to the Nationalists only. Last week, the Nationalists held joint meetings with the . . . SVT, the Taukei movement and other Fijian political parties discussing how best the march could be used to advance "Taukei" aspirations.'

MP Ema Golea Tagicakibau later remembered she was warned by an MP she would not name that something was about to happen: 'In April a colleague MP warned that . . . the government would be ousted. But because it came by way of a joke, I took it just like that.'

Lieutenant Colonel Viliame Seruvakula, commander of the Third Battalion Infantry Regiment, believed a coup was coming and his men would have to act, irrespective of race, colour and religion. 'So what I did was to train the soldiers mentally and physically. I took them down the highlands of Ba and put them in a training cycle which lasted for three to four days per company . . . The objective was to prepare them mentally and at the same time to keep them physically fit. At the same time continue to talk to them about what was to come.'

He knew the date too and on 19 May 2000 had prepared his men at 7 am to surround Parliament to protect it. But the order never came. Police knew the coup was coming and a high-level review after the event, with minutes recorded by Assistant Superintendent Soloveni Waqavuki, noted that Savua had warned Chaudhry on 20 April of a likely coup and they knew the march on 19 May was likely to be a big one. But no operational orders were given by the police command.

'Operations orders are issued during marches, visits by the royal family or foreign diplomats. But if the operation order is

not issued, then police officers would be confused as to what their role should be and what responsibilities to take. The operation order is activated by the commissioner of police after it has been brought to him by the divisional police commander.'

Correspondent Lakhan noted on 18 May that Chaudhry's first anniversary in office would see nationalists marching through Suva calling for his resignation. He saw them as no more than a nuisance: 'We know who the players are behind the scenes. Many of them are the same faces we saw in 1987. And look where the country got after that. It took 12 long years to put the country back on track, get a new constitution that is internationally acclaimed.'

In a dig at rival Keith-Reid, Lakhan wrote: 'A year ago when . . . Chaudhry . . . took office there were doubts he would last a week.' Keith-Reid had said Chaudhry would not last a year. It was obvious, not just because nationalists began plotting, but because of the nature of Chaudhry's character and his son who was cursed with a severe arrogance. Keith-Reid said within the Coalition Government, Chaudhry's 'imperial ways and control mania was already fomenting rebellion in his own ranks'. By April 2000 Keith-Reid wondered publicly who would get Chaudhry first: the nationalists or his own, disaffected side.



6

Civil coup

Friday 19 May 2000

Since the coup, Suva has become a black hole where truth and light have been replaced with speculation, theory, and conspiracy. More than one well placed source can offer an explanation of what happened, complete with names of financiers and the ‘real plotters’ — such a familiar term these days — who stood in the shadows and were to come out later. This makes for entertaining chat at the Republic of Cappuccino coffee house where libel laws can be overlooked. This book requires more than rumour and in going to solid sources I confronted the severely limiting fact that no judicial or formal inquiry was held into the events of 19 May 2000. Several court trials provided only limited information and tended to focus on the role of the individual facing charges. In this account, I’ve drawn from various trials that followed, not least because of the court privilege attached to the information and names. Speculation comes later. The *Daily Post*’s Mesake Koroï claimed later that the ‘real plotters’ included a woman and that they had all met in a house in Laucala Beach Estate in northern Suva. Court records point to a house at 8 Mitchell Street, on the edge of Suva’s central business district, as coup headquarters. Dismal politician Iliesa Duvuloco rented the place and hosted a number of meetings with Speight, making it coup headquarters.

On the theory that success has many fathers and failure is an orphan, no one, other than Speight so far, has been revealed as the

inspiration for the coup. There is no paperwork, unlike Rabuka's coup, except for a list of names said to constitute the post-coup government, found much later at Joe Nata's home.

Those who went to Mitchell Street gave a fragmented picture of what happened but all implied George Speight and his brother Jim were in charge. Sometime in April, Salesi Tuifagalele, a soldier with the army's special force Counter Revolutionary Warfare (CRW)'s First Meridian Squadron attended a meeting at Mitchell Street and said planning was underway to launch a coup on 28 April. He was to have gone with another man on that day to pick up explosives from Duvuloco's farm.

'When we reached the farm no one was at home so we came back. The purpose of the dynamite was to make bombs and the targets were Westpac and ANZ.'

By early May the idea was to seize Parliament, linked to a Taukei march through Suva. A date was set and Duvuloco



Coup headquarters: 8 Mitchell Street. Michael Field

applied for a permit to hold the march. That aspect was nearly undone when Savua's comments led to a ban on marches. The plan called for the plotters to kidnap Mara. Duvuloco would present Mara with a tabua or whale's tooth which would amount to a traditional demand for his resignation. Jone Vidi, who later turned state's evidence, was at Mitchell Street to get his orders.

'I was asked to kidnap the president, but I told George I couldn't because he is my chief . . . George told us that, after the coup, our families would receive a salary for life and we would be responsible for internal security . . . They wanted to destroy Suva by fire, but I told them it was better to stage a coup.'

Speight told them weapons from the military had been confirmed: 'He showed us the paper and someone had written that the weapons were set, it required us to pick them up.'

Another plotter, Viliame Savu, recalled the march permit discussion at Mitchell Street: 'Rules are made by people and can be broken by people themselves.'

He said neither George nor Jim Speight divulged how the coup was to be staged, only confirming that 'everything was set'.

A public works employee, Simione Drole, in state's evidence, spoke of meeting at Mitchell Street on 18 May. Also there was a FAP Coalition Government MP, Timoci Silatolu. Speight briefed those involved and Drole, Savu, Speight and Silatolu went to the CRW office at the military headquarters where they met Jim Speight. There were bags containing arms.

'After the men loaded the big bags into Speight's vehicle, we then made our way down to Suva Point where we were to have another meeting,' Drole said. 'While we were on our way to Suva Point, I found out about the planning of a coup.'

At Suva Point the bags were put into an inflatable dinghy and taken out to sea by three men. It is not known where they went but it was near the unpopulated island called Nukulau. Drole said that at Suva Point Speight had instructed Silatolu that he

would be the one to give the green light: ‘George Speight told him, “You’re the one who will make the final call from Parliament, straight after the prayer.”’

The gang went from Suva Point to Nata’s apartment where he had with him a list of names nominated for the interim government. Drole said, ‘Ratu Timoci was nominated interim prime minister but Speight was not pleased with this, saying he would have it sorted out tomorrow.’

Police found the list later at Nata’s apartment, along with a boxful of similar documents, one of which named Silatolu as prime minister and also named many of those who were sworn in on the 20 May, including Berenado Vunibobo as foreign minister, a post he had held in Rabuka’s government before his electoral defeat. The opposition leader, Inoke Kubuabola, was named on Nata’s list as the new telecommunications minister.

On the night before the coup Drole attended one of the meetings and heard Speight tell Duvuloco: ‘We are having the march tomorrow as planned. You will be in the march, but I will call you straight after the Parliament has been sitting, so that you can direct the march right to Parliament House.’

The involvement of the CRW has not been explained in the court records. Speight had neither a military background nor obvious ties and it remains a mystery how such a crack unit was drawn into the coup. After a week of exercising on Vanua Levu, First Meridian Squadron went to a church service on Sunday 14 May at a farm outside Savusavu. This was followed by rounds of kava, hosted by the farm owner, one Sitiveni Rabuka. Poseci Bune, agriculture minister in Chaudhry’s government, said CRW officers told him that Rabuka had spoken to them of being called to do something from which some of them may not return. Rabuka confirmed the soldiers had been on his property but said it was a coincidence and had nothing to do with the coup.

The retired founder of the CRW was a 60-year-old veteran

of the British Special Air Services (SAS), Ilisoni Ligairi, who claimed he had taken no part in the coup planning and only found out on the Friday that his beloved unit was in some kind of political action. ‘I never knew who Speight was until about one hour before the coup — you see, my men are trained for this kind of exercise. Getting rid of the government was something that almost every Fijian was talking about at the time. So when George, who said he was ready on the civilian side, asked whether we could carry this out, I did not hesitate — I believe in protecting the institution of the Taukei first before protecting the institution of the government.’

A military spokesman, Major Howard Politini, was to claim that some of the soldiers who found themselves with Speight had no idea what they were involved in as they travelled toward Parliament: ‘A few of them jumped off the van when they realised where they were going.’

This was to be a cellphone coup — the conspirators used them constantly, leaving tracks for investigators to follow later. One of those Speight called on 18 May was a minor chief, Jope Seniloli, and from around 3 am Friday 19 May the mobile phones used by Speight, Nata and Silatolu were in constant action. Most of the calls were between Speight and Duvuloco. Journalist Nata took time to phone his girlfriend at 4 am, telling her something dramatic would happen later that day.

Marika Dakuvere, who worked in Silatolu’s parliamentary complex office, remembered that Friday morning seeing two sports bags and a nervous Silatolu. ‘He asked me five times when the meeting (Parliament) was going to start.’ Much later Silatolu admitted to having a conversation earlier that morning with lawyer Rakuita Vakalalabure who was to play a key role in Speight’s coup. ‘Is everything set?’ Vakalalabure asked, to which Silatolu replied, ‘I have just called, everything is okay.’

The march through Suva was the big item on the day’s news

agenda. If the police were taking a casual approach to it, reporters were watching more closely than usual and, in some cases, trying to get an accurate count on participants. For the most part it was an orderly parade through downtown Suva and by 10 am was looking uneventful. The count was again to be disputed: reporters said 1600 people took part; Savua was to say 15,000.

Speight's group of seven were loaded up and ready to go. The two Speight brothers were there, along with Ligairi and four CRW soldiers. Their objective was Parliament. One of the soldiers was Vilimone Tikotani or 'Commander Bill'. Jim Speight wore a balaclava because he did not want his identity exposed — he feared losing his Australian citizenship.

The attractive parliamentary complex at Veiuto was opened in 1992 in time for the resumption of democracy in the wake of Rabuka's coups. It sits on Battery Hill, named after World War Two guns there, on the corner of Vuya Road and Ratu Sukuna Road, and looking out to the entrance to Suva Harbour and the Koro Sea. The ceremonial entrance to Parliament is on Ratu Sukuna, across the road from the neat but poor Draiba Fijian School, whose pupils were to lose a year of schooling in the name of the indigenous cause. Most of the comings and goings were through the Battery Road entrance which ran off Vuya Road. Speight's old school, Suva Grammar, was just down Vuya which intersected Queen Elizabeth Drive at nearby Suva Point. The complex is loosely modelled on a Fijian village with a series of buildings around a large bure or traditional Fijian style assembly, the Vale-ni-Bose Lawa. The chamber itself is light and airy, accessible and comfortable. Hanging masi, fine tapa made of beaten mulberry bark and painted in traditional patterns, gives a distinctive feel to it. Outside it has a wide area of lawn while off to one side a cluster of buildings provides offices and meeting rooms. Out towards the back, overlooking a mangrove-heavy Leveti Creek, is a small bure where social functions were often



Parliament in session. This was taken in 2001, after the coup, and when it had been repaired and restored. President Josefa Iloilo is in the speaker's chair.

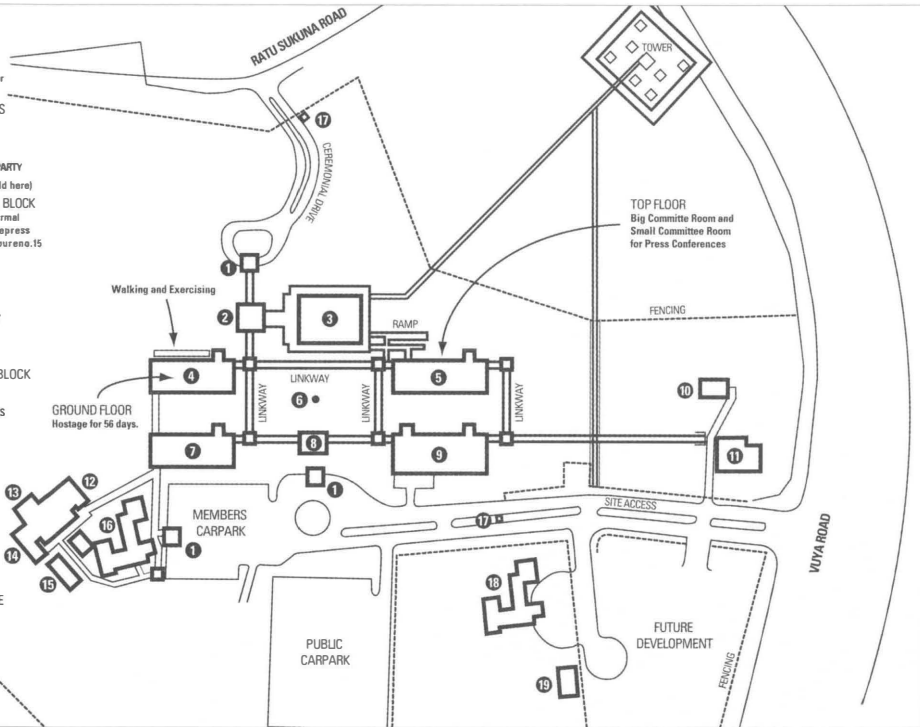
Michael Field

held. Just before Parliament opened that hot Friday morning, Chaudhry's staff in his office shared a cake with one candle on it to mark the Coalition Government's first birthday. Within 30 minutes seven masked men ended that government.

At 10.40 am Parliament's session opened. Speight was nearby and at 10.45 am he phoned Silatolu, who was in his seat in the chamber just as Baba was speaking. Speight's van was coming in, unchallenged, through the Ratu Sukuna entrance. Seconds later the gang burst into the chamber and Silatolu was able, albeit less than convincingly, to claim he was surprised at it.

'When two shots were fired, I knew this could be serious,' he told a court several years later. 'I was fearful for my life so when they asked me about joining them, I was thinking of life, I opted for life.'

- 1 PORTE COCHERE
- 2 PARLIAMENT HALL
- 3 VALE NI BOSE
Fijians/Rotuman and Other
hostages
- 4 GOVERNMENT OFFICES
SOODSODO NI DUAVATA
NI LEWENIVANUA PARTY
CONSERVATIVE ALLIANCE PARTY
(Indian hostages were held here)
- 5 PARLIAMENT OFFICES BLOCK
Press Conferences - in normal
times, during the coup, the press
conferences were in the bureno.15
- 6 GRAVE SITE
- 7 OPPOSITION OFFICES
FLR LABOUR PARTY OFFICE
NEW LABOUR UNITY PARTY
UNITED GENERAL PARTY
- 8 PUBLIC RECEPTION
- 9 COMMITTEE OFFICES BLOCK
DEPUTY SPEAKER
COMMITTEE ROOM FACILITIES
ADMINISTRATION
- 10 GARAGE
- 11 SENATOR'S LOUNGE
- 12 KITCHEN
- 13 SPEAKER'S LOUNGE
- 14 DINING HALL
- 15 BURE
- 16 LIBRARY
- 17 GUARD HOUSE
- 18 SPEAKER'S RESIDENCE
- 19 VAKATUNULOVA



Associate Agriculture Minister Marieta Rigamoto knew who Speight was; just two days earlier he had been in her office, discussing dairy farming. Poseci Bune said Speight tripped as he arrived at Parliament: 'I thought it was a joke because when they stormed in, George almost slipped. He didn't notice the steps so he nearly fell on himself there.'

A government backbencher, Viliame Volavola, who would join the plotters, claimed later he had no knowledge of the coup and was surprised to see armed men arrive. He heard Speight's people say they had the support of the chiefs. 'I got very angry with this statement but couldn't do anything.'

Fiji Times reporter Matelita Rago was in the press gallery and thought it was a group re-enacting the first coup to mark the birthday of Chaudhry's government. She was unsure of its relationship to the march and did not think it was a coup because, knowing what had happened in 1987, she believed it would need intricate planning and military back-up. 'But why were they



Fiji Times' Matelita Rago.

Michael Field

dressed in cut-jeans — they were not even organised enough to have an outfit that would represent their movement or whatever they were! There were only a handful of them and there was no clear leader whose voice should have been dominant in giving orders. The chamber was not swarming with military, well armed soldiers, so one must be forgiven for the initial thought that this was a joke.’ Speight seemed to be the leader, ‘but there were at least two within the group that probably should have been the leader — they disagreed on a couple of things it seemed and while George, in a baseball cap, appeared cool the rest were clearly agitated’.

Chaudhry was staring straight ahead. ‘The members were obviously stunned, especially those on the government benches,’ said Ragogo. ‘No one moved, no one said a word on both sides of the house but there were quick glances around and behind them.’ School students in the gallery were told to file out and the doors to the chamber were closed.

Speaker Kurusaqila demanded to know what was happening.

‘This is a civil coup,’ yelled Speight. ‘Hold tight, nobody move!’ He told Kurusaqila to leave, and warned them to cooperate so no one would get hurt.

Kurusaqila was standing, disbelieving: ‘Na cava: what is this?’

Speight repeated himself: ‘This is a civil coup, with arms and ammunition, by the people and for the people. Please just tell them not to get up!’

‘It is an illegal act,’ Kurusaqila said, ‘you know that!’

Speight waved his gun at the members, and warned them he would use it if they made things difficult.

Kurusaqila was far from intimidated and, still standing, he waved a finger at Speight: ‘If you have to shoot anyone in this House, you shoot me first!’

Ragogo hoped it would collapse then. ‘Even at that point I still

believed this group could be unsuccessful, so disorganised they were and unsure of their next moves. And I didn't want to believe it but I did when I heard the gunshots.'

Speight fired several shots into the roof. Chaudhry had an armed body guard nearby, but he was outgunned by the plotters who had Uzi submachine guns that the Israeli Government had given the CRW.

Ragogo was in the gallery with two other journalists when an armed man, well dressed and who could have easily passed as a plainclothes policeman, came in. The striking aspect of this was that Ragogo had greeted him in the corridor — before the coup. Court evidence suggested Speight and gang arrived in one van, at one time, and took over Parliament. Ragogo's account points to plotters already there, and some who have never been identified by authorities. She had assumed he was a plainclothes policeman and believed he was unarmed. Yet when he came into the gallery, he was armed.

'He was not mean or anything but he didn't allow us to go outside and at that moment I realised that these guys wanted us there, they wanted us to see everything . . . I didn't get scared for my life. To the contrary, I realised I was witnessing Fijian history and I was very saddened by the fact that the "Fijian people" were being used again like the first coup; the few who needed status quo to return were willing to make the country suffer again, return us to the abyss we had just begun to resurface from just so they could get where they wanted or for some, return to where they were and for one person, avoid a court case regarding his fraudulent business practices.'

Speight had achieved the first goal, taking Parliament. When Rabuka seized Parliament in 1987 he had trucks outside waiting to haul the politicians into captivity, but Speight had no such plan and once in control of the assembly, seemed confused about what to do next. Many noted Speight's furious sequence of phone calls.

As the attackers were tying up the hands of politicians, Speight kept saying they would be surprised to see the real leader of the coup. But no one else showed up, said Bune. 'So we had to wait about 40 minutes as he was making calls . . . and telling us that we will be surprised that he is not the real leader as the real leader will arrive for us to see him.'

When the mystery man failed to show Speight told his captors he was going to be late: 'Well, I have to take it on from here.'

Matelita Ragogo remembered an invitation to the Opposition to join the group. 'In the meantime, one of the guys had started walking around the house with a basket collecting the government members' mobile telephones. All members refused to join the group but I noticed that Timoci Silatolu did not stand up to leave with the Opposition members nor did he give his mobile telephone to the man who was collecting them!'

Chaudhry and then other government members were forced on their knees from behind and handcuffed and then told to sit in front of the parliamentary secretary-general's table. 'The men disagreed on whether the women should also be treated the same and, in the end, the women escaped this humiliation,' recalls Ragogo. 'I watched my colleague Josephine Prasad [*Daily Post*] cry and watched the humiliation going on downstairs silently and for the first time in my life, I was ashamed to be a Fijian.

'Being someone who struggled all my life to be where I was at that moment, having had to work and study at the same time to better understand this job I had grown to absolutely love and get some form of qualification, I loathed those men downstairs for trying to find an easy way out, for making such a big spectacle of their supposed belief, led by someone I have never heard speak one word of Fijian, a big talker with an accent and never have I seen him in a sulu before.

'Suddenly one of the group members downstairs yelled at us in the press gallery. We were taken downstairs and told to sit in

the public gallery. We sat there for at least 10 minutes when one of the men turned around and as if seeing us for the very first time, he asked what we were doing there. That's when we were told to leave the chambers. And that's when I confirmed my first observations that they were disorganised, that there was no real leader in that parliamentary chamber that morning.'

Bune and others believed the mystery man they were calling was Police Commissioner Isikia Savua but the phone records showed that Speight's first three calls after seizing Parliament were to Duvuloco who was at the head of the march through Suva. Duvuloco was known to most of the MPs and few would have put him down as a likely coup leader. But he did want Mara out of office and he and the Taukei were leading the march through Suva to Government House, a large old white building overlooking Queen Elizabeth Drive. They wanted to present a petition calling for Mara's resignation. News came through to the march — perhaps from Speight himself — of what was happening at Parliament. Hundreds of protesters made the nearly two-kilometre jog over to Parliament to quickly back up the small band of men holding the chamber. It is here that the strategy makes some sense. Speight could not have held his position for long had the authorities moved against him. Before police could move, the parliamentary complex quickly filled up with Taukei marchers, many of them from the Cakobau–Speight Tailevu/Naitasiri region of Viti Levu. Hundreds of other Fijians in the march did not head for Parliament. Anarchy was in the air and the business district waited, unprotected by Savua. Speight's plan had called for attacks on banks but what happened to Suva was beyond control as hundreds of people plundered shops, supermarkets, dutyfree shops and small stores owned by families for years. Around 160 shops were looted and many were burnt and destroyed in acts of vandalism. A number of key shops were untouched, lending later to an air of wider conspiracy.

Rabuka was one of the first to reach Parliament, ostensibly as a mediator in negotiations between the Speight gang and Mara. Rabuka phoned Mara and told him, ‘I’m ready’, and when Mara asked, ‘For what?’, Rabuka replied, ‘You’ve never heard?’ Mara a couple of years later told Fiji TV that on the following Sunday Rabuka and Savua visited him: ‘That Sunday morning, as soon as they sat down I said, “You two, I want you to know,” and I pointed at Rabuka and Savua, “you had a hand in this thing.”’

If circumstantial evidence is significant, the nature of Speight’s behaviour in the early part of the coup suggested he did not know what he was doing. Rabuka’s coup had been thought out and even put in writing, but Speight was making things up as he went along. Rabuka found Speight did not know what to do next. ‘Tell us what to do,’ he said Speight asked him, ‘you’ve done it before.’ He was astonished that Speight was not even demanding an amnesty for what he was doing; that was an elementary precaution in Rabuka’s putsch. ‘He has no idea; he doesn’t know what to do.’



Tupeni Baba was speaking as Speight and gang charged in:

When the Speaker left with the members of the opposition, the parliamentary sergeant-at-arms left with them. He witnessed the unceremonial adjournment of Parliament and left, leaving his hat behind. Hats are normally worn by Indo-Fijians – for them it is an essential part of their uniform. It speaks much of his state, having witnessed perhaps the most unusual event in the political history of Fiji.

Throughout this early confrontation, which appeared to last forever, I kept standing. I remained standing with my report in front of me. Nobody, other than the Speaker, I thought to myself, had any authority to make me sit. I looked around me. The seat on my right,

that of the co-deputy prime minister, was empty. It had been empty for sometime as Adi Kuini Speed had been sick and was away in Canberra for treatment. I noted that the labour minister's seat immediately behind me, that of Tevita Momoedonu, was also empty. The health minister, Isimeli Cokanasiga's seat was also empty; he too was sick. And so was the seat on the far end of the front bench on my right, that of the minister for education, who was away in Vanuatu to attend the USP Council which my partner, Unaisi, was also attending.

We were being handcuffed, beginning with the prime minister on my left. He resisted and I said to him: 'It's okay . . . let's go along and we'll see what they're doing.' They came to me and like the other ministers, I was handcuffed and required to sit on the floor. Speight (whom I didn't really know) was making calls on his mobile. It was obvious he wanted to connect with someone, or some people. He wasn't getting through, and was clearly frustrated.

Speight announced he would be inviting some of us to join his 'new government'. The first name he called out was 'Ratu Timoci Silatolu'. Silatolu immediately replied he would join him. Speight called out 'Ratu Tevita Momoedonu'. There was silence, and all eyes focused on his empty seat behind me. I replied, 'He's not here.' The next name was called, 'Ratu Tuakitau Cokanauto'. Speight's voice rose above the eerie silence . . . I looked hard at Cokanauto who had a small following in the Fijian Association against Adi Kuini and it was clear he was undecided about what to do. 'Can you give some time to think about it', he said.

'I will give you five minutes,' replied Speight.

Speight called another: 'Ratu Isireli Vuibau?'

'No, thank you,' Vuibau said briskly.

Then Speight turned again to Cokanauto and asked: 'Have you made up your mind?'

'Please, give me some more time,' Cokanauto replied and Speight retorted he would give him another 10 minutes.

In handcuffs, we were instructed to remain in Parliament under the watchful eye of the guards who were in military uniforms and

armed with weapons. We were then ordered to all move outside, and as we reached the porch, we were separated: the Indian members were ordered to move into the Government Members' Office at the bottom floor of the next building. I sensed immediately that the rebels wanted to separate us as was done to us in the first coup of 1987. This was a weapon to break our solidarity. With the benefit of the 1987 coup in my mind, I protested and said to my colleagues to hold on tightly to each other and not let them separate us. At that point, I realised that there were only three of us – I counted quickly – who were there in Parliament on the day of the 1987 coup: Chaudhry, Joeli Kalou and myself. We struggled but finally they pulled us apart. Our colleagues did not know the drill, I said to myself. There was no time to talk strategies. The Indo-Fijian members were led away with Chaudhry into the next building. The Fijian and Rotuman members and the two General Voters (or part-Fijian members) were led back to the main Parliament building.

I noticed as we settled into the main Parliament building that some members of the Fijian Association who were supposed to be part of the Government were allowed to leave. This included Cokanauto, Volavola, Esira Rabuno, Leone Tuisawaga, Atonio Tanaburenisau and Peceli Rinakama, apart from Silatolu who had agreed to join the rebels earlier. Later I gathered that they had left to have a meeting with the opposition MPs who were mostly SVT members. They left and did not return.

Those that remained in the main Parliament building were members of the Labour Party, the Party of National Unity, the two members of the Veitokani ni Lewe ni Vanua Party and two members of the Fijian Association, Ema Tagicakibau and Joji Uluinakauvadra. Altogether, there were 16 parliamentarians in the main building: 11 men and five women.

There were two senators, Jokapeci Koroi and Atu Emberson Bain, who were captured in and around the parliamentary complex and were rounded up, along with two women secretaries, a male assistant clerk, two male messengers and two Fijian policemen. These people were held

captive with us in the main Parliament building during the first night.

After a while, in came Ligairi. He said: 'I am the head of a special unit in the army, I am responsible for the security of this operation. I have no choice as I was told to do this . . .'

I realised then that a section of the army under him, the CRW, were the soldiers in uniform around Parliament. He visited our Indian colleagues next door and briefed them of the same. I had mixed feelings when I saw Ligairi. As he came in, I immediately recognised him but I was not sure whether I could tell my colleagues that we were at school together at Lelean Memorial School. He was a few years ahead of me and he joined the British Army when he left school. On the other hand, I felt I could at least trust him, of all the strange people we saw in Parliament that morning. I guessed that he knew me from school and from the coups in 1987 when he was used by Rabuka against Bavadra and the Labour–National Federation Party Coalition supporters.

At about lunchtime a 'Commander Bill' who was assigned to look after us called the women members to help serve food to the Indian colleagues next door. The women were Social Services and Women's Affairs Minister Lavenia Padarath, Assistant Minister Ema Golea Tagicakibau, Assistant Minister for Agriculture Marieta Rigamoto, Akanisi Koroitamana and Suruj Nand. Also held was Tourism Minister Koila Mara Nailatikau, President Ratu Mara's daughter. The story they relayed to us on their return regarding the conditions of our Indian colleagues and how they took the events of that morning was very sad. They were depressed and anxious now that they were on their own. I did not expect any better treatment from a group of rebels with strong nationalistic and anti-Indian sentiments.

The rules given to us in the main Parliament building read something like this: no talking together, no moving about and no writing. We needed permission to go to the toilet and had to be accompanied. Most if not all of the guards covered their faces with balaclavas. They did not want to be identified, especially in the early days. But as days went by, they realised that anonymity in small Fiji was next to impossible.

In the early evening at about 6.30 pm I was allowed to go to the toilet next door to where our Indo-Fijian colleagues were being held. The guard stayed behind and waited for me. From the toilet, I decided to walk upstairs into what was the Labour Party Office as I wanted to ring home to assure our daughter I was all right. I burst into the office and caught Silatolu on the phone. His reaction was the same as mine, shocked and surprised. I said, 'Au vakayagataka mada na talevoni' (I would like to use the telephone). I did not expect a reply and as the telephone in that room was being used, I entered the next room immediately on the left which was assigned to Kalou, the leader of government business, and lo and behold I came face to face with Ligairi and Colonel Metuisela Mua. He was the head of the Intelligence Unit created by Rabuka which we closed down, which explained his opposition to our government. As I entered that small room their reactions reminded me of people caught in the act of doing something unsavoury. What can be more unsavoury than planning a takeover of the government by two officers of the Fiji Military Forces!

'There is no going back now,' I said to myself. As they looked up I said in a matter of fact way 'I have to ring my daughter at home' and proceeded to dial our home number, in front of their eyes. Melania's voice came through clearly and I cut in quickly to avoid other questions and said, 'Mela . . . I'm here in Parliament and I'm all right . . . do not worry'. I put the phone down . . . I did not realise then that that would be the last call I would make to anybody at home for 56 days. As I put the phone down, I said, 'Vinaka vakalevu, drau sa moce' (thank you very much and goodbye). I looked at them acknowledging the courtesy in accordance with Fijian protocol, or rather what was left of it in the situation, and then saw myself out of the door, and down the steps.





Speight, son of Sam

‘Failed businessman’

For the coup 45-year-old Speight had renamed himself Ilikimi Naitini and adopted ‘The Cause’ which he could not easily define and whose language, Fijian, he could not speak. For weeks ahead he would identify with the vanua but could not easily say what it meant or even what it really was in modern Fiji. A mixed-race fourth-generation descendant of a white settler in Fiji, he was the son of businessman Sam Speight, who was elected to Parliament for the SVT under the name Savenaca Tokainavo. One of his political rivals had been Iliesa Duvuloco. George Speight’s paternal grandmother was from Naivacula in Wainibuka, about 10 kilometres from Korovou in Tailevu, north of Suva. His mother was from Ra in the western sugarcane belt of Viti Levu. Speight had a middle-class upbringing in Fiji, including Suva Grammar, then went on to an education at the Seventh Day Adventist Andrews University in Michigan, United States. Speight was one of five people sponsored at Andrews by a powerful benefactor, one-time finance minister Jim Ah Koy, one of Fiji’s wealthiest individuals. He secured degrees in marketing, management and finance, which enabled him to set up as a businessman, spending several years job-hopping in Australia. In Brisbane he was involved in a pyramid investment scheme and narrowly escaped arrest. He was married in Australia to Shauna Bull and had two



Speight's coup
girlfriend Torika
Rawlinson.

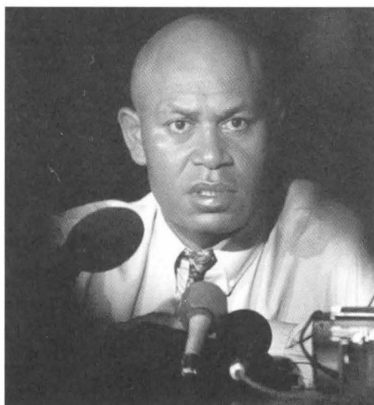
Reuters

children. By 2000 his marriage was over and he was living with 21-year-old Torika Rawlinson, who had a child by him.

Back in Fiji around 1997 Speight became managing director for insurance brokering firm, Heath Fiji Limited, a subsidiary of an international insurance company. Ah Koy was an investor in the local company. Speight was fired from it over allegations of misappropriation of funds. In 1998 the Rabuka government appointed Speight as chairman of the Fiji Hardwood Corporation and the mahogany issue emerged. When Chaudhry came to office Speight was fired from Hardwood and it was revealed he had been taking money from TRM, which was bidding for the mahogany. On the Monday before the coup Speight had been in court pleading not guilty on exchange rate and extortion charges that he would ultimately be convicted of.

Speight would occasionally play golf with Rabuka — the former prime minister played a lot of golf and he was very democratic with his partners. Rabuka found it surprising that Speight was leading a coup and scoffed at Speight's claims to have seized Parliament on behalf of indigenous Fijians: 'I don't know why he is claiming to be acting on behalf of indigenous rights like I did in 1987. I'm still waiting for him to say this in Fijian.'

With Speight were Ligairi and the men of the CRW. It was an 80-strong elite unit set up in 1987 and modelled on the SAS. They are armed with Uzis and an Israeli version of the M16, and practised hapkido, a martial art. They were all Fijians. Ligairi, who founded the unit on Rabuka's orders, was known as the 'Invisible Man' and 'Mr White'. Among the more gullible it was believed he could transform himself into an animal, such as a sea snake, and get out of any situation. He was one of nine Fijian soldiers drafted into the SAS in 1962. His unit played a key role in the May 1980 relief of the siege of the Iranian embassy in London. A Fijian SAS officer, George Morrell, received severe burns and the George Medal for his role. Two other Fijian contemporaries of Ligairi also received medals for other operations. Ligairi's activities were never disclosed but the *Fiji Sun* claimed that while on an undercover operation in Northern Ireland he was captured by IRA guerrillas. Subsequently released he could never again be an operative and so was put into training with the SAS before transferring back to the RFMF to set up its special forces unit. Rabuka saw the need for a unit when he realised how easy it had been for him to knock over an elected government.



Plotter and traitor
George Speight.

Fiji Times

Ligairi said he wanted uncorrupt Christians in government. 'I am part of George Speight's group making decisions. I am head of the military people here and I am also the one controlling the crowd and guards. I contribute to decision-making in George Speight's team.' He never let on to the identity of who turned the CRW.

Speight called the first of many press conferences to announce his 'civil coup on behalf of the indigenous people of Fiji. That civil coup has resulted in the overthrow of the Labour-led coalition government in Fiji. I would like to announce that Fiji is currently under civilian rule, with the assistance of armed forces, who are passive but will remain at the beck and call and the control of the civilian government that is in place at this time and is headed by myself.'

Fiji has a competitive private radio vs state radio market, and while Speight did not seize radio stations, he really did not need to as the radio stations were broadcasting Speight's every word, either live or with little delay. Commercial radio gave free rein to the plotters' voices, in English and Fijian. In this way Speight called for supporters to go to Parliament to back him. As a tactical move it was inspired: even before the police or military were able to react Speight had packed his new fortress with foot soldiers. Arguably the coup may not have succeeded to the extent it did without radio broadcasting the various calls from Parliament. What was news and what was incitement was lost in those early days. An unrestrained media can show itself to have deadly consequences in a situation slipping into anarchy.

Speight met with a number of key people, including Inoke Kubuabola and Apisai Tora, who had been at the march. Tora told Speight he was 'not out of the woods yet . . . so you better act very quickly' to appoint his ministerial line-up. Tora wanted an indigenous Fijian and not a 'halfcaste' such as Speight to do the swearing-in of the ministers. He walked off in a huff, later saying

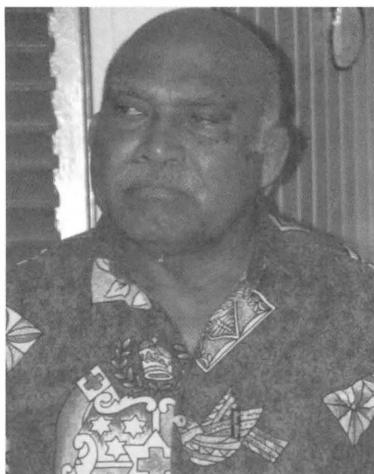
he had ‘had enough’. Ligairi told some of the hostages that Savua and Rabuka were involved in the coup. Rabuka was to take over the presidency and Savua was to be prime minister. This quickly proved not to be so.

With journalist Joe Nata acting as master of ceremony Speight then produced the chief and retired school teacher Jope Seniloli, whom he had phoned the day before, and swore him in as the new president of Fiji. In a confused ceremony Seniloli, with Nata directing, swore in the new government, all on video for Fiji TV — and unbeknown to them all, for a court several years on. Silatolu became prime minister. Lawyer Rakuita Vakalalabure was sworn in as attorney-general and at the end of the weird ceremony he punched the air and briefly cried with the emotion of the moment, declaring ‘Long live self determination for the Taukei . . .’ Duvuloco was named lands minister and Viliame Savu works minister. Viliame Volavola, an MP and also a territorial army lieutenant colonel, would quit soon from Speight’s side, disgusted at what he perceived as heathen behaviour among the coup-plotters.



Opposition leader
Inoke Kubuabola.

Ministry of Information, Fiji



Rebel president Jope Seniloli.

Michael Field

Speight also named other people who he said would join his government. Notable among them was former foreign minister Berenado Vunibobo, who had been soundly defeated in the 1999 election. He was never sworn in but later court testimony indicated he did brief Speight on how to handle the international community. Speight named a new military commander as one Colonel Ulaiasi Vatu who had the good sense to promptly deny any connection to the coup.

Mara, who learned that his daughter Koila was a hostage, declared a state of emergency. 'I regret to say that what happened today is not in accordance with the constitution and therefore is unlawful,' he said, adding the Government would not bow to the threats of terrorists.

Parliament might have been a crime scene, but the police were barely seen. But although Speight had 45 hostages, including Chaudhry and all but one of cabinet, the coup was faulting badly. Beyond the Veiuto compound Speight had nothing. He tried several times during the night to get the Government Printer to

publish his decrees but, in one of the few signs of police presence in the crisis, this was stopped. Beyond, in Suva, police, armed with freshly looted golfclubs, were slowly trying to restore some order.

Parliament quickly became a carnival. The small group of armed soldiers who had gone into Parliament swelled with later arrivals and a kind of terrorist security was in place. At one point, in an action yet to be explained, more arms were brought in from Queen Elizabeth Barracks (QEB) and handed to soldiers. Supervising that operation was the RFMF third in command, Lieutenant Colonel Filipino Tarakinikini.



Tupeni Baba, now a hostage, saw for himself military connections to the coup:

As I descended the steps, I wondered about the guard that escorted me but as I got to the foot of the steps I saw four people carrying a large wooden box which I immediately recognised as a weapons box from my three years' experience in the Australian Civil Military Force. Two additional men carried boxes of cartridges behind the men. A chill ran through my spine as I began to connect what I had just seen: the planning that was going on upstairs and the weapons that were being brought into the compound. The weapons could not have come from anywhere else other than from the RFMF. Somebody with authority must have been authorising it! I thought of the 1987 coups when the military under Rabuka backed the takeover.

The guard that brought me was chatting with others in what appeared to be a fairly trusting fashion. My mind was working overtime and as I went back, I compared notes with other colleagues. Two colleagues, Lesavua, a former police officer, and Reverend Goneyali, had also seen the ferrying in of weapons. They also had gone to the toilet and returned to the main Parliament building before me.

It was getting dark and the soldiers were moving about cautiously as if they were expecting something to happen. We gathered they were expecting an attack from the RFMF. Commander Bill barked out orders for us to switch off the lights and remain quiet. There were some false calls and we were told 'to take cover' and remain as low as possible behind and under the parliamentary seats. I had some sympathy for our women MPs and other members without military experience. We went through with them some basic drills on how 'to take cover' when the call was made. One told me he had had some experience in the cadets. After all my opposition to the inclusion of cadet training at school, I could now see some advantage, I thought to myself. The false alarms came and went but the tenseness of the atmosphere remained. It was obvious that there were a lot more weapons being carried by the soldiers in the building than before. I connected this to the delivery of weapons to the parliamentary complex early that evening.

Without any sleeping gear, we stretched on the long seats of the gallery or on the floor of Parliament. The women congregated together close to the centre and the men took the long seats of the gallery. I kept close to Commander Bill and insisted on knowing what was going on. I did not sleep a wink. Next morning, we received a warning of an early attack. We waited in silence but nothing came.

In the early afternoon of the next day there were attempts to get us to sign papers indicating our willingness to resign from our positions and from Parliament, thus enabling the handover of power to a new government that was being mooted. Commander Bill came to me and explained that our resignation would be a way of avoiding an attack on the parliamentary complex. I was sceptical and yet thought that there would be an advantage in Chaudhry and me issuing a joint media statement highlighting our plight to the outside world. I felt I could push this better from my position. It was obvious as events unfolded, that I was taking bold steps to advance our collective interests against theirs with some impunity.

I consulted some senior colleagues and I wrote a letter to Chaudhry,

copied to Speight, saying something to the effect that by the time he received my letter the president, Ratu Mara, would have assumed the authorities vested in him under the emergency powers in the constitution and taken over the Government. In this event, it was no longer necessary for us to be held in captivity in Parliament and we should therefore be released immediately.

I signed the handwritten letter and gave the two copies to Commander Bill and asked him to send it urgently to Chaudhry and the other copy to Speight. There was a hive of activity and interest in this, and we could see on Commander Bill's face a sense of anticipation. I was worried that I might have misled him but he had read the letter himself and showed it to his seniors, who appeared to be equally interested. The reply came back from Chaudhry instantly with his comments which he wrote on the letter itself, which read 'I endorse your comments'. Commander Bill was elated and in the next few minutes Chaudhry and I were paraded before the media in front of Parliament as Speight made some media announcements. I learnt from that media event that a new rebel president had been sworn in

A day after the coup Baba wrote a letter, endorsed by Chaudhry and being held here by Speight, in which they urged the release of the politicians.

Fiji Times



that morning. Our letter was read and I was happy at least that the outside world, through the media, would have learnt about our plight. At this media show there were attempts to harass Chaudhry and on one occasion, I had to push Speight away from him so hard that he nearly collided with his security people. This particular footage was played over and over by Fiji TV and in the courts as evidence in some of the trials against Speight's supporters.

In the late afternoon, Silatolu discussed the signing of individual resignation letters by MPs but I insisted that nobody would sign such a document. Our Indo-Fijian members were being pressured very hard to sign the documents and many of them acquiesced under such pressure. I was disappointed to hear this. The prime minister tried to hold the line but it was difficult given the circumstances.

The evening was just as tense as the first day. We were harassed from all sides to sign the forms and at the same time we were told to expect a possible attack. I felt I had to assert some authority, being the most senior MP in the main building, if we were to hold together as a group rather than being broken up, which would play right into their hands. I insisted on being the first point of contact on any issue affecting us. In this way, we were able to reduce the pressure imposed on individuals and fob off all attempts to get us to sign resignation forms individually. Under this system, we could manage all the visits of outsiders including Speight, Ligairi and others. Vuibau was assigned a place near the door and he was to scrutinise all those coming in to see us and advise us accordingly. On reflection this was one of the most effective ways of handling issues and pressures from outside and retaining group solidarity and morale.





8

Reaction

Golf clubs in action

News of the coup got out of Fiji quickly, if informally, through an Indian talkback radio station in Auckland. Radio Tarana was on air with rumours within minutes and its audience, at that time of day dominated by Indian taxi drivers, quickly passed it on. It was hard to verify the reports as phone lines into Suva appeared to be down. Telecom New Zealand said Fiji had disconnected its telephone system from international links. What actually happened at Fiji Telecom has remained a mystery. In the 2004 court martial Lance Corporal Epeli Gaunavouivuda said hours before Parliament was taken over he was with a group that disconnected lines out of Telecom Fiji to the outside world. While this sounds unlikely, before becoming an MP Silatolu had been a telephone technician. Gaunavouivuda admitted to having been at 8 Mitchell Street the night before the coup. Phone records produced in a later court case showed that just before the coup Silatolu frequently called his former supervisor at Telecom, Jone Maraway. Reliable diplomatic sources with satellite phone links were able to confirm something was happening. The name George Speight emerged with few outside of Fiji knowing anything of him (and some in New Zealand wondered if he was linked to a southern beer of the same name). He was quickly labelled by most media as a 'failed businessman', a description that, as his ego grew over the weeks ahead, would rile him greatly.

Co-Deputy Prime Minister Kuini Speed — Bavadra's widow — said from Canberra that Speight had a poor reputation in Fiji and that the coup group was mostly made up of members of the opposition party. 'Maybe this is a trial run and the main players are still behind the scenes,' she said.

Given the hijacking in 1987, Air New Zealand was not too keen to fly into Nadi without knowing what was going on, and held the scheduled flight nearly five hours. Asked what the delay was, a ground staffer told a reporter, 'We're waiting for Helen to give the go ahead.' She meant Prime Minister Helen Clark. Most of the journalists flying in knew little of Fiji; one of the *New Zealand Herald* reporters was astonished to hear it would take three hours to drive from Nadi to Suva. Another newspaper reporter had his library provide him with background stories; they told him of the unrest in the Solomon Islands. Also on the plane was top Fijian All Black Joeli Vidiri, who was just heading



After the riots, an old man moves through battered Suva. *Dominion-Post*

home (and, not known at the time, dealing with news that he had renal failure and a life of dialysis ahead). Short of anything else to do while waiting for the plane, Vidiri was taxed by reporters on his view of the coup. The poor chap knew nothing of it. Most of the foreign media got into Suva early Saturday morning but ran into a police roadblock next to the city dump that marked the Queen's Highway city entrance. Passes were obtained from the Lami police station allowing reporters to drive on through the city.

Downtown Suva was a shock. The looters were gone and most of the major fires were out, leaving smoking rubble and a carpet of looted and broken goods across streets. Policemen, who had stayed away all afternoon, were patrolling in force, most of them armed with golfclubs. Later Saturday morning I asked Savua about the golfclubs and where they had come from. He replied cheerfully, 'Well they were in a shop yesterday.' He was smiling and seemed the opposite of a man who had just lost the government and city he was sworn to protect. Damage downtown was worth around \$30 million with 167 shops looted, 20 of them set on fire. Himmat Lodhia, president of the Fiji Retailers Association, said while the nation has been set back a few years, the business community — particularly in Suva — was the hardest hit: 'A lot of business people are totally disillusioned with the manner in which law was carried out in the city. Some businessmen are even thinking of closing shop altogether. A few of them are seriously viewing the scaling down of operations. There will be a lot of job losses.'



Unaisi Nabobo-Baba was at a USP Council meeting in Vanuatu:

I was walking towards the central craft market in the main street with friend and colleague Lili; it was about 11.15 am. Out of nowhere Young

Vivian (now the premier of Niue) yelled out the shocking news from the distance. 'Fiji . . . coup . . . seven men . . .' I felt a chill run down my spine. Lili and I hurriedly entered the market to see Dr Wame Baravilala, the dean of the Fiji School of Medicine and Ikbal Jannif, a prominent Fiji businessman (both members of the council as well); they were unaware of the news. I spurted it out in pieces and then I saw Ikbal grab the closest chair and sit down. The image of the very likeable Ikbal slowly crumbling onto a chair brought down hard on me the reality of what I had just said.

I had Tupeni's face in my mind's eye throughout breakfast. I could not help hoping that he would be polite to the 'stupid seven', as I know that he does not know about politeness sometimes, especially such times. Word quickly went around that the vice-chancellor was requesting all staff and Fiji members to please go back to the USP Port Vila Centre for a briefing. From Suva, we were briefed by university personnel of the latest events on the ground. Across the room, Vice-Chancellor Esekia Solofa caught my eye and I thought he said to me right there and then: 'I don't seem to know what to say, Unaisi', except that he did not utter these words. The quiet and composed Vio, his wife, like other colleagues there, was a comfort.

I had to return to the centre and by 4 pm, I found myself being driven by Jacque Sese, the Vanuatu minister of education himself, to the local airline office. Jacque, a longtime friend, spoke very little except to say that I needed to be calm for the baby and for myself. Jacque and I walked out of the USP campus room that was filled to the brim with Suva-based USP Council members in a bid to hear news in English about the Fiji coup. Before that, we were scrounging around in the town centre trying to make sense of the news in French and this intensified our frustrations.

At the airline office Jacque spoke in French in a firm but polite tone. As a result the packed plane somehow had a vacant seat. It was supposed to have been used by Pratap Chand, Fiji's minister of education. Pratap, I was told, was now booked to fly to Sydney

instead of Suva and was being escorted to the airport by council chair Savenaca Siwatibau. I do not know whether this was out of fear or what, but something told me at that point that all may not be too well after all. Earlier on in the afternoon, I had overheard a group of council members standing around Pratap saying that 'seven stupid men' cannot overthrow a legitimate government.

On arriving in Suva, Solofa took me aside and asked whether it would be safer for me to stay with them for a while. I declined the offer and opted to go home straight away instead in Esther William's car. Esther, the university librarian, was in black and she told me a lot of pro-democracy supporters had begun keeping a vigil and wearing black as a symbol of mourning. She drove me home but had to be turned back as our end of Ratu Sukuna Road had been sealed off to the public. Esther gave me a quick rundown of events while she took the other route home via the city. Home was a stone's throw away from the back gate to Government House and this meant that we had to stop at a number of checkpoints.

I arrived to see daughter Mela upset. A 12-year-old at Holy Trinity Primary, she talked about speaking briefly to Tupeni after the takeover. She was concerned that he may not have a good pillow to sleep on at night. I thought that was particularly sweet. The two women who helped to look after our household were in tears, but after a cup of tea and some reassuring from me that things would be fine, they seemed happier. Tupeni's ministerial car was parked in the cassava patch at the back of the maid's quarters, obscured behind the shrubs. Jai, Tupeni's driver and a pleasant young committed Muslim whose parents lived in Taveuni, had done some shopping for the family. He also brought Mela lots of sweets, checked that all the doors of our house were safe and then got two police friends of his to be based at home on full duty. Jai was such a person, so true to his work. Sadly Jai, some weeks into the coup and under pressures related to the coup, took his life. He did so within the compound of his small but comfortable home he shared with his Fijian wife from Taveuni. This broke my heart indeed. I

remember how Mela kept asking for him and my inability to explain to her where he had gone.

That night our main lounge became a bedroom for me and it remained so for the next 56 or so days of the ordeal. Mela and our two house-helpers joined me, and usually one or two friends of mine. Just like Jai, they too had become family. Semi from Rewa had a husband who had become a kind of security guard-cum-cook for the many police officers who by this time had found out that one of our garages had been turned into a place for them to rest and have a feed. Their work had become almost round the clock, without increased pay. I made up my mind that one of the garages should be done up by Pau, the other helper, for the police to use. Needless to say, my friends were not always amused when they came home to check on us and were given a barrage of questions by the officers as to their name, the purpose of their visit and their length of stay. These were all initial events on the home front in the early days of the chaos. I must say that our home had never before heard so many prayers, so often. Funny how God is close and remembered in times of strife. In Parliament, prayers were full on as well, both by the captured and their captors, as Tupeni noted in a letter:

Today 7/7/00 we are exactly 7 weeks in captivity. I am sufficiently ok with a mild flu. Fortunately it did not go down and 'clog' the lungs like I had sometime back. This was because I took the necessary measures and was covered up well, thanks to the warm coat that our friend Rekha made. I also prayed for it one night and it was this, in my humble view that did it (Matthew 17:20). It is the first time I recognise effectively the power of prayer. When you pray and you believe that it is going to happen, it will come about and you actually have the feeling that it is being answered. All for that . . .

I broke down when I saw Suva. It was my first cry after hearing the news in Vanuatu. I really cried. There was something about the way the whole city was torn down that tore through my heart. The city, a physical manifestation of the ability of human beings of all colours

to exist together, was no more. Suva or what remained of it was as if a thousand angry elephants were set loose on it, and a tsunami to complete their task. I began to see TV footage of the looting that had taken place and wondered why. It was easy to see, however, that the destruction avoided particular businesses and buildings. There was a pattern to the madness, I thought; the looting and destruction was done by some selection process and today I refuse to believe that this selection was random.

One of my friends told me she heard that a fat woman was carrying a suitcase full of goods in Mark Street when the police van stopped by her and took the case. She then put up a fight saying she was doing what everyone else was and alleged the police were selective in who they were after. Funny how even in theft one could still argue for their right to be treated fairly. I cannot understand the law sometimes and the police increasingly became a parcel I could not understand, some of them not all. It was hard to trust people. I was never sure what to say to my Fijian countrymen because I did not know and was never sure of their position on the matter – if they had any – or how such views were formed.



The Centra, originally the Travelodge and now the Holiday Inn, is Suva's premier business hotel. On the waterfront, across the road from the Government Buildings, it was next to what had once been a Pacific byword for luxury, the Grand Pacific Hotel. But the Nauru Government had purchased the lease on the old Grand and boarded it up, leaving it to slowly decay like so many of its other investments around the region. The Chaudhry government had just a month before the coup told Nauru it was cancelling its lease on the once fine building and taking it back. For years Suva's transsexual hookers jealously protected their hedgerow turf across the road in front of the hotel and neither cyclone nor

police crackdowns deterred them from their trade. Speight's coup, though, pushed them away; silver linings to some clouds. Centra's advantage was proximity to the downtown area which, while not large by standards of most capital cities, had a couple of popular bars and restaurants. The Centra had wings down either side of a lawn and pool area, and connected by a lobby, bar, function rooms and restaurants. On its west side, against the harbour, a long sea-wall offered a stunning view across the harbour to the rugged mountain ranges of Rewa and Namosi and Joske's Thumb, a large exposed eroded volcanic plug that had, in 1944, beaten a young Edmund Hillary. On a great day with the setting sun behind Joske's Thumb it was a magical view and a perfect one for the media 'stand-ups' and 'two-ways'. Making life easier for the television crews was the early and speculative arrival of a



The pool at media central – the Centra Hotel overlooking Suva bay.

satellite company which set up a transmission dish on the lawn. It lasted only a couple of days. It might have been near anarchy out on Suva streets but when Fiji Telecom learnt of the presence of unlicensed competition they closed them down promptly, forcing television for the rest of the coup to make a daily trip through barricades around to the licensed satellite dish across Suva. As the crisis progressed the daily trip meant negotiating military roadblocks, making it a routine panic for television crews racing to meet 'feeding time' when their pictures had to be sent.

Early that Saturday, as I was walking past the poolside bure, a familiar voice called out: Rabuka. He was on an adrenalin high and exhibiting a kind of battlefield savvy that was one of his strengths. A year before, Radio Australia correspondent Sean Dorney and I had found ourselves caught up in a tricky situation with rebels on the plains of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, which was slipping into civil war. A long enforced stay with them was averted only when Rabuka, who was freelancing as a Commonwealth peace negotiator, showed up and with that same skill had won our release. On Thursday 18 May I had been preparing to go back to the Solomons — chasing coup rumours — and had taken part in a live Australian Broadcasting Commission radio panel on prospects there. Off-air just before the programme we had chatted; Rabuka gave no hint of what was about to happen. He denied any involvement in Speight's coup; he seemed to find it professionally insulting that he would conduct such an operation, saying the plotters were confused and uncertain. He said he had visited Speight five times and had told him to surrender. 'They have no choice. They have to surrender,' he said.

He said he had told Speight, 'I sympathise with your cause. I do not agree with your methods.' It became a tiresome, justify-anything-and-everything refrain from Fijian politicians and churchmen and continued long after the crisis was over, preventing recognition of the profound injustices taking place.

Police Commissioner Savua told the press police were not taking orders from the coup leaders and would answer only to Mara: 'I want to state unequivocally that the Fiji Police is the custodian of the law in Fiji and respects the 1997 constitution . . . We are trying to avoid force, we have had enough bloodshed,' he said oddly, given that nobody had been hurt or killed at that point.

Savua defended the inaction of the police during the looting, saying he had warned Chaudhry that the police could not control such marches. What he did not say was that the police simply did not try at all.

RFMF chief Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama was overseas (during Rabuka's coup his commander had also been abroad) and the acting head, Colonel Alfred Tuatoka, said Mara remained the commander in chief: 'We are still abiding by the 1997 constitution and we are helping the police restore order.'

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer warned it would not accept any compromise which undermined Chaudhry's elected government: 'We abhor this attempt to seize power in an undemocratic way.' New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark warned that 'if power changes at the barrel of a gun the Commonwealth for one will not stand for it'. In time both countries, in the interests of *realpolitik*, would sell out Chaudhry. The United States did not formally acknowledge the coup until 2 June. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee condemned it: 'It is unfortunate and we hope that democracy will return to the nation as early as possible.'

Distant relatives of Chaudhry in Rohtak in Haryana state demanded Indian commandos be sent to free the prime minister. 'These terrorists are nobody and a surgical commando strike will change the scenario,' niece Madhu Chaudhry said. 'We are going on a hunger strike to press for our demands.' Madhu Chaudhry said her contact with Chaudhry's wife Virmati was broken on

Saturday. 'No one has picked up the telephone today . . . We are worried. My father has fallen ill and he is bed-ridden with worries. I spoke to my aunt yesterday and she was too scared. She was weeping. I told her India is with you. Our uncle is headstrong. He will rather be shot than bend before these savages. We are terrified. My father says he will commit suicide if anything happens to his brother-in-law.

'These people are savages. These people should be killed. People of Indian origin are in trouble and India should come to their rescue. We want India to attack.'

Rumours had swept Fiji naming specific Indians as being involved in the coup to overthrow Chaudhry, on the theory that he was a socialist and was bad for business. One leading company, Punja and Sons Ltd, resorted to full-page newspaper advertisements saying they had not financed Speight: 'Like any responsible business house . . . Punja and Sons Ltd knows the value of stable government having barely recovered from the upheavals of May 1987, and would do nothing to jeopardise their investments.'

Jim Ah Koy, who had sponsored Speight's education, also published an advertisement denying any link to the coup.



9

Ten-day slide

Chaudhry beaten

With surprising ease, a pattern quickly developed that bore no relation to the popular image of a siege. There were neither police marksmen nor skilled negotiators, no effective roadblocks or signs of any serious attempt to end the crisis. Lives were at risk, but it was still possible for everybody other than the captured politicians to wander around. Over that first weekend a group of uniformed New Zealand Army soldiers arrived at the Battery Road entrance for a look. Wellington headquarters denounced this as ‘a bad case of compass-work’ and pulled them home. They were not the last of the tourists; at one point a French backpacker couple strolled around Parliament, and at one of Speight’s notorious press conferences a classic little old white lady sat quietly. Asked who she was with, she replied that she was retired and was thinking of settling in Fiji and wanted ‘to see what the new chap is like’.

For the USP journalism students under New Zealand coordinator David Robie, the coup provided a sharp training workshop. Students broke news, at times to the chagrin of other reporters, and published it on a website, *Pacific Journalism Online*, and the student newspaper *Wansolwara*. Robie later said the website created its own international niche market: ‘In a sense, this was the Internet Coup, and the students were a vital part of it.’ Trainee journalist Noora Ali of the Maldives wrote on the website that

she had really wanted to see the drama but was aware that with ‘my Indian looks crossing the line into the Parliament where all the indigenous Fijians were gathering, would be kind of scary . . . I was not harassed, but eyes were certainly laid on me just curious and confused as to what an Indo-Fijian was doing in an indigenous Fijian gathering.’ Fellow students Losana McGowan of Fiji and Laufa Eli of Samoa went in with her and sought out an interview with Speight. McGowan said the men inside the compound told them they did not trust the media.

‘We slowly made our way back to the gate. When we were about to go out, the rebel in a balaclava asked if we were coming back. I told him the police officers down the road are not letting any local media go in. “Oh . . . don’t worry about that, when you come again just tell the police officer in charge to come and get me and I’ll bring you people inside, O.K.”’

Speight’s numerous press conferences eventually produced so little that reporters would only go reluctantly. It would take a while to work out that Speight, while giving the appearance of being a powerful action man, was running a confidence trick. ‘I continue to hold the former members of the Labour Coalition Government led by Mahendra Chaudhry, the former Indian prime minister,’ he started one. ‘I want to assure the international community they are safe, they are very happy, they’re secure and basically they spent all day in Parliament today sitting around and drinking grog, having some food and engaging in stories.’ He said he was protecting the politicians ‘because of the absolute immense level of the backlash of public hate for them’.

To Mara’s claims that Speight and his gang were terrorists, he replied: ‘From where I sit he has no legal claim to the title of president . . .’ and that that belonged to Seniloli. He revealed he had taken over the premiership. Silatolu, the only person in the whole gang who had actually been elected, lost his leadership in less than a day.

Speight said he had abrogated the constitution and then launched into a monologue, safe in the knowledge that he had his audience under the gun, literally. Few people have patience for the kind of monologue he was staging and reporters stirred, interrupting him.

'Can I just finish please,' he barked, going on to say that Mara and his deputy were no longer in office and statements going from that office were no longer valid.



For the hostages there was no news from outside, as Tupeni Baba recalls:

At about midnight of the first day of the incarceration, I was woken up by Isireli Vuibau: 'Tupeni, yadra, yadra, sa mavao o Mahen, sa mate o Mahen' (Mahen is injured and is dying). Vuibau pointed to the door, and there was Speight and Silatolu with two CRW boys, with their weapons.

I rose from my 'bed' on the floor, and asked: 'Na cava e yaco?' (what's up?). They looked out of sorts, and urged me to follow, through the corridors of Parliament down to one of the offices below, into what seemed like an empty room. They opened the door; the room was dark, pitch dark. I could only hear whispers. There were evidently three Labour MPs and Mahen's son Rajen, led by our doctor MP, Dr Gunasagar Gounder, trying to resuscitate Mahen.

I asked 'Who did this, who did this?' No word. Their silence conveyed the message; they were unable to answer in front of the soldiers. I knew through their muffled whispers that he had been manhandled. He had been hit around the body area to avoid leaving any scars. He had refused to sign the resignation paper that we were all being pressured to sign that evening! I knew it was a precise military piece of work.

Two minutes passed; it was like a long time. I turned to Speight and demanded an ambulance. I could see in the dark through the torchlight that Speight and Silatolu were very worried. They wanted to

do all they could to ensure he was revived. I only knew afterwards that the ambulance that was called was stopped at the gate. They tried the next morning to have Dr Bhagat Ram come in to see him as I gathered afterwards. I couldn't have much sleep after that . . . it was like having a bad dream.

When I returned to our 'Fijian prison' I felt that things were taking a turn for the worse. As I briefed our Fijian and General Voter MPs about the incident, another order came: all the parliamentary office staff, policemen and senators Koroi and Atu Bain were ordered to leave. We hugged as they said goodbye. Only the parliamentarians remained in the main Parliament building.

Soon another order was brought by Silatolu that the four women MPs were to leave. We discussed it and decided that it should be left to the women themselves to decide the issue. After a short deliberation and a prayer, Koila Mara Nailatikau, President Mara's daughter, summarised their feeling: 'We will not leave; we would like to leave together with all the other men parliamentarians'.

It was a moving gesture, one of courage and solidarity and the women MPs were unanimous on it. We decided to allocate the gallery part of the Parliament to the women as their 'living quarters' and the men were allocated the central floor area. At that point, none of the 16 MPs had signed the resignation document among the Fijians and General Voters.

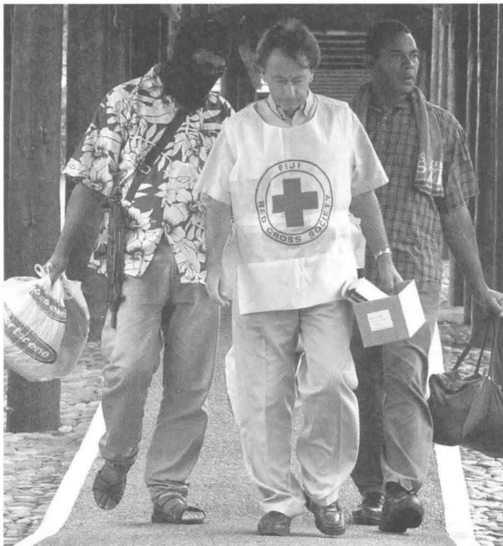
In the Indo-Fijian 'prison', a number of MPs were released including John Ali, Lekh Ram Vayeshnoi, Ahmed Gaffar and Suruj Nand, their only woman MP. They had all signed the resignation document and were being rewarded for their compliance by the rebels. The next morning their comments were reported in the papers which were directed at the rebels; this displeased Speight and his team and made things more difficult for those remaining.



Outside the complex Speight said news that Chaudhry had been beaten up was ‘an outrageous lie’. Then, as he would so often do, he changed his story: ‘Our perimeters were breached for a short period of time, I think it was last night or the night before, and they were able to get to him, but we were able to suppress that group and everything’s back to normal again.’

Fiji Red Cross boss John Scott appeared on the scene. He had access to the hostages and said Chaudhry looked ‘fine’. He did not appear to have been beaten or sedated: ‘He’s in a chair in the corner. He looks OK. He was talking to me.’ That was not the case, however. Scott, who was later murdered, never explained why he said that.

Early Sunday morning nine people were released, including four politicians. Assistant Minister of Information Lekh Ram Vayeshnoi, among the freed, said Speight held a ‘machine gun’



John Scott of the Red Cross is escorted out of Parliament, carrying letters to hostage families.

Reuters

to his head and threatened to shoot him if he did not sign his resignation. 'It's a matter of deciding your last minutes,' said Vayeshnoi. 'Your fate depends on your voluntary acceptance of resignation or you face being killed.'

He said Silatolu added: 'Mr Vayeshnoi, we are running out of time.'

Around 2 am on Sunday, soldier Apenisa Rovutiqica, dressed in combat pants, a bandana, no shirt, and waving an M16 rifle, walked out of Parliament unhindered through the police barricade and in among reporters, who scurried for cover. I found myself close to the man, who was plainly high on something. He muttered in Fijian, with the odd bits of English: 'Don't put any of this on the news' and 'Are you straight in your heart?' After 10 minutes of meandering around he headed back off into Parliament.

Speight showed early evidence of paranoia and intellectual inability to deal with the situation. He claimed two shots had been fired at the parliamentary building but he said they came from a 'third force' on the perimeter of the complex. 'My people are very highly trained and qualified in situations of this type. It makes us ask whether there might be third parties on the perimeters intent on creating situations that may be contrary to our non-confrontational stand.' Showing his grandiose side Speight added in another comment: 'As far as my administration is concerned, we are committed to a non-confrontational solution to the impasse that exists between the two parties. This has been our resolve over the past two and a half days since we overthrew the government, and the manner we did so will prove we are committed to safety.'

The crisis focused on Parliament and nearby Government House with its sole occupant, 80-year-old Mara. The elegant building was first erected in 1882 but was badly damaged in a lightning strike in 1921. A replacement was erected in 1928

and to save money it used the plans for the equivalent building in Ceylon. A kilometre from Parliament, it was within range of some of the plotters' armaments. Mara stayed on in Government House, out of touch with the situation, essentially a father worried about his hostage daughter. Mara's press conferences were conducted like vespers in an office almost convent-like with polished floors and respectful lowered voices. More ominously perhaps, he also seemed detached from what was going on; most reporters were soon aware that he must have been receiving less than accurate accounts of events. He wrongly believed Parliament was sealed off from the outside world.

Mara was not convincing when he told reporters he was in effective control of Fiji 'and not the militant group in Parliament . . . So, the self-proclaimed regime led by George Speight has no domestic or international standing or status. And I again call on them to lay down their arms, release the hostages and then enter into dialogue on their grievances and concerns.'

Asked whether Chaudhry would resume office, he said: 'I cannot give that guarantee. I cannot say that I will put back the government that caused this problem.' When freed he would talk to Chaudhry and say, 'You've seen what has happened, what is your possible solution for it?'

Very early on in their ordeal Chaudhry and co. had become redundant. As if to underscore the process of debunking Chaudhry and asserting what would become known as 'The Cause', Mara said he had noted the concerns of the people who had seized Parliament: 'These will be thoroughly examined and solutions considered to further protect and enhance the position of the indigenous Fijian community.' Democracy had been betrayed on a fabricated explanation. It amounted to a presidential declaration that the coup had succeeded. Mara's abandonment of Chaudhry could of course have been a reaction to strain, presidential and parental, but it more than likely reflected a darker, more ominous scene.



A traditional face of Fiji:
Government House.

Michael Field

Speight had come out of nowhere; coup rumours never mentioned him and even as his various lieutenants and sidekicks emerged, they were never people of any consequence. The suspicion was that Speight had simply been able to jump a queue and stage a quick, ill planned coup ahead of one already underway. The other coup-plotters, the real ones, were moving into position in a palace coup. It was almost as if Speight had been the bluff in which he was as much used as Chaudhry would be, while the real plotters could, ultimately, have themselves portrayed as the rescuers of Fiji. Part of the plan involved developing the notion that Chaudhry was the cause of all problems. Unwittingly, Mara was part of the strategy.

Buried here in the early days of the hostage drama was another clue to the nature of the power play; it had little to do with race at all and everything to do with an internal play by Fijian groups for power and control of resources. Many of the negotiations that

were to come in the weeks ahead were nominally over freeing Chaudhry and the hostages, but their central, unstated focus was putting in place a particular kind of Fijian government, controlled by the people who, since the departure of Rabuka's government, had lost access to the money. Mara would know too that the old Cakobau rivals were moving in on the scene.

On Monday morning the Fiji Reserve Bank, showing that at least somebody in Fiji was doing the job they were paid for, took a range of drastic measures, saying it needed 'to ensure that Fiji's foreign exchange reserves are protected'. It stopped a run on the currency but suggested something altogether unhealthier in the economy. Little cash fled; all the big players in the economy had the bulk of their money outside, in other currencies, long before the coup. The bank was protecting small people for the time being, but they would suffer in the long run. The Fiji dollar fell relentlessly after the coup — no currency likes uncertainty.

At much the same time on Monday morning, Tikotani or 'Commander Bill' grabbed Chaudhry from behind as he ate lunch, pointed a gun to his head and took him outside. He said he had heard that Rabuka was coming to free the hostages and they were going to use them as human shields.

'I was quite composed,' Chaudhry said later. 'I had a choice as the nation's prime minister to either give in to these terrorists or stand my ground. I chose to stand my ground and uphold democracy.'

Chaudhry may not have been the best prime minister Fiji has had, but one thing is clear: his courage and vision cannot be doubted. He was an extraordinarily brave man in the wrong job.

The GCC came back into the equation with a Tuesday 23 May meeting with Rabuka as chairman and mouthing the same moral ambiguity that was sending Fiji into a deeper hole. 'They do not approve of what Speight has done, although there is a lot of sympathy for his views,' he added.

The GCC could not make any decisions and their prevarications gave Speight oxygen.

Litia Cakobau reverted to nineteenth-century politics and was critical of Mara. When word got out to her Kubuna heartland, a flood of people joined Speight and gang. After three days of meetings the GCC's best bid was to call for the release of the hostages and the replacement of Chaudhry as prime minister. They also wanted a return to the pro-indigenous Fijian constitution, overlooking the fact that they had approved the new constitution. Rabuka, his reputation in freefall, said the chief's proposals represented 'the least damaging of all the bad solutions.' Litia Cakobau led a group of around 20 chiefs to Parliament where, lord-of-the-manor fashion, Speight walked out to greet them as they made a ceremonial procession into the building, flanked by hundreds of cheering supporters. The international media was still reporting the whole saga as a Fijian vs Indian thing when it was by this point Cakobau vs Mara.

Into the saga blundered Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon and the United Nations special representative to newly independent East Timor, Sergio de Mello (who was to die in a truck bomb explosion in Iraq in 2003). De Mello was despatched by the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who had never taken any interest in the South Pacific and routinely spurned invitations to its key events. McKinnon, who was a former New Zealand foreign minister, hitched a lift on de Mello's jet into Nausori on Wednesday 24 May. The two men, in a display of arrogance, seemed to believe they could resolve Fiji's problems on a day trip. If there had ever been any effort by authorities in Fiji to handle the Parliament scene as a straight-out crime, the piece of terrorism it was, the impact of de Mello and McKinnon was to turn Speight and partners into international celebrities on a grand scale. It was a futile exercise. It amounted to an international view that the Fijians were inept and incapable of dealing with the crisis.

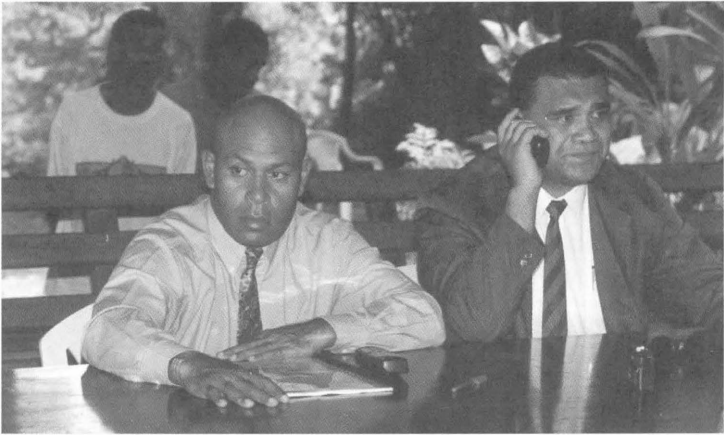
So much the worse when the great men actually went to Parliament and met Speight: self-declared head of government meeting fellow international statesmen. It's hard to imagine what the two and their advisers were thinking and, sheepishly, after the failed event, they denied that they were giving recognition to the terrorists. 'We took the opportunity to express to him our total disapproval of the methods he had adopted in seeking to redress perceived injustices,' the two men said in a joint statement. 'The world has no tolerance for the violent overthrow of democratically elected governments . . . He resisted our appeals for the immediate release of the hostages but gave us an assurance that the hostages would be well cared for and that no harm would come to any of them.'

Speight, who was completely unmoved by the entertaining sideshow, lectured them on 'The Cause'. De Mello appealed to Speight for the immediate release of the hostages: 'But this was not obtained.'

They briefly met the hostages, including Chaudhry. 'We found him and his colleagues in what under the circumstances could be described as good spirits, although he complained that he and his son were twice manhandled. Some of the hostages were clearly in anguish.' They had flown all the way around the world to discover the hostages were upset.

McKinnon even came perilously close to accepting 'The Cause'. Speight's support came from low-income people who lived in a severely divided society. 'It starts out with Fijian kids going to state schools and Indian kids going to their own schools. Fijian boys go into the army or police, Indian boys go into commerce; these ones become lawyers or accountants, these ones become officers. Indians go to Hindu church, Fijians to a Christian church.'

Business had no faith in what was going on. A group of major insurance companies warned that policies contained a clause



Speight and lawyer Rakuita Vakalalabure, who went on to become deputy speaker — before arrest and jail. *Fiji Times*

that excluded compensation for damage caused by rebellion, insurrection and attempts to usurp power. ‘The implications of this exclusion and those that go on to specifically mention attempts to overthrow the legitimate government are yet to be determined and much may depend on the events that unfold over the coming weeks,’ the companies said, adding they would not admit liability for any loss arising from the events of 19 May.

Some shops in Suva, on the principle that the stable door still needed to be bolted, ringed their stores with empty shipping containers, increasing the air of mad decay over the city.



10

Constitution's edge

Friday 26 May 2000

The end of the first week of the crisis, Friday 26 May, was a hot, muggy day. At the intersection of Vuya Road and Queen Elizabeth Drive, alongside the Pacific Theological College, there was a loose cordon. There were a couple on Ratu Sukuna Road beside the junction with Domain Road, and another at the important junction with Muanikau Road. Another on Battery Road, just metres away from the back entrance to Parliament, was the easiest to negotiate. Increasing numbers of Tailevu people were arriving by the busload, singing hymns and passing unhindered through barricades. Around 4 pm the military arrived in force and with barbed wire set up two meaningful cordons; one just down the road from the Battery Road–Vuya Road junction and another on Ratu Sukuna, near the entrance to the French ambassador's home. The soldiers were armed, unlike the police.

In Parliament Speight was holding one of his long sessions with the media, dominated by international television who were finding him visually appealing while his incoherent message could easily be masked over in editing. Speight exposed a failing of modern journalism; in the desire to get out short, sharp stories, the incoherent was made understandable when, in reality, the incoherence was the message. Speight seemed enraged and genuinely surprised that the military had toughened up. Like any good conman Speight excelled at the tactical, even if he missed the

strategic point. Gathering up around 40 of his supporters, including armed men, Speight marched out of Parliament, along Battery and turned down the slight hill towards the first of the new cordons on Vuya.

I was with the military at the barricade and had no doubt that in the first moments the soldiers were ready to defend their cordon. What so utterly confused things was the media. As Speight came around the corner and marched towards the cordon reporters, cameramen and broadcasters, like close-order bodyguards, surrounded him. Speight is a short fellow and his bald head was hidden from the military by the multitude of cameras and microphones. Indeed the whole vanguard of Speight's force was finding cover behind the international media. It was like some crusader siege machine rolling toward a castle wall. Cordon soldiers found themselves suddenly powerless and the military were doomed. Speight and forces reached the cordon



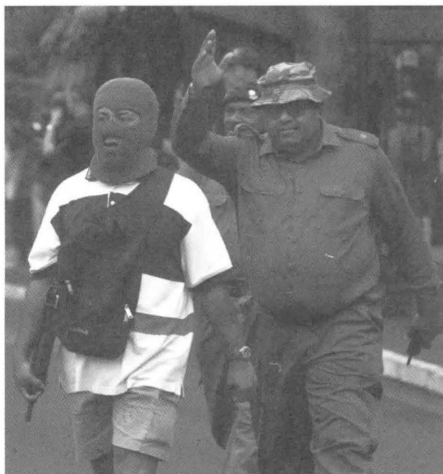
Soldiers and rebels clash on a barricade outside Parliament on 26 May.

with the military and pulled down the coils of razor wire and dismantled the barricades. The soldiers and the rebels pointed guns at each other and screamed threats but no shots were fired. The soldiers regrouped and negotiations began between Speight and their commanding officer. The coup leader eventually secured their agreement and the two sides began shaking hands.

Speight turned around and marched up the hill towards the new cordon at Ratu Sukuna. The media were again with him, but with an eye on how it would all play and knowing the outcome anyway Speight insisted that the media walk behind him as he approached the next cordon. On the nightly news around the world the image played of the spunky little bald guy facing up to a military barricade. A soldier at the barricade said they did not resist the rebels because 'they were armed'.

'We are here to stop civilians from getting hurt. We are not here to shoot anyone. What we want to do is to create an atmosphere where the talks can go on between the two parties,' he said.

A little while later a group of soldiers from the barricades



Defecting Major Joseph Savua, the police commissioner's brother, goes over to the rebels, accompanied by George Speight's brother Jim (in the balaclava). While Jim Speight said he was acting for the Fijian indigenous cause, he was concerned that if his identity was revealed he would lose his Australian citizenship.

Dominion-Post

deserted and marched into Parliament. They were led by a fat territorial major Joseph Savua.

'My brother is 46 years old,' Police Commissioner Isikia Savua said. 'He is mature; he can make up his own mind. He can make his own decision. He has decided to go that way, I have to accept that.' He said he was seeking 'a soft solution' to the crisis; 'There are 1500 people in the complex, among them women and children . . . There are friends of ours in there, and soldiers in there. The last thing you want is for us to start shooting at each other. The last thing we want is to go through that option . . . that is to mount an assault.'



Part of a Red Cross letter from Tupeni Baba to Unaisi:

I was curious to hear about Mela getting scared while moving around the house. She learns this from adults and she should not develop such fear especially when it is groundless. It is best not to ignore it: you need to discuss it with her rationally. If you push it away at the back of your or her mind, it will be suppressed in the subconscious part of the brain and becomes the basis of irrational fear. Once we have taken all reasonable steps to ensure security, we need not fear. It is good to remember that all people including thieves, robbers, soldiers, etc, have fear in them. Some express it and others do not. One must learn to be calm and collected in crisis especially as a mother . . . !



After the Friday fiasco Speight's thugs had good reason to believe they were in charge of the neighbourhood. Next day around 200 rebels, many of them armed and most of them tanked up on the false bravado of kava, alcohol and 'The Cause', confronted soldiers at the barricade on Vuya Road. In an area of rough

ground between the parliamentary complex and the Theological College it became chaotic. Scattered shooting broke out and two soldiers were wounded. Filming it was Associated Press Television cameraman Jerry Harmer. He saw Isoa Karawa point a stolen military semi-automatic at him and fire. Harmer was hit just above the wrist and lucky to survive. Speight blamed the troops and claimed his men had not fired a single shot: 'We are not at war with anybody.'

The plotter's position was strengthened when Mara's secretary, Joe Browne, showed up at Parliament to ask for Chaudhry's resignation.

'The president's secretary Mr Browne arrived to see Mahendra Chaudhry,' plotter Simione Kaitani said. 'I believe he has a letter with him asking Mr Chaudhry for his resignation.'

Browne was not allowed to see Speight. Next day, Saturday 27 May, Mara called a press conference to announce that he had sacked Chaudhry and appointed a caretaker administration. To do this he had appointed Tevita Momoedonu as caretaker prime minister on the understanding he would immediately resign. The resignation was a ploy to 'enable me to provide unfettered



President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, three days after Parliament is seized and his daughter, among others, taken hostage, telling reporters he will stand firm against the plotters.

Reuters

executive authority' and he defended his slowness by saying he and his advisers had wanted to be very sure that what they were doing was legal. 'I want to make it absolutely certain that I have stayed within the constitution . . . on the edge but still within.'

There was a section in the constitution providing for the removal of a minister who is unable to perform his functions. 'I think there can be little doubt now, given the existing hostage crisis, that the present prime minister . . . is not only absent from duty, but is also unable to perform the functions of his office. Therefore I was looking for and I think I have found a constitutionally alternative viable route through the crisis.'

The strategy was a bid to end the value of the hostages by removing them from their posts. Nobody was going to storm Parliament, he said. 'They are no longer ministers; I am the only person who is governing the country.'

Momoedonu was sworn in Saturday afternoon and quit within minutes. A broadcaster by trade, he had not been in Parliament for the coup. His malleability was to prove useful again in 2001 when, in a bid to get around another constitutional hitch, Laisenia Qarase resigned as prime minister and Momoedonu filled in again, this time for two days. All this modest service was rewarded: an ambassadorial post and a premier's pension.

Mara, whose daughter remained a hostage, was distraught and losing grip: 'We have not only faced purgatory but we have been to hell literally.'

Much of the government was at a standstill, but as soon as Ratu Mara sacked the government, its members had their pay stopped — with serious ramifications for families.



Unaisi Nabobo-Baba writes:

Ratu Mara's actions had implications for the families, as the ministers'

pay was cut immediately. For nearly two thirds of the wives and partners this meant our lives had to change enormously overnight. Some staff of a few ministries still supported and visited their former ministers' families (like Tupeni's Ministry of Foreign Affairs), while others did not. Families of hostages were put under financial strain and knew things would get harder.

Spike Padarath, Vinay Singh and I had lots of discussions on that. Spike was retired, so he began looking hard at options on jobs. There were always discussions that the deposed husbands would get compensation for losing their jobs but to this Vinay, who is very pragmatic, cautioned that after all this, like 1987, after all the court battles, lawyers and what not, nothing will eventuate. This was part of daily dialogue.

'It shouldn't be long now,' Tupeni wrote early in July. 'Some of us are saying that the longer we stay, the greater will be the compensation fought thru the courts! What a thought!'

The ousted government ministers did not get their May pay. The last pay they received was for April, so when we had our first meeting with the army, we took some tea stuff up. We were still wives and partners of ministers so Mrs Kalou (MP Joeli Kalou's wife) insisted we take up food that looked presentable. I could understand that but I could not help thinking how Mrs Kalou for instance managed to bake two trays of Fijian-type pies. We all tried to take what was presentable . . . something just looked terribly amiss. I guess part of it was to do with our own lack of acceptance as wives that our husbands were no longer ministers of government.

'I hope that your financial situation is ok,' Tupeni wrote to me. 'I am not sure of my accounts as I understand that we are now only paid as MPs from the beginning of June . . . May I don't know about . . . I have not been in a position to check this with Vicky or Emitai (his permanent secretary) but I believe it is true. If you need some assistance let me know tomorrow . . . Please keep well, do not stress and make sure Junior gets full term . . . On the money front, I am not sure what will happen after this . . .'



Three days into the coup Fiji TV's Riyaz Sayed-Khaiyum conducted a celebrated interview on the coup to date with Rabuka, who refused to stop jogging during the interview. Cameraman Pauliasi Verebasaga felt he had the hard side of the assignment that morning. Sayed-Khaiyum was best known for his Sunday evening *Close Up*, a current affairs panel. Ten nights into the crisis he hosted a live discussion with one-time Rabuka aide and political commentator Jone Dakuvula and radio station owner William Parkinson. Sayed-Khaiyum suggested the local media were not covering the crisis adequately because it was too sensitive, too close to the people involved.

'That shouldn't be a sensitive matter because these people who have conducted this coup have caused some gross insensitivity as Fijians themselves,' Dakuvula said. 'They have disagreements with the [GCC], they have disagreed with the president's offer of pardon. They want everything, they want power, they want the president to be removed, they want to form the government without any election. They are going against the . . . Chiefs and that is going to lose them a lot of support, people who otherwise were sympathetic towards them now know what they really are. They are just a group of people who are greedy to occupy offices in the Government Buildings without any election.'

Sayed-Khaiyum wondered if Speight was being given too much prominence by the international media and Parkinson said Speight had been calling numerous press conferences: 'At one stage it seemed he was doing one every hour. And as a new batch of foreign journalists would come in again, another news conference . . . another news conference. We really are regurgitating the same thing over and over again.'

Dakuvula said the media was naïve: 'The media also has been

at fault in allowing some of the spokesmen for these people to speak particularly on the radio. We've had Simione Kaitani for example, who had been allowed to describe what's going on in Parliament. That's the job of the reporter. I've complained quite a number of times to Radio Fiji about how they were allowing these people to make subtle appeals to the indigenous Fijians about their course. That shouldn't have been allowed — the reporter's job is to report what's happening, it's not the people supporting the coup to do the reporter's job.'

Dakuvula said the Fijian grassroots had been persuaded that they would lose everything to the Indians: '. . . that's the nature of the sympathy the Fijians have for this coup and that is going to wear off once the naked interest about this coup is revealed . . . The naked interest is, a bunch of people who want to get to power through unlawful means and they couldn't get it through the constitution, and therefore they want it through a coup and they want to impose a system of government here in the name of indigenous rights. But it does not accord to the Fijian way of thinking, which is a peaceful and consensual way, give and take, listening and respectful . . . This is very un-Fijian.'

Dakuvula described Speight as 'a two-day wonder' with no track record in fighting for indigenous rights.

Even in those early days of the coup, Sayed-Khaiyum was asking what some of the international media were wondering: who were the real players? Dakuvula did not want to give names although he reserved some vitriol for Iliesa Duvuloco: 'He has fought elections five times and lost.' And he said this showed what was so ridiculous about the situation. 'They've just mobilised poor Fijians who really don't understand what they're going for. They're genuine and they are feeling — well, this is really a cause for Fijians, we must support this. But they don't know the agenda of these people who have actually manipulated them to support the coup.'

Another military coup

Monday 29 May 2000

Like vampire bats the Speight gang were let loose. Around 100 men, carrying guns and knives, marched off from Parliament, escorted by the coup leaders in pick-up trucks. By the time they reached Fiji TV the *Close Up* team had gone. They burst in and smashed up the studio, knocking them off the air. Silatolu said Fiji TV had been biased against Speight; it was owned by an indigenous Fijian company. It had been surprising on 19 May that Speight had not seized at least the radio station, but on this night, after the mob had done over Fiji TV, they were just a rockthrow from state-owned Fiji Broadcasting. Journalist Sandhya Narayan recalled soldiers rushing to them to tell them to move cars and lock the doors. Windows were locked and lights turned off. In the middle of it they had a 9 pm bulletin to put out, but given their vulnerable situation, they decided not to mention what was underway.

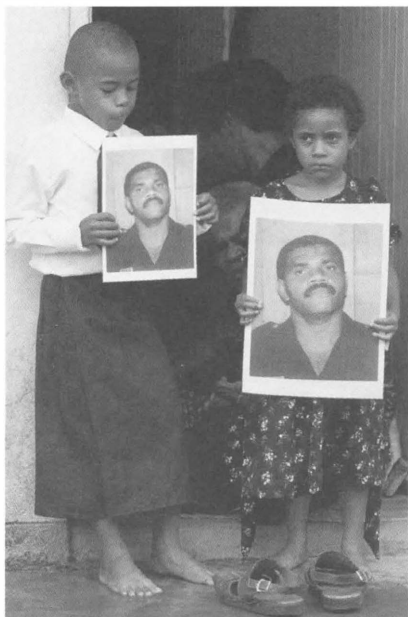
‘Coming back from the studio after the 9 pm bulletin, I saw our receptionist running towards the newsroom,’ Narayan relates. ‘Some people from the mob had come up to the door, and through the closed glass told her that we were not to mention anything about the mob on air.’

News director Vasiti Waqa got reporters Emily Moli and Narayan onto a ledge outside with instructions to jump the two storeys down if the men barged in. Security guards at the nearby

United States Embassy passed word that the mob was moving on while a security guard at a nearby food court had a heart attack at the news of the mob and died.

The gang went back to Parliament and just outside the Methodist Church, on the corner of Ratu Sukuna and Domain Road, they murdered Filipo Seavula. A policeman, he was shot in the back as he tried to uphold law and order. In a supposedly racial uprising, he was Fijian. Five years on, the spot where he fell is marked with a cross and flowers are regularly put there in memory of the first fatality in Speight's poisoned ambitions.

Behind the scenes Chief Justice Sir Timoci Tuivaga and fellow judges Daniel Fatiaki and Michael Scott were advising Bainimarama. Their actions were to cause sharp debate in the Fiji legal world; the view of their critics was that they were effectively



Daniel and Sisilia hold pictures of their murdered father, policeman Filipo Seavula. His big shoes are at their feet.

Reuters

trying to end a constitution they were sworn to uphold. The counter-view, argued with as great a passion, was that a 'doctrine of necessity' required practical, not theoretical responses.

Bainimarama called up all reservists under the age of 55. The US Embassy and the Australian High Commission advised their nationals to leave Suva. The small French community were advised that if things got worse they were to head to Lami. Nothing obvious was said but the implication was that a warship from the French naval base at Noumea was not too far over the horizon, keeping watch. The French Embassy even issued army combat rations to people under its wing. (They were later subject to an embarrassing recall over fears they might harbour mad cow disease.) In one of the bizarre moments, much of the international media suddenly fled Suva, and in some cases Fiji, in fear of their lives. Those that stayed were somewhat mystified by this, while the local reporters, who had nowhere to flee to, were contemptuous of the mainly New Zealand media.

As night fell a curfew was announced, starting at 6 pm, and the military patrolled the city. Few people moved. The disputed barricades were dismantled and many of the supporters in the grounds of Parliament left. Word was out that something was going to happen. Mara's private secretary Joe Browne noted that the army that was protecting Government House mysteriously disappeared that night: 'In hindsight it was all stage managed. By whom I am not quite sure.'

Rabuka, Savua and Bainimarama had arrived at Government House and told Mara he had to step down and be taken to his home on distant Lau. It was not a discussion; it was an order. Later Bainimarama said they had gone to see him about a threat on his life. 'I briefed him on the security situation and advised him on the need to release the hostages and return the country to normality. He said he wanted to step down and was not going to come back. The resignation was his sole decision.'

It was long claimed that the three men had presented a tabua or whale's tooth to Mara as a symbolic way of asking him to go. Bainimarama said this did not happen: 'I insisted from the start that we would not take a tabua but that the tabua would only be given at the end of the visit. And it is pretty hard to force a big man such as him to return to office once he has made a decision.'

Mara's daughter Ateca Ganilau agreed her father voluntarily stepped down: 'He did not agree with the abrogation of the constitution. That was probably why he refused to return to office. It was not the military pressured him to move out . . . The abrogation of the constitution should be investigated thoroughly and legal advisers should be made accountable to answer on its abrogation.'

It was a coup in everything but name.

The remaining foreign media was in the Centra after the curfew was imposed when a phone call came to the desk and someone announced the military had called a press conference at the headquarters. Robert Keith-Reid, who in the 1987 coup had been locked up in the guardhouse at QEB, feared a trap and, with memories of endless mosquitoes, was not keen on doing it again. I phoned a diplomatic friend who said their military attaché happened to be at the barracks. Back in a couple of minutes the diplomat advised it was worth the risk of driving across town: 'They are going to declare martial law.' The media drove in a little convoy through the empty streets.

The officer's mess at the barracks has a British imperial kind of feel with wide verandas and ceiling fans. We were assembled in a small room off the main mess and were told to wait briefly for an announcement. The people involved at that point were not very well known to most of us and Bainimarama had to be introduced. He read a statement saying he had declared martial law and had taken over, effective from 6 pm.

'All the nation has been saddened by the extent to which the



Commodore Voreqe
Bainimarama.

Island Business

country has fallen during the last week,' he said. 'I have therefore, with much reluctance, assumed executive authority.'

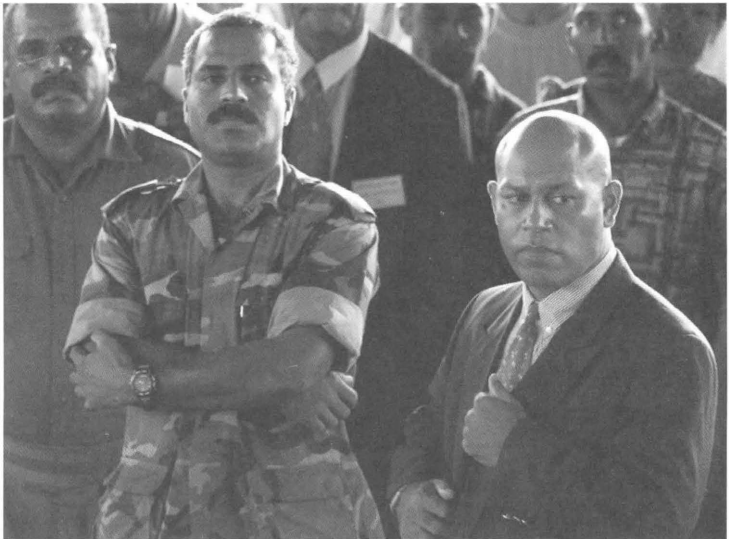
Bainimarama said the 1997 constitution allowing all races equal access to power had been 'wholly removed' but then ordered that existing laws stay in place, and that parts of the constitution relating to the operation of government be reinstated. He said he took power reluctantly and in sadness at the extent to which the country had sunk, in the English version of his speech. 'A primary objective of this government is to take the country towards peace and stability and wellbeing of Fiji and its people at the earliest possible opportunity.'

Martial law threw Lieutenant Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini into the public arena as military spokesman. Urbane, dark and handsome, he was and remains an enigma. His good looks, it was claimed, came from the fact that his father was an Indian doctor, and that he was not really the Fijian highlander he was said to

be. Always wearing combat fatigues, and often with a jacket somewhat out of place with the heat of Fiji, he was accessible but seldom transparent over what was happening. A Catholic, he saw the crisis as a moral recession. 'Fear is a luxury we cannot afford at this time of national crisis. We must rally together, we must hold hands. We must look forward to the future with hope, with determination and with courage. This is the time for us to stand up and defend the democracy that we believe in.'

But the essence of the crisis followed when, in the next breath, Tarakinikini said the military was looking for a 'culturally sensitive solution . . . We cannot see it purely in a criminal dimension . . . The solution must have political connotations.'

Bainimarama named former army commander Epeli Nailatikau as prime minister. His wife Koila was a hostage. Speight's sidekick



Speight and Lieutenant Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini on July 14 at a strange ceremony to return stolen arms. Reuters

Joe Nata said the choice of Nailatikau was completely unacceptable, as 'he has no commitment to The Cause'. That was to be little more than a footnote to the crisis: Bainimarama backed off on Nailatikau saying that the climate was not right for a civil administration. The military government would stay in place until all hostages were released and all weapons returned to the army.

'We will defer the naming and swearing-in of the interim government until we are sure that the situation has stabilised to a point where they can . . . put in place a viable constitution and pave the way for the next general elections and the return to democratic rule.' That amounted to an extra set of nails into the coffin of the Chaudhry government. 'Mahendra Chaudhry will no longer come back as prime minister,' said Bainimarama, marking the success of the second coup of 2000.

Bainimarama had declared a 24-hour curfew, with soldiers ordered to 'shoot to kill' any violators, but this quickly became an 8 pm to 7 am restriction and beyond Parliament people had to try and live, raise their children and find some kind of happiness in an environment of hostages, roadblocks and armed soldiers on the streets. There were always rumours too. 'Sister,' said a Fijian woman at the market to an Indian, 'get out fast. They are marching again. There will be trouble . . . I'm getting out. I don't want to be part of this thing.'

Within minutes of the curfew announcement the city had shuttered down, barricading itself behind burglar bars and grilles and old shipping containers. The streets were suddenly deserted. It happened frequently, usually on the breath of a rumour. It was often hard for foreigners in Suva to avoid the sudden surge of covert sellers of looted goods. Most of the men, who gathered around the fish market and were secretive but not necessarily worried because no one was arresting them, had little idea of the value of what they were selling: laptop computers for \$10.

Child prostitution was emerging. Extra movie sessions were scheduled for the day so that the Bollywood-hungry movie crowd in Suva would not miss out at night. High-school balls became daytime affairs, or, in the case of one school, a night occasion with everybody staying in the cheap wing of the Centra. But schools were closed and parents, no matter their race, faced the fear that Speight's ambitions were now wrecking their dreams for their children. The immigration office was opened and under siege with people, including some leading politicians, anxious to get passports. The office ran out of blanks within days. In the same building the registry office conducted weddings, mostly for Indians anxious for immigration purposes to register relationships. Although merely a civil event, the temple ceremony being the one that counted, the couples and families always arrived in their best saris, giving a pleasant splash of colour. The banks imposed tight security around their offices; in an air of lawlessness, robbery was an ever-ready prospect.

At Parliament martial law made little difference as busloads of supporters came and went unimpeded. The day after martial law was imposed a group of Speight's people roamed around Suva: 'They are beating up people. Go,' a soldier manning a checkpoint said. Down by the coast Speight's people began hijacking cars and taking them up to Parliament.

The air of unreality followed on Wednesday 31 May when one of the hostages, Assistant Minister Ema Tagicakibau, was released to attend her sister's funeral. She then returned to continue as a hostage. Bainimarama met Speight and began negotiations, although they were not the kind of discussions one would expect with hostages involved. Even the new military rulers seemed incapable of handling a crime scene and the Bainimarama-Speight talks had the air of political negotiations, complete with polite handshakes, tea and coffee. A group of 30 unarmed soldiers went into Parliament and presented a *tabua* to Speight,



Soldiers walk toward Speight's machete-wielding rebels near Parliament. The military set up the shipping containers blocking Ratu Sukuna Road and access up the hill to Parliament. This was the place policeman Filipo Seavula was killed. AFP Photo

who promptly responded with a new set of demands. So weird did it all become that Speight was given four-wheel-drive vehicles to get around Suva and up to the military headquarters for talks on the new demands in Bainimarama's office. Reporters lounged around outside under palm trees on the grassed parade ground as talking moved on. A military spokesman, Eroni Volavola, termed it a 'major breakthrough' and said, 'I think we can safely say that within the next 24 to 36 hours you will start to see a lot of very positive things coming out of Parliament.' At the end of the talks Speight and Nata punched the air in a victory sign. They were as deluded as everybody else. People's hopes of an end to the crisis were routinely tortured by Tarakinikini who every so often would make an end-is-nigh pronouncement. Sometimes he would at least modify his pronouncements: 'But you must remember we are dealing with unpredictable people here.'

Bainimarama said Speight and six others would be allowed to walk free after the crisis was over. Tarakinikini explained the logic of amnesty they were considering: ‘What they have done is wrong, it is criminal, but it must be seen in the context of its political connection. It is not straight-out criminal activity, it is politically motivated and they have substantial political support, as they have shown.

‘The amnesty is being considered, conditional of course on the release of the hostages and the recovery of all weapons and ammunition which will be returned to the military forces. It is not a straight-out concession to a terrorist; it is a concession bearing in mind the deep-seated political support we have seen and our desire to win peace at the end of it all.’



Part of a Red Cross letter from Tupeni Baba to daughter Mela:

Hello Mela, I hope you are well and that your work at home and at school are also OK. Mum tells me that you have grown quite big over the last 7 weeks. If so then you must be as tall as mum. Yes, you should be in a position to really help mum at this stage. This is the one thing I have been pointing out to you apart from cleaning the car and watering the plants. How do you go to school now? Do you walk back? This would be good for you otherwise you will put on unnecessary weight. I guess you take the taxi in the morning. I hear you wish to clean up the ironing room for Junior. This is good. I don't want mum to be lifting things now with you and Semi around. Anyway, keep well and don't watch TV too much.

Regards and Love





12

Ten-point plans

Through June 2000

Unhindered by authorities, food and supporters flowed into Parliament. Speight would get irritated over questions on the hostages: 'Look, I could have easily shot these people, okay? Don't forget the cause for which we acted . . . The hostages have their place in this whole process.'

The hostages were, he said in the pseudo-criminal lawyer turn of phrase he used, 'in a coup situation' and while they were anxious to leave, 'they will remain here for as long as necessary until these issues are resolved on behalf of the Fijian people'.

He said the international outrage being expressed over what was happening would dissipate quickly within a short time after the coup events. 'Two years after 1987, everybody was back in bed together, everybody was buddy-buddy. I'm quite confident that's what's going to happen to me . . . Time is a great healer. It will reveal the hypocrisy about the whole affair.'

Speight predicted Australian Prime Minister John Howard would respect the legitimacy of a new regime, giving him the same acceptance Rabuka had received: 'Two years later, everybody was patting him on the back; three years later, he was the prime minister and he held power for five, six, seven years until he lost the elections in 1999. I'm confident in five years from now, whether I'm in power or not . . . He will come and shake my hand; he will,

mark my words. Australia will understand and New Zealand will understand.'

Speight was unconcerned that the country could be bankrupted by the crisis: 'Why have money in the bank and no control over your destiny?' He said he talked to Chaudhry: 'It's mainly me talking . . . I doubt Mr Chaudhry is in a mood to dialogue with me.'

From the beginning Speight issued demands which would undergo modifications and additions with such rapidity that it took a while to figure out what he really wanted. In early June the demands revolved around a 10-point plan, the key part of it being that all executive authority in Fiji pass to the GCC. They would then appoint Jope Seniloli (the man who swore in the 'government' on 19 May), as president to form a civilian government with members drawn from the GCC's and Speight's group. They wanted another constitution as well as amnesty for the principal people in Speight's group; the soldiers who took part could return to the RFMF 'as regular members'.

Speight botched the amnesty issue. At many press conferences he was asked why he would take seriously a promise of amnesty when no contract applied under duress would have validity after the duress had passed. He said he 'absolutely' trusted Bainimarama and Tarakinikini and denied there was any duress involved in his agreements with them: 'I am talking Fijian to Fijian and I don't expect the Europeans among this international press corps to understand that.'

He was asked if he trusted the military: 'Absolutely, and I resent any implication that the army and us can't come to a level that we can work together.'

He was confident he would not be attacked by the military: 'The army will never attack Fijians, never.'

Rabuka, who had put his own civil and criminal amnesty in his two constitutions, was contemptuous of Speight's behaviour,

warning he might not have much of a future: ‘He won’t be able to walk on the streets safely anyway, whether he gets amnesty or not . . . They are playing at it day by day. They don’t know what will happen next and when that happens they sit down and reconsider their options.’

With hindsight it can be seen that the slowness and the manoeuvring that dragged the crisis out over weeks was also part of laying an ambush. Speight had wanted power transferred to the GCC but Bainimarama said it was a chief’s forum and not a village council that could be called at the whim of anybody. ‘The military therefore maintains its stance that we must secure the release of all hostages and the return of all arms and other military stores before anything else is done, and the GCC will be convened when we are assured of the peace and stability of the nation.’



Part of a Red Cross letter from Tupeni Baba to wife Unaisi:

After my mild flu, I have been taking Vitamin C tablets just to supplement our diet deficiency. About half of us are doing that. Given the situation we are in esp the hygienic conditions, we need to look after ourselves. I am back to my normal self. A few of us are still suffering from flu. The warm materials you sent are being used esp the heavy coat from Rekha and the neck-warmers . . .



International pressure was beginning to tell in Suva. For entirely misplaced reasons Fiji passionately cares about its link to the British Crown (which London does not reciprocate), and while Rabuka had made the place a republic, its flag still featured the Union Jack, the currency had Queen Elizabeth on it and

Queen's Birthday was a public holiday. The Commonwealth put Fiji on notice that its membership was under review. That was particularly galling because the Commonwealth was at the same time pussyfooting around with Zimbabwe and Pakistan where democracy was in a worse state.

The serious pressure came from the European Union, whose representative told Bainimarama that if Fiji acceded to Speight's demands, Brussels would act against them. Sugar makes up around 35 percent of Fiji's gross domestic product and each year it produces around 340,000 tonnes of raw sugar. Over 70 percent of it goes to Europe on prices two thirds higher than the world market price. The EU was already under pressure from other growers using World Trade Organisation rules to end the preference, an extension of a British colonial deal.

'I have been told by the representatives of the European Union that if the name of one of George Speight's people appear on the list of the interim government, then they will effectively put things in motion which could result in the closure of Fiji's sugar mills,' Bainimarama announced.

Speight was dismissive. 'We are not concerned, immediately, about the international backlash, about the trade bans, about European Union threats to take away our preferential sugar prices, and all of these things, because our commitment and resolve to these things is complete.'

Silatolu cared little for the heavy damage the economy would suffer: 'Even if everyone loses their job and I am the only one left with the hostages, I will still believe in the cause.'



Although salaries had been frozen, Unaisi Nabobo-Baba found they were expected to feed their hostage spouses:

Speight and co got more and more creative as the days moved on.

It was round about the tenth day when we first received a weekly shopping list from Speight. The shopping list was for food to feed our spouses. The shopping list was handled by the wives' committee comprising five spouses; this included Joana Bale, wife of Labour MP Manoa Bale, Leslie, wife of Leo Smith, Ben Padarath, Lavinia Padarath's son, Mrs Anup Kumar and myself. The shopping list grew longer and more colourful (and costly) as the days went by. Typically the lists, which were scribbled on A4 paper, looked like this:

- 5 no. 16 chicken
- 4 plastic bags full of baigani (egg plants)
- 5 trays of eggs (1 tray is about two and a half dozen)
- 1 big bag of rice (probably cost \$30.00)
- 1 big bag of sugar
- 1 big bag of flour
- 1 big bag of Chinese cabbage
- 5 big bottles of cooking oil
- 5 big packets of tea
- Fruits
- Lots of milk

George Speight's two brothers, Sam Junior and Jim.

Matelita Ragogo



At one point, I asked Tarakinikini whether he thought the army should be doing 'that' shopping for our spouses. A number of the wives were not income-earners. Only a third of us had paid jobs. So with our husbands in 'prison' and their pay ceased, I did not know where the coup-makers thought the shopping money would come from. We had our collections which we did weekly for such things but we did not anticipate that the coup-makers would go that far. We were worried about our spouses so we acquiesced. What else could we do? A note from Tupeni told us the food was not always getting to the right mouths.

We are well. I have received the clothes in yesterday's bag with the eatables like soup packs, 1 butter, 1 pkt. toilet paper . . . You mentioned foods organised by the wives – that did not come. I suggest you don't go into food. It will most likely not arrive past security. Nevertheless our spirits are high and we pray twice daily with Bible readings.



For all of us in Suva in May and June 2000 life revolved around the expectation that, just around the corner, was a solution and an end to the crisis. For the hostages it was infinitely harder, but everybody was suffering. Schools remained closed and military roadblocks in place throughout the city, slowing movement and adding to the air of uncertainty. Children who had only seen guns on television programmes were daily confronting soldiers with automatics. Journalists too found the strain hard, not least because of the competitive edge that inevitably came into it. There were hassles; curfew passes had to be applied for every two or three days at the Nabua police station. That could take half a day and getting one was entirely at the discretion of the particular lieutenant or captain on duty that day. Some of them

were reading our stories — thanks to the Internet many foreign reporters were finding their stories pirated in local papers — and felt free to comment on them, sometimes aggressively. Suva's already severely handicapped social life took another knock when Speight's men burnt down a small restaurant on Queen Elizabeth Drive, called the Lighthouse. It cannot have ever been described as a high-class eating joint, but its destruction underlined the complete pointlessness of Speight's cause.

On Monday 5 June the coup I had been tipped off about in early May finally took place in the Solomon Islands when, in Honiara, another indigenous group with a cause, the Malaita Eagle Force, seized Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu. It was part of a battle for control of the main island of Guadalcanal whose own indigenous people were trying to drive the Malaita people out. Among some of us who had covered both Fiji and the Solomons, Honiara was Fiji without the Indians; back to the future. For reporters swapping notes, it was generally agreed that those based in Suva had the more comfortable coup to cover.



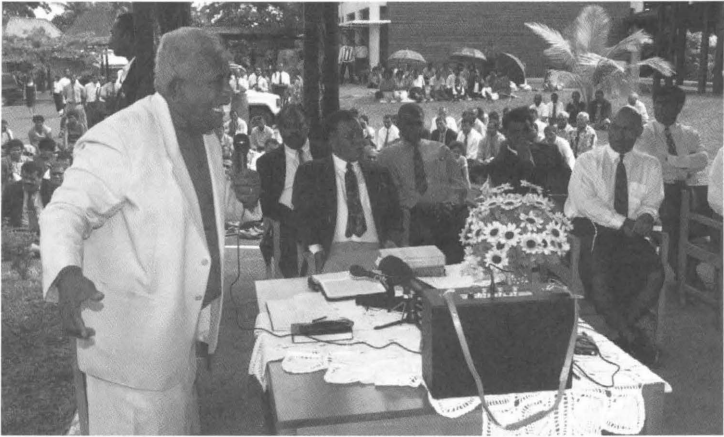
13

What does God want?

‘Forgiveness’

During the crisis Christian churches in Fiji became grossly ambiguous over the fundamental issues of right and wrong. Many church leaders advocated the disagree-with-the-method, agree-with-the-cause theology and the shallowness of it all was exposed in outrageous ‘forgiveness’. In a striking aberration churches were having people forgive each other, even as the sins continued to be committed and the hostages were held. On the day of the coup hundreds of people had plundered downtown Suva and set fire to dozens of shops. For the most part it was not a case of the poor and oppressed overthrowing the merchant classes; at that time much of downtown Suva was made up of family shops and nothing was terribly extravagant. It was a brutal kick when the churches of Suva two weeks after the destruction dished out what amounted to a general absolution to their congregations involved in the looting. No remorse, regrets or acts of repentance or compensation for the victims, just the sinners with clean slates to go forth and sin again. Worse, the churches were forgiving Speight and his men as they continued to hold the hostages. Forgiveness was the cover for inertia; the alternative to doing anything.

Chaudhry’s wife Virmati, who belonged to the Assemblies of God church, said she had forgiven Speight, even as he held her husband, just as she knew God would have wanted her to do. ‘Before the elections, many Christians fasted and prayed to God



Fiji churches found no theological problem with moving close to the coup and the rebels. A church service inside Parliament. *Dominion-Post*

to appoint a leader. Not once did I mention Mahendra Chaudhry's name to be a leader because I know that the choice is the Lord's. I know that whatever has happened is beyond our control.'

Teresia Teaiwa, a Fiji-Banaban academic heading Wellington's Victoria University Pacific Studies Department, felt that while the looting had not been planned, the march organisation by the Methodist Church and Taukei movement had enabled it. She pointed out that looting had been 'an ominous feature' of Fiji response to crisis, including floods in 1998 and a fatal plane crash in 1999. 'The image of a humble, God-fearing, dignified and hospitable people marketed by the Fiji Visitors Bureau is chillingly contrived.'

Religion added to the erratic, mad scene at Parliament. A US-based evangelist, Jay Datt Lal, was wandering around preaching Armageddon with 20,000 lives lost if his country continued to flout the rule of law. It was not really clear why he was allowed to stay in Parliament as he made Speight's people uneasy. Church

services on Sunday in Parliament were mostly Methodist but included a range of evangelist types, complete with loud music. One Sunday I endured a kind of fundamentalist loud service, brutal and unforgiving, full of lots of ranting. It felt like some kind of North Korean brainwashing session. No Sermon on the Mount, it was more akin to a Nuremberg rally. At times the message dished out by these pastors utilised the Old Testament in the endless battle for power in Fiji. When somebody proclaims the need for Fiji to become a Christian state it almost always has nothing to do with Christ's message and loving one's neighbour. It is all about cleansing Fiji of its 'heathens' — Hindu and Muslim and Christian Indians who make up 44 percent of the nation.

Fijian churches were an extension of the same power game within the Fiji community. Leadership in the church was as ambitiously sought as politicians seek places in Parliament. Leadership in the Fijian Methodist Church provided immense wealth and status.

Around 80 percent of Fijians are Methodist and, given the nature of politics in Fiji, the church was unashamedly political. The Fiji Methodists got themselves offside with world Methodists for their endorsement of Rabuka's coup. In the years since, the leadership, at least publicly, tried to back away from politics but its domination of village life meant it could not easily do that. The church engaged in a double standard for Speight. Early in June church general secretary Ilaitia Tuwere led an 80-strong delegation to Speight. Among them was the head of the multiracial Methodist conference, Anil Reuben. Speight shook his hand and told him 'everything will be alright brother'.

As with previous delegations to Parliament, Tuwere and his group pandered to Speight's air of self-importance, presenting him, as if he was a chief, with a *tabua* and winning no concession in reply from the new defender of Fijian culture. Sitting with Speight were Ligairi and Mua.

Tuwere announced the church was mediating: 'As the largest church group in Fiji we have a role to play and we will actively move into that . . . I think there is an end to this. If what I perceive is the right perception, I say something positive should come out next week.'

Another pastor, Apete Toko, made a comment portentous for many: 'We know what the Indians want, we know what the people of the other races want. The question we now want is this: what does God want?'

Speight grandly escorted them out of Parliament, always the good host, but did not think it amounted to much. 'They came basically to pray with us and to hope that we all came to a speedy resolution.'

Four years after that visit to Parliament the *Fiji Sun* revealed church president (and later government-appointed senator) Tomasi Kanailagi had secretly written to Speight hailing the rebellion and the bravery of the participants: 'I wish to confirm to you my friends that there is no change in our support for the cause . . . I wish to let you know that we must not let Fijians fight among themselves, or the Indians will have the last laugh.'

During the crisis Kanailagi admitted to keeping regular contact with Speight in Parliament. 'The church has to be where its members are to continue to be the prophetic voice even if it means being in the wilderness.'

A retired Methodist head, Reverend Josateki Koroi, slammed the church's approach: 'Speight wants power first before he could serve the indigenous people, but he's got it back to front. He needs to serve the indigenous people first, before he gains respect and could attain that power. Political paramountcy is the monopoly of the few self-centred individuals hungry for power.'

The Bible made no mention of indigenous rights, Koroi claimed, only human rights. Speight argued all land must be owned by indigenous Fijians, but Koroi said God gives the land to

mankind as trustees and custodians, not as owners. Fiji land was well secured by law and nothing can take away the owners' rights. 'Nothing is lacking; therefore, there is nothing to fear about land ownership. The only thing lacking is the motivation for diligent, hard work of cultivation of the land by those entrusted with it.'

One of the men sworn in to Speight's government, Viliame Volavola, was also a territorial army officer, and 18 days into the crisis he marched out, responding to Bainimarama's order for all military personnel to quit Parliament. In his trial three years later he said what he saw in Parliament offended his moral principles. 'The worship of God in Parliament was two-faced. They requested the help of the kalou vu or heathen gods. They planned an attack on the government while worshipping God. There were immoral acts around Parliament where girls were raped.'

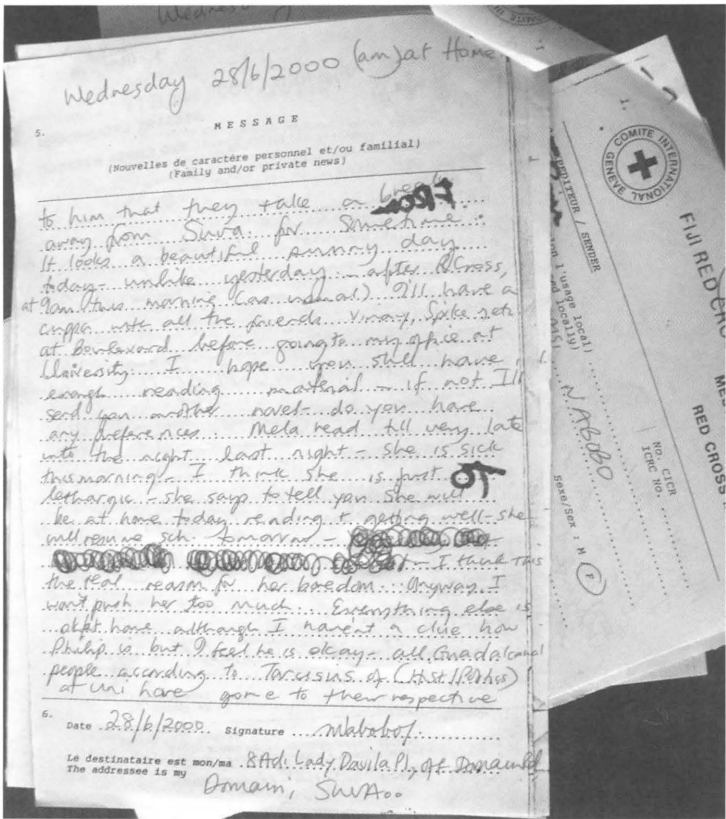
Volavola was jailed for three years on a charge of illegally taking an oath.

Through the crisis, Fiji's dogmatic and strident Christian leadership faltered and compromised themselves. So too, in a curious way, did the Hindu and Muslim leadership. But every day at the Anglican Holy Trinity Cathedral women, indigenous, Indian and 'fruit salad', would hold a vigil with quiet prayer not only for the hostages but for the nation. Mocked and threatened, they won no points in Fiji. But each time a hostage was freed, like a slowly leaking tap, the freed people would come to the vigil.



For Unaisi Nabobo-Baba the Red Cross letters became vital:

Letters were our only means of communication, so very often they went to a few pages of the Red Cross message pads. The length of the pages was approximately 16 centimetres and the width was approximately 12.5 centimetres. I found the pages too short, for I always wanted to



Red Cross letters that went to and from the hostages. The heavily blacked out parts are where rebels tried to censor them.

include details, it was the only way to let go of all sorts of emotions. It was the same when we received letters from the inside. One kept reading till the last letter and word appeared, and then we would read, and read again as if to expect more. On both sides, the letters were the only 'barometers' we had to suss out the possibilities of 'hurricanes' or good and calm weather!

Late in June the army told those of us living in Domain and close to Parliament that we would have to temporarily relocate. I told Tupeni this in a short note and he replied.

From: Dr Tupeni L Baba, Parliament House, Veiuto, Suva
 To: Unaisi Nabobo, C/O Red Cross Society, Gorrie St, Suva, FJ
 Date: 1st July, 2000

Dearest Una,

Greetings in the name of the Lord. Today is a beautiful day. I had an early shower at 7.30 am and here I'm dropping this note before prayer time.

I was a little disturbed by the news which came in your note that you had to shift temporarily. I didn't have time to ponder on it before dropping a very quick note for your moving to Elixir for a time. Now I have to reconsider, talked to others affected and these are my views: These are only a precautionary measure especially at night for those where there are no men. By all means, you + Mela could sleep for a time either at the Elixir or in a furnished university flat. Elixir might be better, if vacant at least for 3-4 days. If I were there, there would be no move. Any chance of a dangerous incident is nil provided you stay indoors after 6 (6-6am) and have 2 men from the village there. Even Semi's husband could be asked to come plus Peceli etc. I am dropping a note to Laisiasa (Tupeni's brother) in Veiuto to also talk to you. He could get two guys at night (Qase + others) if needed. He could ensure you don't strain yourself when moving. At day time, the house needs to be occupied for security of our things. Vicky [minister of foreign affairs' P.A.] to inform the Domain police to cover as well.

No overreaction is needed. Sober mindedness is required and this is overly played up . . . I would advise against moving with precautions above (both day and night time). You need to

be at home for washing, cleaning etc. The house needs to be occupied. This hype will pass after one day or two. The garage needs to be locked at night for security of the car. But if there is another suitable arrangement then follow that.

If Elixir is vacant you could go there for 3-4 days but whatever happens keep the home as a base and needs to be occupied. The laundry needs to be locked – both doors + windows – for security of clothes and washing machine. Semi + husband could be in the Maid quarters and Samisoni [gardener] at night plus boys arranged by Lai. I enclose here a note to Lai and another to Manageress of the Elixir Motel.

We are hoping to come out anytime, now. I hope God will clear the way either today or tomorrow. In the meantime, we wait on God's time. Don't worry about me, just look after yourself and our arrangements. Don't forget Vicky, she could also make arrangements. Please ring the Manageress of Elixir . . . for a vacancy if you need to go there. Give her my note attached. Otherwise hope all is well.

Don't be alarmed, by now you should be used to the situation and take one step at a time. Don't let anybody bother you unnecessarily. Only God we fear, nobody else.

I hope Mela is fine. Keep calm and collected for her and especially for Junior. At this time you need all the peace in the world . . . I don't need anything today. If you have time, buy six or 1 dozen rolls of toilet paper and give it to the RCross. We are running out of supplies here. No need for food; we are okay.

Love to you, Mela and relatives
Tupeni





14

Long days and nights in captivity

Carnival at Parliament



Tupeni Baba writes of being kept hostage in the parliamentary complex for 56 days:

None of us imagined that we would be in captivity for such a long time. On many occasions, we even wondered whether we would live to see the sun the next day. We learnt to develop an attitude of living one day at a time. We sought strength and we were surprised to find strength within ourselves and supported by our own faiths and religions.

After the first three to four days, big crowds came to Parliament daily. They were ferried in by well known bus companies in Suva and Nausori. We estimated after counting heads one day, that there were about 300–500 people in the complex on any one day. This would be swelled by another 100 people on some special occasions like special church services, meeting of vanua chiefs, and other special meetings and celebrations. The crowd acted as a human shield and they were mostly, if not all, indigenous Fijians from various areas: from the districts in the Tailevu province; from districts in the Rewa province as well as from Naitasiri and Ra provinces. There were also those who came in from around the urban areas of Suva and Nausori.

There was a carnival atmosphere, particularly in the days following

the swearing-in of the rebel president, Ratu Jope Seniloli, and Speight's cabinet. This followed a period of intense activity as the President Ratu Mara set about assuming emergency powers to govern the country under the constitution, while the GCC tried to mediate between these power groups.

We were cut off from the outside: without TV or radio; we were not allowed to see the papers or talk to outsiders. We were not allowed to meet together for any other reason than to pray, worship and study the Bible or other religious texts. Many of our writings were confiscated so we had to use our powers of observation and work out from what we had heard through the PA system outside or from the comments coming from the many sermons in the PC courtyard what was going on in the country. We developed after some time a way of communicating what we saw and heard, and in that process were able to make sense of many things.

We were visited by the leaders of the Methodist Church with Rev Dr Tuwere and Rev Jone Langi, both of whom I knew very well. But they were escorted by Speight himself and his armed security team, and as we embraced and attempted to talk, we were separated. Following a statement by the Methodist Church of its opposition to the armed takeover of the Government, the leaders of the Methodist Church and its ministers were not allowed to visit Parliament. The Methodist Church is the biggest church among Fijians – about 80 percent of them are members.

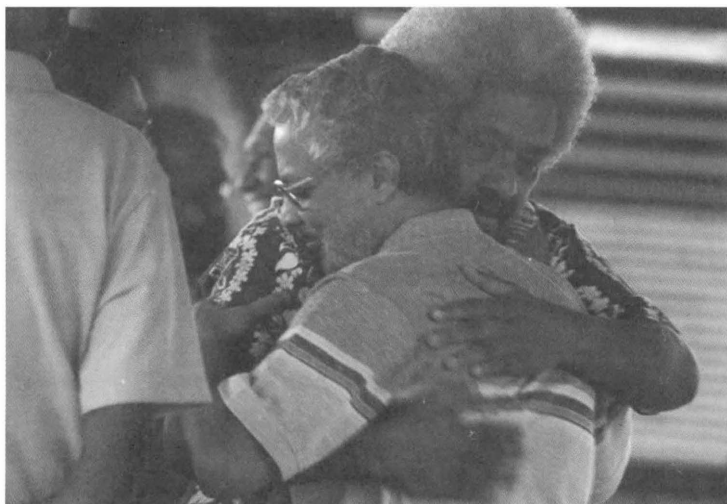
Following the ban on the Methodists, other church groups were allowed to visit. The groups that were given free rein to conduct services outside in the grounds of the PC were largely of the charismatic variety such as the Assemblies of God, Everyhome Church, and others.

The deacon of the Suva Holy Trinity Cathedral, Reverend Cama, was allowed to come into the complex. Irrespective of our different denominations, we were happy to participate in the sacraments he administered for all the 16 Fijian, Rotuman and part-European MPs. Holy Trinity became the centre for prayer and vigil throughout

our period of captivity by our friends, relations and supporters of democracy throughout Fiji. It was an initiative by the women and women's organisations. Some of our Indian colleague MPs also shared the holy sacrament with Reverend Cama.

There were other charismatic religious preachers like Jay Datt Lal, the Indo-Fijian Christian revivalist living in California, who found his way into the complex to conduct prayers and worship. He prophesied that we would be released by God on a particular day. We were expected to meticulously follow a strict routine of Bible reading and prayer in order for this to come about. On 23 June, the day he predicted we would be released, we waited expectantly but unfortunately his prediction, like many other false prophets in history, did not eventuate; he was not to be seen again.

It was amazing how people turned to God, by whatever name, at

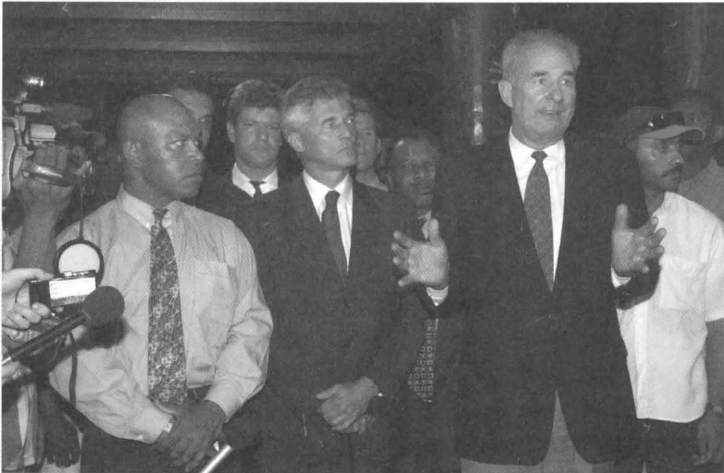


Among the first look at the hostages while they were prisoners: Chaudhry greets Isireli Vuibau. The Fijians and the Indo-Fijians were normally kept apart.

a time like that. As one who had gone to a Methodist school in Fiji, religion had always been a part of my life; it was not something that I had to search for or escape to in times of crisis, as I observed others doing.

On the sixth day of the takeover, we were visited by the secretary-general of the Commonwealth, Don McKinnon, formerly the New Zealand minister for foreign affairs, and a UN special envoy, Sergio de Mello. These two visitors were accompanied by what I thought was a group of strange bedfellows, including Speight, Kubuabola, Jim Ah Koy, Berenado Vunibobo and Nationalist-Tako Lavo Party official, Iliesa Duvuloco.

As minister for foreign affairs of the Coalition Government, I was curious to find out why these international visitors were negotiating with Speight for our release, and I wondered about the implications of



Speight, treated like a head of government, disdainfully receives UN special representative Sergio de Mello and Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon at Parliament as the hostages were still held nearby.

that action on Speight's own status. We wanted to talk with the two international visitors, as they were concerned with our condition and the condition of the women MPs, but again, as we began to exchange pleasantries, we were separated. I wondered also what Vunibobo's advice was to Speight as one who had been former minister for foreign affairs in the Rabuka government. He had been in the complex with Rabuka even on the first day of the takeover of Parliament.

We had visits from Manoa Kamikamica, the executive officer of the GCC, after the chiefs had their first meeting on the 23–24 May. He talked with Koila Nailatikau and we were disappointed to learn from her that the GCC, while deciding to support Ratu Mara, had apparently suggested that the Council of Ministers which was to be formed by the president subsequently were to include some members who reflected the views of Speight. I thought to myself that this was the type of compromise based on political expediency for which the GCC was known and it would make it very difficult for the new government to move forward.

It was an unnerving experience witnessing the morning training of some 60–80 youths from the villages. Aged from about 18 to 30 years, these young men were being trained by experienced CRW soldiers in soldiering and particularly the use of automatic weapons, physical fitness, tactics, drills and various military manoeuvres. They would stand and exercise under the sun, run, sing and shout in unison with precision and passion. I kept thinking, no wonder the Fijian soldiers are internationally acclaimed in their work in the UN peacekeeping operations. Unfortunately, the same skills for which they were trained in to keep peace have been used to take over their Parliament and carry out coups. What an irony.

Following such training, many of the new recruits were introduced to security duties and were allowed to carry weapons. Up to that point, most of those who were carrying weapons were in full uniform and obviously were members of either the CRW or territorial soldiers. As the new recruits came in, we felt insecure and as the takeover dragged on and on, we began to see more and more young faces, and the sight

of them carrying automatic weapons after only a short training was unsettling.

On the 22nd day of our captivity, one such young fellow with an automatic weapon slung on his shoulder woke me at about 3 am: 'Vuniwai, Vuniwai' (doctor, doctor), and he asked me in Fijian if I could verify what he had heard about us. I asked him what he had heard. He replied that they had been told that we were part of the Freemasons movement that drank blood. (The Freemasons Hall in the town of Levuka had just been burnt to the ground; this we learnt later.) I expressed surprise and told him that all the Fijian, Rotuman and part-European MPs were Christians and were not Freemasons. As we talked, I watched his automatic weapon which was slung on his shoulder and wondered if it had the safety catch on. He noticed I was looking at it and he pointed it away from me.

Before he went away, he told me he knew those rumours were not true and he also believed that I would tell him the truth. I thought as he left that a lot of rumours must have been circulated about us. No wonder, every day people would file past our quarters just to have a look at us as if we were some beings from another planet.

One day we heard clapping and cheering, and as we looked out we saw a whole platoon of regular soldiers who were engineers, led by Major Josefa Savua, the younger brother of the commissioner of police. They marched into the complex and joined the 'Rebel Army'. The new platoon looked committed and ready, as if they were about to go into combat. I thought, what the heck? A numbness descended on me.

We witnessed a number of shootings from where we were in the complex. Early one evening we saw a group of youths, some armed, running up to Parliament from the Draiba back entrance, being chased by the police. We heard some sporadic shooting and we lay on the floor. Early the next morning Iliesa Duvuloco came and told Vuibau that a policeman was shot dead as a result of that exchange. Vuibau also told us that the same group trashed the Fiji TV premises that night.



Chaudhry greets fellow hostage Manoa Bale. *Asaeli Lave, Fiji Times*

Another incident involved an exchange between the rebels and the army along Vuya Road. Two rebels were wounded: one died and was later buried in the courtyard of Parliament. We witnessed the full burial from the main Parliament building. We sensed that the Fiji Military Force was taking its time, waiting for an opportunity to come into Parliament.

On 24 June, the 37th day of captivity, Speight and Ligairi came and advised us that the women were to be released that evening. They had been very courageous and we could not ask any more from them. We knew also that with their departure, the military would most likely come into Parliament.

On 30 June, Ligairi came and he appeared anxious and disturbed. He said the military had declared the complex, the domain area, Nasese and much of Muanikau a 'military zone'. This meant that they could attack it and take the area over at any time. He had never showed any

such level of anxiety throughout our captivity. He knew as a military man what such declaration meant. He asked if we could write to the RFMF to reconsider their decision. We discussed the issue and decided that as hostages, being held against our will, we should not be taking sides. I communicated this to him in a note.

Our day as hostages started very early, at 5 am, with light exercise, mostly within the building. Occasionally, we were allowed to exercise in the parliamentary ground. After exercise, we were escorted in twos to the bathroom for showers. This was a long process; there were limited showers and toilet facilities for the number of people that had been living in the complex. The state of the facilities, both showers and toilets, left much to be desired. We were not in a position to do much about it.

This was followed by breakfast, which usually consisted of a cup of tea, bread or biscuits. Occasionally, we had eggs or toast but usually nothing much more than that.

After breakfast, we were ready for prayer and study of the scriptures. Under the guidance of Rev. Goneyali, we would discuss particular Bible verses or certain theological writings or ideas. On one occasion we discussed the views of the German theologian Dr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was writing from a German prison in the hands of the Nazis. At other times, we had visiting church ministers, like Reverend Cama from the Holy Trinity Cathedral. We would have the sacrament and after that we continue reading the Bible.

Before lunch we would be visited by John Scott of the Red Cross with letters from our families and return of clean clothes that had been laundered by our families. This was the most enjoyable time for us as we received letters from our families and relations. Our letters were read by CRW officers, and were censored if they were suspected of passing important information to the outside. I had a lot of black marks in the letters that I sent, I found out later on. In some cases, I thought that they did not know what the words meant and they suspected

some of the longer words were being used used to convey some hidden meaning. They would sit and receive our letters and, for a while, the main dictionary in the Chamber would disappear. I guessed where it went. In the first coup in 1987, when the soldiers wanted to screen our conversations with relatives, we relied on Mandarin-speaking MP Edmund March to pass on our important messages outside through his son. This way the Fijian soldiers would have no idea what was going on.

Our lunches were simple fare. Very often we had sandwiches or curry and rice. On some special days we might have something more generous.

In the afternoon, we either rested or had visiting church ministers. We would have early tea and after tea we would have another prayer and often would sing a hymn or two. Some of our guards were keen to attend some of these sessions. After such occasions, we were ready for the night.

Every day we expected to hear something of our release, but as the time rolled on, we learnt to take each day and whatever it brought. I would number each day in my diary and as it was getting on to the 50th day nothing was happening.

One morning as we woke up, we were told by the CRW guards to get ready to move to the next building where our Indian colleagues were. The guards told us that the vanua chiefs were meeting the next day in the complex – the chiefs wanted to meet in the main parliamentary chambers where we were.

We packed our meagre belongings in the Red Cross rubbish bags and joined our colleagues. We met, hugged, embraced. It was an emotional reunion; we had been kept apart all this time. As we settled into the room, I noticed that our Indian colleagues were in two camps. On one side were Chaudhry, his son, Ganesh Chand and others. On the other were Anand Singh, Shiu Charan Singh, Vinod Maharaj, Gyanendra Prasad and others. The long ordeal in Parliament had obviously taken its toll on the relations between our Indian colleagues. Poseci Bune

and I immediately mixed some kava with the help of a security guard, who by this time had become fairly close to the prisoners – especially those who smoked like Anand Singh and Vinod Maharaj – and Indian colleagues who could speak Fijian. The kava helped to ease the tension among our Indian colleagues . . . and helped to bring us together. The next day we saw many vanua chiefs arrive with their people.

Samanunu Talakuli Cakobau arrived from Malaysia, where she was high commissioner, to open the meeting. As foreign minister I pondered for a while how she was able to come. Then we heard a number of speeches that followed. Most of these were directed at the need for the formation of a vanua government. They talked about vanua resources, land, seas, rivers, mahogany and cane plantations, and the need for these to be in Fijian control.

We sat and listened attentively, trying to take in everything. We were also translating the meeting to our Indian colleagues. I remember the pointed and harsh voice of the NLTB's general manager, Maika Qarikau. He addressed the gathering on a document circulated that morning, seeking consent for all the vanua chiefs to support the document, giving their authority to the formation of a vanua government. At this point, a senior security person came in and disconnected the amplifier that was transmitting the sounds from the main parliamentary chambers to our room. The meeting ended with ceremonies and presentations. All we could hear were the clapping and the restrained voices of the ceremonies.

At the end of the meeting they filed past our room, looking in at us. I recognised Ratu Epenisa Cakobau, his sister Litia Cakobau and a few others.





15

Clueless

‘Great’ chiefs and reporters

In two years I wrote around 200,000 words on the coup but I was best remembered for just 1200, written on a slow news day. Suva people became fascinated with the foreign media whose reporters were treated as stars. In a piece I wrote for the *Fiji Times*, I exposed the life inside the Centra. It appeared on a Saturday and many of my fellow reporters were outraged. My one regret was that I did not dream up the headline: ‘Clueless in Coup Coup Land’.

Forget the poor sods being held at Parliament, the real scandal in Fiji can be found among the celebrated ‘international media’ trapped in the Centra Hotel.

No Red Cross parcels for these guys . . . and no Geneva Convention on civilised treatment either. They are suffering the worst indignity of the lot — the world is losing interest in their story.

It has, since May 19 when George misheard the quote about ‘five minutes of fame’ and thought it meant five months, been a tough assignment, but the payback has been in the charming way in which we of the international media have been given a glorious status . . .

Back at our various homes we’re just the same run-of-the-mill reporters the folks here are. Come to Fiji though, add in a coup and a bit of shooting, and suddenly we’re

something different. Lots of photos in the newspapers to start with. Reporter A looking stupid with umbrella; Reporter B sleeping; Reporter C and D sitting close together. C and D close together again. And again. Lots of reporters playing touch outside Iloilo's house.

Back home no one would notice. Just another bunch of hacks, but here we are 'international media'. We're special. Not that it saves us from parking tickets.

Perhaps before going on we should try to define this body that has acquired this august status.

Back when May 19 dawned not a single representative of the species could be found in Fiji. By about midnight there was a serious flocking of them at Nadi. All trying to convince hapless rental car employees that although they were in Nadi they were not really going to drive their rental cars to war-torn Suva. They're not that stupid in the west.

Within a couple of days around 150 of us were cluttering the Centra, which was immensely grateful to see us and our Amex gold cards . . .

A kind of caste system exists among the media. Camera and sound equipment operators, for example. Got on with everybody, always helpful. Just so long as their camera is right in front of everybody else. Then there were radio journalists who, acting on the principle that size really is important, had bigger and better phallic symbols — called microphones — which they insisted in sticking into everybody else's pictures. Free publicity for obscure Sydney radio stations . . .

Camera and radio people fight a bit. Lots of elbows and bad words.

In that first week there was a great flock of New Zealand journalists. But they fled. First to Pacific Harbour. Then to Nadi. And on to Christchurch . . .

There were the newspapers. Dailies first. Always earnest, one-story-a-day people. And the weeklies. One story a week. And then the agencies.

Australian Associated Press once even had a house and home in Suva, but they soon lost interest and went home. Only three agencies matter and between them most of the world gets its news about Fiji. Reuters, the imperial British outfit, for example, was keenly interested in the state of the Suva Stock Exchange — the ‘sex’ as the shorthand had it — in that first week. Sugar futures too. Finance is their big interest. Associated Press is the American outfit which had a bit of a struggle here. The United States was not interested. And then there is my outfit, Agence France-Presse or AFP, the oldest of the lot.

Only a handful of the original May 19ers remain in Fiji. News organisations, once they realised Fiji was not a quick fix, rotated staff through with great speed. One news organisation, seemingly unaware of just where Fiji was, assigned somebody from South America to come through. Hey, coup, must be near Bolivia, right?

Some of my fellow international scribes were pretty dumb. This may or may not be true: a Fiji reporter tells of being asked by a foreign journalist whether this fellow Ratu Mara was Fijian or Indian. I kind of believe it.

Some desk somewhere asked why so many of these Fijians had Ratu as their first name.

The poor local journalists have mostly had a hard time. First trick of the tourist journalist here for the coup is to drain information from the local just as rapidly as possible. Mahogany over breakfast with a local journo, for example. Astonishing too was the speed with which first timers in Fiji became expert. You could hear them on their ‘two ways’ or ‘Q and As’ back to their homelands

speaking like, well, like they had been here for years . . . Or hours. People who otherwise write about horse-jumping or something, intoning at length about the significance of the Great Council of Chiefs.

Much of what we write and broadcast would shock people in Fiji, possibly because it seems mostly superficial and often inaccurate (most stories mention sugar production figures and the ratio of Indians to Fijian; like it really matters?). Who to blame for this is not an easy question because it really is a product of what readers in other countries are deemed to be interested in.

Places like Fiji are expected to provide to readers everywhere else a good-guy-bad-guy story; victims-and-oppressors. Nothing complicated, okay?

The respect accorded we of the international media is, perhaps, not really deserved. If one thing has become readily apparent, hopefully to the public of Fiji, is that their own domestic media does a much better job on the Fiji story than the international media does. And they do it because they live here, they care about it, they know people, they raise their children here and, unlike most of us, when it is all over they live here. We fly off home.

So, 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.

Within days around 150 local and international media in Suva were covering the coup amid a sea of rumours. Reporters found themselves confined to the intersection of Vuya and Battery Road, against the slope which rose up behind the assembly bure. About

100 metres down Battery Road was the large gate into Parliament, patrolled by the armed plotters. Police put a modest, easily movable barrier at the entrance to Battery Road. The world and local media congregated, more or less permanently, making quick trips down to the Centra which became the media headquarters in lieu of most other guests. There was another group in the hotel, six or seven white men, well dressed and always dining together, never engaging with the journalists. By November 2000 it turned out the group was only vaguely interested in the coup. Policemen from Australia, Canada, Fiji and New Zealand, they had their eyes on a 357-kilogram shipment of heroin imported into Fiji just before the coup and bound for Sydney and the Olympics. The international police were not diverted by mere local events and finally, on 29 October, they seized the drugs which had been



A love affair – Speight and the media. *Fiji Times*

caught up in the coup and could not move on to Sydney. With a street value of around US\$500 million it was the fifth largest drug seizure anywhere in the world ever.

Television New Zealand's Barbara Dreaver attended the first press conference Speight put on for the international media the day after the coup. Reporters gathered outside the Battery Road gate when armed men came out brandishing guns and yelling, 'Line up, line up!' They were then marched into the compound, with some reporters losing their nerve.

'When one white-faced young male reporter said that he wanted out, the gunmen refused and told him "Don't look back" and demanded business cards or names from people.'

Dreaver stayed in the compound for two nights as part of a Radio New Zealand team. 'On the first day in there Speight's men suddenly started shouting and quickly herding all the supporters, most of them in their late teens, to the fence line. They were all carrying rocks, many of them shouting and excited. Speight's people were saying that some foreign soldiers had been seen driving past the compound and there could be an effort to rescue the hostages . . .

'Some of the behaviour of the foreign press was disgraceful. One time I was sitting writing reports and a few feet away a group of male journalists were joking and playing around with some of the gunmen. One of the reporters was teasing the gunman, I think it was Jim Speight, he had a balaclava on, and joking about girlfriends,' Dreaver recalled.

'It made me sick to the stomach because these guys were terrorists and this wasn't meant to be an exciting adventure. Earlier when I had gone to request an interview with Speight, I had glimpsed a hostage's face, in the block where they were being kept. It was a reminder that there were real people in fear for their lives.'

The reporters stayed in the parliamentary dining room behind

barricaded doors. Four men broke in. The kitchen staff had their husbands staying there and they managed to push them out.

‘Very early the next morning local radio reporter Malakai Veisamasama, who was able to move freely, told us that he had overheard threats and he said the foreign journalists should leave as soon as we could.’

Dreaver believed they were being compromised in the end.

‘I was also feeling uncomfortable with a local journalist . . . who knew Speight . . . He would applaud when Speight spoke and would spend time with him. A reporter also compromised our position. Sometimes he was on friendly talking terms with the gunmen, at other times he would deliberately antagonise Speight as if hoping for some sort of confrontation that would make his career.’

‘While we were having our meeting, Malakai threw a towel over the security cameras and within minutes a whole lot of men came down. They lined one wall of the dining room just watching us.’

The reporters decided to leave in small groups: ‘We didn’t think Speight and his group would like all the foreign media leaving as he saw us as his personal mouthpiece to the world.’

They got out unchallenged: ‘I don’t regret being in the compound at all. I saw events unfolding around me firsthand and was able to report on these. But neither do I regret leaving when I did. It was definitely time to,’ said Dreaver.

Journalism, as well as being a pursuit of truth and justice, is also about ego. With the international media sweeping into Suva the competition was quickly on for firsts and exclusives. Most of them were quite shameless with promoting themselves as the first this or that to talk with Speight, all blithely overlooking the local Fiji press who scored all the meaningful scoops on the Friday afternoon while the international media was still sitting in business class lounges.

Journalists, both international and local, had also moved into Parliament and were eating meals and sleeping there. Some had developed a friendship with Speight, based, no doubt, on the prospect of some kind of exclusive story. Some reporters' behaviour had become dangerously unethical; one was stealing bullets from rebel weapons. When his photographer complained to his boss, the boy was pulled out.

Speight was a testament to neatness, wearing an ironed sulu or wraparound, topped with a pressed cotton island-style shirt or business shirt, and often a tie. He left many reporters star-struck and he would flatter their egos in one of the oldest cons in the book: using each other's first name. For many he quickly became 'George' and he would respond with first names in reply, creating solidarity and a media version of the Stockholm syndrome. This phenomenon won its name from a bank robbery that went wrong in Stockholm in 1973. Caught in action, the robbers seized hostages and held them for six days and as time passed the hostages became sympathetic to their captors. Several hostages resisted rescue attempts and later refused to give evidence against the kidnappers.

At one point Speight briefly threatened to hold no more press conferences, and then tested new boundaries when on Thursday 29 June he called one for after 7 pm. It was his second or third of the day — sometimes I would go to one of his press conferences and take not a single note or file anything as they were increasingly pointless — and it was hard to figure out what he had on offer for the late call. Apart from anything else, he knew it was 'feeding time' for most of the television crews who would be filing. In the event nine international reporters showed up and several locals and inevitably no sign of Speight. It was dark and raining and the masses camped around were eating, smoking and drinking. With such a small caucus of reporters for once it was easy to agree on a time to quit and this was reached without any sign of Speight.

We were walking out when a Radio Australia reporter decided to stay and try for a Ligairi interview. It was a case of all in, all out. What we had not known anyway was that Speight had locked the gates; reporters outside were not being let in and it was plain something was up. Back in the bure Speight grandly announced none of us could leave.

‘I understand there is quite a build-up of military personnel and some of them could cause problems and they may take the opportunity to take action against us. If you want to leave you can, but I don’t recommend it. My recommendation to all of you is that it would be unsafe to leave the complex this evening. We advise you don’t leave.’

Speight left to walk away, turned back to the group and said: ‘Our guards have been advised not to let anybody in or out. We have received some threats from outside the parliamentary complex originating from the military or not. We are not sure. The last thing you should be scared of is us.’

My own view of the drama, in which we were held for an hour, was that the gang wanted to send a message to the military that hostage-taking could continue unless the military made real concessions, and it was also a test to see what would happen. Speight in a grand gesture finally walked us to the gate and freed us.

Unlike the 1987 coup there was no formal effort to censor the media and for much of the time the news media found themselves operating in a no-rules environment where the only restraints on what they could do were those they imposed on themselves. It was not always a useful experience, and certainly not for justice and democracy.

The constant presence of reporters at Parliament became an issue, with criticism that they were aiding Speight by giving him a platform. In part that was true, although many of the reporters got past the novelty effect and saw through Speight. It was



Speight holds one of his regular press conferences in the parliamentary bure.

Dominion-Post

important for us to be in Parliament, not only because we could, but because, as Matelita Ragogo put it, we were ‘witnessing Fijian history’. It turned out reporters were legal witnesses and their accounts helped send people to jail. Fiji TV coverage of the Seniloli swearing-in was crucial in several treason trials. Without it, justice would have been harder to achieve. In a sense, too, the journalists were helping to restrain the situation; Speight loved having the media close to him but that also meant he had to surrender some of the control he desired. He could hardly kill or beat up people with the media always around.

Robert Keith-Reid, Suva media’s white ratu, entertained the country and fellow ‘Rotfians’ with a witty weekly column in

the *Fiji Times*. Many of the international media did not know what to make of Keith-Reid and put him down as a washed-up beachcomber. Regulars knew that he was possibly the only character in the whole place who actually knew what was going on, and why. Part of the secret to success was his mother Kathleen. Still alive and well, for many years she ran Fiji and Britain's Pacific empire. Born on the Black Sea coast of Russia, she grew up in Egypt, was schooled in Belgium and arrived in Fiji in 1958 with her Royal Navy husband and a younger Keith-Reid. Eventually she became private secretary to three governors and, after independence, a couple of governors-general. She even taught ADCs how to perform and drink tea, among them young officer Rabuka. She quit in disgust at his 1987 coup. As the 2000 coup hit, Keith-Reid was in Vanuatu.

'On that famous Friday before last I began to acquire a Rotfian feeling when, in Vila, I found I couldn't get through on the phone to Suva,' he recounted in his weekly column. Back in Suva he found law and order had broken down 'with constables disgracefully giving absolutely no attention to the blatant illegality of the cars parked all day in the very street in which the Central Constable Shop is positioned . . .

'One evening I found myself up at the army camp, a place I hadn't been to for, oh, at least 13 years, hearing the chief army person declare that the nation's president had agreed to "step aside". What that meant I cannot say. Had the president taken a holiday? Had he resigned? Had he been sacked?'

But, he argued, the constitution said the president could not be sacked.

Keith-Reid wondered who was behind the coup. 'For it sure as hell ain't the product of the genius gone rotfian and out for revenge on account of the roftian mess he made of his own brilliant career. F'rinstance; who was it that managed to turn the army's so-called counter terrorist unit rotfian, and with what means?'



Robert Keith-Reid.

Island Business

Keith-Reid knew too that the coup was not about Indians. ‘As the weeks tick by and more names and motives scum to the surface, it’s clearer and clearer that the business at Veiuto is being disguised by a veneer of nationalism. What it’s all about is money wanted by people who had it but couldn’t keep it, who have debts they don’t want to repay, who have money deals they don’t want found out and, above all, who want back positions in which they can make LOTS more money laced with the thrill of power.

‘What a pity it is that no one is loudly declaring that the myth that Mahendra Chaudhry hoped to steal the Fijian heritage and Indianise is a lie.’

Keith-Reid is one of the few people in the media old enough to have recalled the days when the Council of Chiefs wasn’t always great.

‘Nor was it a secret club, like it is now, perhaps because it felt that it had nothing to hide or be ashamed of. People used to just wander in and out of it like I did at times when it assembled in places like the hall at Marist Brothers School.’

He recalled that while it was not great, it was impressive, with ‘a lot of classic looking Fijians sitting in their best suits and medals enjoying lengthy deliberations on things Fijian . . .’

State radio ran reverent commentaries in BBC tones from a broadcaster. ‘He had the irritating habit of saying, in a hushed pommy priest-like tone: “I am speaking to you from the GREAT Council of Chiefs” . . . Well, it caught on. Obviously someone liked it. One day there appeared in the *Gazette* a proclamation declaring that, henceforth the council was a great one.’



16

Nightmare spreads

‘Darkness of Fiji’

North of Suva the Rewa River leaves the highlands and cuts across fertile lowland. It was used to grow sugarcane, but it was too wet and today it is a dairying and market garden area. For generations Indians had lived with Fijians in the area 30 kilometres north of Suva. Many speak the language of the other community: Indian boat boys are fluent in Fijian and Fijians speak the variation on Hindi. In the anarchy that spun out of Parliament, relationships of three and four generations quickly fell apart. Houses were burnt down by roving gangs, shops were looted and communities of Indians were driven into hiding spots and eventually became refugees. Speight’s gang looted the area for food.

The road to the Baulevu landing was rough. To go further, I paid 50 cents for a small boat upriver to Muaniweni. On the banks and in the river Fijian and Indian children were still playing, while behind them crops mingled with the forest. Fijian women make a living out of the river by collecting freshwater mussels, protecting their faces from the sun and water by applying heavy black mud. The effect was surreal.

At one of the first riverbank houses 16-year-old Romika Nair handed me a piece of paper, listing most of her possessions stolen in the last couple of nights: benzene, garlic, onions and three bars of soap. Not much.

‘I am very frightened,’ she said, sitting on the porch of the

simple home where she was born. Her family were being protected by a Fijian couple who felt a deep obligation towards them. But Romika's eyes betrayed distress as the only place she has ever known turned savage. Romika and her 12-year-old sister had been living with their parents growing taro, making a modest, but comfortable living. Six months before the coup their father died. Then came the coup.

'On that night 15 men with their knives came and they warned us to go away, they said they were going to break into our house,' she said. 'The men came back at about nine, and they took all our things.'

The men took the food they had been keeping for funeral rites to honour their dead father and husband.

'I was born in this house,' she said, trying to smile. 'I like this place. Now I don't like it.'

Romika believed the men may come back. 'I am frightened when I sleep.'

There were no police, soldiers or checkpoints. There were people watching out for the Indian family and as I arrived Fijian

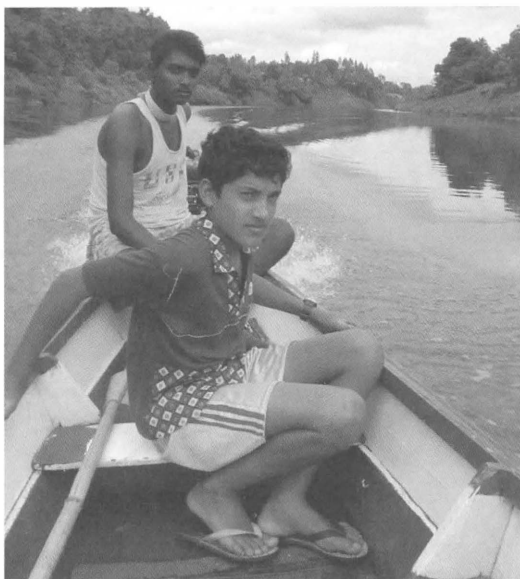


Romika Nair in her Rewa River valley home.

Michael Field

Boat boys on the Rewa River as Indo-Fijian villages suffered looting.

Michael Field



Kasanita Natoga came to be with Romika. She was a mussel gatherer and her face was smeared with mud, her clothes wet and poor.

‘Her father,’ she said looking at Romika, ‘was like a brother to us. We look after her.’

Across the river Lagan Prasad, a 45-year-old Indian, unlocked the bars of his shop, so old its petrol pumps were hand-cranked.

‘Before, it was peaceful. I don’t know what has happened now . . . Before, we called this the paradise of Fiji. Now this is the darkness of Fiji.’

A couple of days later 70 Indian families, around 300 people, dressed as if they were going to a wedding and fled for the safety of Fiji’s first refugee camp. They were eventually housed at the Girit Centre in Lautoka, a gift from one-time Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi.



Indo-Fijian farmers of Muaniweni, up the Rewa River, express their security fears over kava with senior police officer Romanu Tikotikoca (left, wearing sunglasses). Michael Field

Families who did not want to be identified said the attackers addressed them by their names or as ‘tavale’ (brother-in-law) or ‘bainis’ (sister) while looting their homes and harassing them. One refugee said men who had used to eat and drink with them had a sudden change of heart after the coup. All pleas fell on deaf ears when looters armed with cane knives and gardening tools started raiding their homes, he said.

‘We do not have the courage to go back despite the assurances police and the military will give,’ he said. ‘The police have betrayed us once and disregarded our numerous complaints and there is no guarantee they will protect us now.’

One woman who was the victim of an attempted rape said she had to beg the man not to and remind him she had four children, before she was released. A six-year-old child told how a man he recognised as his father’s friend threw him into the bushes. After

sleeping rough in the jungle for two weeks the families decided to move here where they had set up camp at a primary school. The police, still powerless and without effective leadership, did nothing.



Red Cross letter:

From: Unaisi Nabobo, 8 Adi Davila Pl, off Domain Rd, Domain, Suva
(Female)

To: Dr Tupeni Baba, In Parliament (Male)

Date: 3rd July, 2000

Dearest Tu,

The weekend saw me + Mela doing numerous things – I feel heavier by the day but try to enjoy my pregnancy as much as I possibly can in your absence. Yesterday, Sunday 2/7, Mela, Vika and I had lunch at our place at Cumming St, it was quite nice going out there – the owners asked after you. In the afternoon, Mita + her Canadian friend, Mela, Vika and I visited Rekha [tailor and friend] – I took across flannel baby wraps, I want to slowly work on baby's needs so when the time comes, we are more than ready for the arrival. At night, Mela and I had sandwiches for dinner with Mita and Heather [her Canadian friend].

Today there is again plenty to do besides 2 visits to the RCross, and a hairdo at 3 pm at the salon. I will largely be at USP – Exams begin today for Fiji students – I have yet to find out when I am scheduled to supervise. The island students will sit their respective exams in their own countries. I realise that I have to work only for three weeks now before I am officially on leave on 24/7. I find this waiting/preparing for baby's arrival exciting – I am pretty particular in terms of room curtains, bed – I am still to see something I like – the whole thing is quite exciting, I'm sorry you are not around – but you will soon. I know God will give that time, a suitable time that is good for all.

...

Today, I am trying to send again a big can of Mortein, 1 pkt cashew nuts, 1 pkt dates, 1 pkt almonds, 1 pkt Camille cream biscuits (I'll have to take back home Mortein, JScott says it's not allowed inside). How are you keeping up overall? Like you guys in there, we are all praying for your release and some movement forward in the country – there is after all truth in the saying that every cloud has a silver lining . . . I feel a lot of people are closer to God now than ever. I note your interest for instance in locating a church for us – that shouldn't be hard at all – 1st you get out, I'm dead sure everything will fall into place.

The families who meet at RCross I feel are close, we almost look forward to our visits, it has a therapeutic influence on a lot of us. The Red Cross on their part I feel are doing so much to make everyone as comfortable as possible . . . Life at University is generally quite rocky at the moment – we may even have an emergency meeting of Council – I've been told – a desire by Pacific member countries outside Fiji . . . I realise we need now at USP leadership that is far reaching in its vision, not expedient and certainly one that is strictly prudent or even thrifty. I intend to attend the emergency meeting . . .

I am happy that you are thinking academia is an option after this . . . Junior and Mela will thrive in an academic environment more than anything else . . . Till tomorrow – be strong, calm + polite + in prayer be earnest.

My love and prayers

Una





17

Assassination or stage play?

Queen's Birthday: 12 June 2000

Monday 12 June was Queen's Birthday in the Republic. Hot and quiet, it was the 24th day of the crisis. An Indian family was holding a wedding reception at the Centra. Hotel guests were in the pool. The hostages were prisoners and Speight was out and about, visiting Josefa Iloilo, who had been Mara's deputy and was out of a job under martial law. He also visited the man who swore him in, Jope Seniloli, and a Methodist pastor's for tea. Speight and six others in two cars moved around freely. With Speight in the passenger seat of the second car, they came down Ratu Sakuna Road towards Parliament and to the military barricade on the intersection of Muanikau and Milne Roads. On one corner, in his house, Robert Keith-Reid dozed in the hot afternoon, while at another corner the residency of the European Commission ambassador was locked up. The barricade consisted of barbed wire and angle iron traps, designed to make drivers slow down and curve through them. Crocodile-teeth-type road spikes could also be deployed. In Suva people got quite adept at driving through them, although one diplomat managed to drive onto the spikes one night, losing all four tyres. Speight's car slowed down to almost a halt when suddenly automatic

gunfire rang out. A policeman nearby said half a dozen soldiers opened fire with M16s, letting off around 60 rounds. A couple of bullets went several hundred metres up the road and lodged in a concrete fence in front of Iloilo's house. Yet the soldiers, who were standing right beside the car, managed to put only one bullet into it. Speight was unharmed.

'As far as I can see,' Speight said, 'in my assessment of what took place, and it's not an exaggeration, I had been the victim, I had just experienced, a failed assassination attempt.'

At the first two checkpoints the soldiers appeared to want to stop him but did not manage it. At the last checkpoint they came to a stop because at the other end another car was advancing through.

'We were then ushered through. Upon going past the barrier . . . they recognised me and starting yelling and shouting, the army officers, to stop us. Then all hell broke loose.'

Speight said he heard the soldiers saying: 'It's him, it's him, get them. Don't let them through.' It's a clear indication to me that there are some sinister plans going on within the army to remove myself, or get rid of me, at all costs.'

He put down his survival to an 'ongoing divine revelation'.

Speight showed reporters the bullet hole in the side of the one-time prime ministerial car that he had hijacked for his use. It was surprising that soldiers so close to such a big car could only hit it once. It smelt of a set-up.

Tarakinikini was quickly on the scene with a statement describing the whole thing as a 'grave misjudgement on the part of the soldiers . . . and over-excessive use of force'. The Speight convoy, he said, had refused to stop. 'Warning shots were fired by soldiers at the Muanikau checkpoint when vehicles carrying George Speight and his backup team drove through without stopping.'

Keith-Reid, the only reporter who had been there, began to explain what happened and as television cameras swung on

him, a feisty radio reporter was knocked into the ditch. He came out fighting and Tarakinikini found he had no audience left. He quickly scuttled off to Parliament to assure Speight, he said, 'that we are in control of the situation on our side now'.

Speight said the lives of his 31 hostages were directly threatened by his supporters after the incident. The shooting was clearly heard in Parliament and suddenly dozens of armed men, until that point hidden from outside view, emerged, ready to fight. Some of them fired shots but Nata said 'we will not be retaliating, although there was a knee-jerk reaction from our people here'.

The truth of the incident never came out: it was hard to accept that professional soldiers standing so close could not only miss, but by such a long way. The drama had another desired effect for Speight: hundreds of people from around the country showed up with pick-up truckloads of food, including slaughtered cattle and pigs.

It was creating a real problem in the compound with decaying rubbish, flies and stagnant washing water, huge slabs of beef hung in the open and several live pigs awaiting their fate attracting large blowflies. Much of the food and livestock was looted from Indian farmers. A steady line-up of men used metal mortars to pound raw kava into powder and as the toilets blocked up and many of the supporters did not shower, the body smells were overpowering. The once well cared-for lawns turned into bogs. Speight held press conferences by ponds of soapy water, and bouts of rain aggravated the problem. People slept in makeshift beds, sometimes as Speight rambled through a press conference. On the hill the hostages sat inside the inner circle of guards and no one from the media got near them. At night, with little lighting, the atmosphere was fetid, with smoke from cooking drifting around and men sitting in the dark drinking kava. Sexual relations, only some consensual, took place nearby, and marijuana smoking was frequent. Speight was a user but was careful not to show it when

on world display at his media follies. It was like a chapter from *Heart of Darkness*.

Speight claimed to have, at any one time, 3000 people in Parliament 'comprising young men, women and children, church groups, chiefs and overseas supporters and media in support of the cause'. The number was an exaggeration but it was surprising at times just how many hundreds of Fijians were keen on becoming part of a crime scene. They swarmed into offices and made camp in them and spread around the sides of the compound with earth ovens and laundry lines. Realities were never too far away and nobody strayed into the inner core of the nightmare, the place where the hostages were held.

The rebels were well armed, with snipers set up around the compound and a light machine gun covering the Battery Road entrance. They had Uzis, M16s, some with grenade launchers, claymore mines and plenty of ammunition. As the military had delivered the weapons to the rebels in the early part of the coup, they knew what was there and this alone probably stayed their hand in any considered assault. 'I hope I don't have to shoot Fijians,' Speight said.

Ligairi was in charge of security and had his armed men wander through the compound and near the gate, carrying semi-automatics. Although naturally fearsome it was notable that as the crisis wore on the weapons were not maintained and the people increasingly carrying them did not look like soldiers. Ligairi controlled much of the daily life inside Parliament with a rag-tag civilian gang of around 170 males — many of them boys and teenagers. Unarmed, they learnt drill and daily jogged twice out the gates of Parliament to nearby schools for exercise.

'They are very patriotic and will defend what's rightfully theirs,' Silatolu said. They looked like louts.

The sacked head of the Fiji Intelligence Service, Metuisela Mua, joined Ligairi and warned the military not to move against

them: 'If they should exercise a military option, then the whole country goes to dust. If they apply a military option, then they will have to build a new institution tomorrow, right throughout Fiji, in regard to their military installations.'

Had it ever come to a fight it might have been bloody, but no side was willing to test each other's bluff. Bainimarama kept ruling out a military assault and said his main strategy was to talk to the GCC and church heads to get them to persuade those in Parliament to give up. But for all Speight's indigenous cause talk, he was losing the GCC. One member, Suliano Matanitobua, objected to the way the body had become a pawn. 'We must not allow him to dictate to us about when and why we should meet. He only wants us to meet again now because he could not get a better deal than what we offered from the military.'

Matanitobua said when the coup was first mounted it was Fijians against Indians: 'Now it's Fijian against Fijians, starting with east versus west with the west wanting to form its own government. Then it was confederacy against confederacy and province against province.'



18

Families

John Scott and the Red Cross

As the crisis dragged on the hostages tended to become somewhat abstract. Nobody was seeing them and, while they were alive, their condition was a mystery. Thirty-two days into the crisis Bainimarama got around to meeting hostage families at the military headquarters, saying he was ‘very hopeful’ their captivity would end soon. He admitted that the hostages were at the mercy of Speight and his men since neither the military nor the Red Cross were supplying food to Parliament. Two weeks later the hostage families wrote a joint letter to Bainimarama: ‘We, the undersigned spouses, children and family members of the hostages held in the Parliament Complex make a humble plea to you . . . to immediately accommodate all demands of the rebels for the safe release of hostages. The hostages have suffered a lot and along with them, we have also been experiencing trauma and hardship of various forms.’



Unaisi Nabobo-Baba found her days full:

With my pregnancy advancing, I took great care to be walking as much as I could. The day began early with dressing up nicely (as one still needed to meet the media). Then there was the trip to the Red Cross. Every morning at 8 o'clock we would meet with the director of the Red

Cross, John Scott and his staff. They would look through all our parcels that we were sending in to our spouses as well as check our letters. We were given strict instructions to only write about our daily lives and not comment on the coup. This was the order from the coup-makers. The letters had to be kept short and if they were in English they had to be written in everyday English. John would then leave with his driver to go into Parliament to deliver the goods to the coup-makers who stole most of the stuff we sent in, especially the stuff they fancied.

At some stage Tupeni complained about the blue flies that had become a bad problem. Tents and temporary structures had been put up on the grounds of Parliament where supporters had come to dance, celebrate, eat and shit. Animals were being slaughtered as well and toilets were either blocked or overflowing. Given such conditions, hygiene became a concern so when Tupeni asked for fly spray, I went and bought five cans and so did the other spouses. The day after John Scott told me the coup-makers had confiscated the sprays thinking it was meant to be used as a weapon by our men to spray their eyes with. How stupid, I thought. We then purchased roll-on insect repellent, which was acceptable to them.

The coup took place at a time when things were just getting sorted on the home front, finalising details of Tupeni's divorce and subsequently our marriage. We had finally decided to legalise our marriage after four years of being together when the coup took place. Tupeni noted in his diary 7 July:

'I hope Jeli will collect the papers from the courts. She asked me about the case and I explained to her the latest scenario, ie the granting of the "decree absolute" three months afterwards on May 23rd. The latter is a matter of normal course of events unless exceptional circumstances prevent it . . .'

Ten days later I sent him a Red Cross letter: 'You can judge by the type of writing (in the past few days) that the "faculties" are quite in disarray – surprising I feel very busy + occupied. Good News Vicky tells me Howard (our lawyer) said to her on the phone the "absolute" is

granted – he will pick up the papers from the courthouse and inform Vicky to pick up – it should be ready at home when you return . . . I enclose also a bookmark – I made myself – I hope you'll use it. Semi and I are home, relatives come and go – all is well! . . . So till tomorrow – Read!! Your faculties hopefully are better than mine given these trying times . . . My love and prayers. UN. P.S.: Keep warm!

The divorce came through during the period of captivity. It was good news but under the circumstances, there was not much we could do. Spike Padarath, who had become a very close friend, suggested jokingly that I should go in with John Scott and marry inside 'prison' making some different news headlines. But that is Spike, just like him to make light of the situation we were in and, like Vinay Singh (wife of hostage Attorney-General Anand Singh), he was a friend I depended on for nearly everything during the time. This is also true of his son, Ben.

The Red Cross was our lifeline. John Scott, Mareta Tovata as his deputy (and a former class mate of mine), Greg Scrivener, John's partner and other volunteers were just so, so good to us. John would go to Parliament once every day, at 8 in the morning. At about 12 we would all come back to the Red Cross meeting room to hear from him and receive our letters from the inside as well as dirty clothes. The next morning, we would bring in our letters, clean supplies of clothes, food and other stuff needed inside by our spouses. This process went on throughout the whole time, non-stop.

Now and again, Greg would ensure the meeting room at the Red Cross had flowers. Clearly John and his team were trying to do all they could for the hostages. Besides the supplies the families were sending in, they too were meticulous in their daily packing of supplies for the hostages. John never failed to turn up on time in the duration. He was a comfort, a huge comfort. And in terms of his work, he was just simply the best.

Tupeni wrote that his glasses had been damaged.

'John Scott got it repaired. I asked him to give it to you but I guess Red Cross want to be self-sufficient. They have been very good. I have

already given a cheque donation to John for \$50.00. Manoa B asked me to give John a cheque on his behalf. I signed another \$50.00. When I get out, we will organise more formal ways of contributing to the Red Cross.'



Scott never made public comment about his visits. He gave the hostages a nine-minute audio tape recording on how to cope in captivity, based on the experiences of western hostages, including Englishman Terry Waite, who were held hostage for years in Beirut.

Matelita Ragogo of the *Fiji Times* was able to glean some outline of life for the prisoners. She said three doctors visited the hostages regularly and the Red Cross provided mattresses. They were allowed 20 minutes on the lawn of the parliamentary



Exercise time for hostages Deo Narain, Chaudhry, son Rajendra Chaudhry, Shiu Sharan Sharma, Gunasagar Gounder, Ganesh Chand and Vinod Maharaj. Asaeli Lave, *Fiji Times*

complex in the morning, had no access to newspapers, television or radio and could only read books brought in by relatives and approved by their captors. Playing cards was the favoured pastime. Several local media were eventually allowed to watch the hostages, from a distance, as if they were some kind of wild animals. *Fiji Times* reporter Akanisi Motufaga was allowed to look at the 16 Indians as they took an afternoon walk. She said Chaudhry looked 'haggard and dejected . . . He did not look up or talk to anyone during the 15-minute walk.' He looked older than his 57 years: 'He was not the same man who only two months ago strode purposefully along the same corridors on government business.' Photos showed a bearded Chaudhry embracing Isireli Vuibau. Another photo showed Baba greeting Chaudhry. Noticeably thinner, Anup Kumar and Vinod Maharaj smiled at the camera. A week later Fiji TV broadcast the first pictures, showing Anand Singh, Kumar who had grown a beard in his 40 days of captivity, Maharaj and Deo Narain drinking kava and smoking with their captors. Maharaj spoke in Fijian to the people he was drinking with and thanked them for talking to them.

'This is what I want, for Indians and Fijians to unite,' he said.

Tarakinikini was allowed to see the 31 hostages and he said they appeared to be in good health: 'They were resting in their room and I spoke to them . . . What is okay, being held under point of a gun for 27 days, how okay is that?'

Late in June, in the first of a sequence of little heartbreaks, Government House secretary Joe Browne announced Speight had agreed a deal with the military that would be signed next day. Vinay Singh said she was 'very excited' but Virmati Chaudhry was uncertain: 'It does not mean the hostages will be released.' Ben Padarath was also sceptical: 'I'll believe it when I see it. Why didn't they sign the accord tonight? Why did they have to wait until tomorrow?' It wasn't signed then, and nothing happened.

Home Affairs Minister Joji Uluinakauvadra was released from captivity to get chest x-rays for a suspected chest infection and was then brought back into Parliament to resume hostage life.

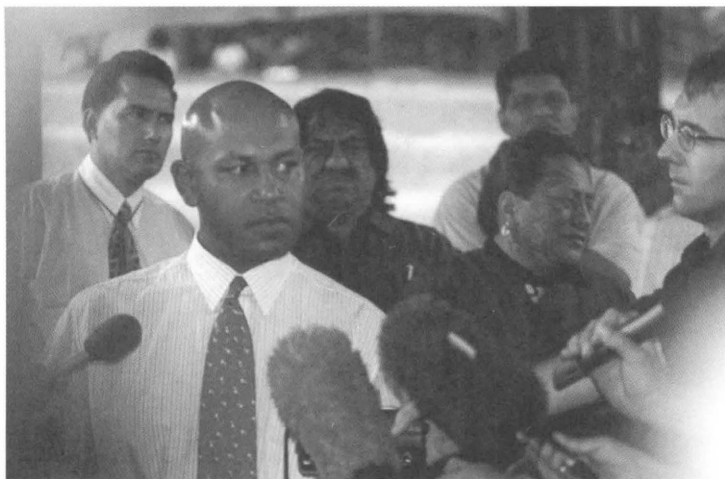
Early on Sunday 25 June, four women, Lavinia Padarath, Akanisi Koroitamana, Koila Nailatikau and Marieta Rigamoto, were freed, leaving the 27 men behind. Padarath's husband Adishwar heard his wife early in the morning calling to be let into the home.

'I thought that I was dreaming, then we all ran down, then the realisation dawned on us that she was standing right in front of us. We praised the Lord and thanked the Red Cross for the part they played, and continue to pray for the rest of them, that the whole lot are out today, if not tomorrow . . . This is a welcome sign, a very very welcome sign that the ladies are out.'

Nata was overwhelmed by his generosity: 'They were woken up and told they were being freed. They were surprised, pleasantly surprised. They were given a few minutes to pack their things and then they were taken to the gates . . . We feel the women have suffered enough . . . As mothers of children they needed to be with their children when [schools reopen] because of the agony and trauma the children will have gone through. The mothers need to be with their children.'

Tarakinikini believed the release of the women changed the situation: 'The exclusion of women now from the parliamentary complex gives us less restrictions as far as we view the hostage situation . . . There was an element of chivalry in all this. We are glad that the women are out.'

People who really had no business being involved continued to arrive on the scene. New Zealand Maori activist Tame Iti of the Tuhoe tribe arrived early in the crisis and met Speight: 'We've come to support the struggle of the indigenous people of Fiji.' He went home but returned later with nine supporters to help Speight — and found themselves detained at Nadi International Airport.



Speight and New Zealand Maori activist Tame Iti. *Fiji Times*

‘We came here as an indigenous group to give any unconditional assistance if that is possible and if it is required,’ Iti said, but instead were told they were being put on the next plane back to New Zealand.

Tarakinikini said the group had been meddling in Fiji affairs: ‘They were coming here to provide some kind of liaison or support and we did not want this happening in Parliament.’

Shortly after the Air New Zealand plane took off a bomb threat was phoned in; the plane was forced to return and the passengers evacuated. Iti and crowd got home eventually, leaving only bewilderment.

The Commonwealth returned in another guise, in the form of Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and his New Zealand counterpart Phil Goff, who flew into Nausori on a RAAF Falcon. They were put up in the elegant hilltop Borron House which, in 1987, Rabuka had used as a detention centre for Indian members of parliament. The Goff–Downer show was to assess

the future of Fiji in the Commonwealth. Downer saw 'a rough roadmap to a return to democracy' but said the Commonwealth had warned the military that they wanted elections within two years.

'They told us as soon as the hostages are released they will move to an interim civilian government,' Downer said. 'We are pleased Commodore Bainimarama assured us that neither Mr Speight nor any of his henchmen will form any part of the interim civilian government.'

Despite what was being said in Suva by Bainimarama and Mara before him, Goff said the Chaudhry government would have to be restored to power: 'Our first and best solution is that that government should be returned to office at the end of the hostage situation.' Neither Goff nor Downer would honour that word.



Unaisi Nabobo-Baba said spouses met through the crisis, with one notable exception:

On 28 June, about 40 days into our spouses' incarceration, the prime minister's wife, Virmati, decided to join us. I thought it was nice of her to have done that. She had been in prayer, we were told, all this time in her home. She was the only spouse who still had a government car and a driver. The rest of us had to drive our own cars or go by taxi. I volunteered to drive two wives who had neither cars nor income.

The day before Virmati came, Mahendra's friend Asha Lakan had to be asked to stay away from the Red Cross meeting house. John Scott could not tell Asha that, so left it my friend Vinay Singh, whose husband Anand was a hostage. Asha did not take too kindly to this request. From day one, Asha had been there with the spouses; she who was a close associate to Mahen, and never failed a day to send letters and goods to the prime minister. So when Virmati decided to join the 'gang' after the 30th day, Asha blew up.

A close relation of mine and wife of the minister of home affairs, Joji Uluinakauvadra, told me in no uncertain terms that our husbands would never be released while Asha had her goings-on with Mahen. So Asha stayed away and Virmati came.

Virmati is a Christian of a charismatic variety. She is very prayerful and prays in the Assemblies of God style, shouting, crying and beseeching God about life and this and that. When she arrived she wanted to pray. She did so, much to the dismay of Indian friends as she mentioned Jesus Christ too often and addressed the 'only true God'. At the end of her prayer she talked about how upset she was to hear that we were having weekly meetings with Bainimarama and top officers of the army. She thought wives should have more faith than that and should resort to prayer.

I sat next to Vinay and our other friend from Navua, a gentleman, a staunch Muslim, who never left our side. He too was deeply religious. Straight after Virmati's prayer, she received a 'barrage of corrections' from our friend from Navua, who reminded her of some things in this order: that she had neglected us, only came today after 30 days, talked cheeky about us crying to Bainimarama, and that not all of us spouses and prisoners' families were Christian.



Virmati Chaudhry, wife of Mahendra Chaudhry, prays to the 'only true God' and sparks a row among the rest of the group.

Reuters

Virmati never came back to be with us spouses and partners. Asha Lakhan returned the next day and stayed till the end.



It was getting difficult to keep writing of events as a ‘crisis’; a hostage government and military rulers, complete with a madhouse in the middle of town, had become the status quo. Suva is a wet city, known for rain for weeks on end and an all-pervading dampness. Much of the first part of the crisis took place in hot, dry and unnatural Suva weather. By the middle of June the prevailing climate returned with sodden, dreary rain. Nothing seemed to be changing.

‘After weeks of misty rain the sun is finally blazing down on Fiji’s capital Suva, as the occasional mongoose races across the empty road looking for the cobras they are supposed to kill,’ I wrote in a feature on 2 July. ‘Children in their Sunday best drag their bare feet along the pavement to yet another church service and men armed with M16s keep watch from the shade. This is day 45 of Fiji’s hostage crisis and it shows no signs of resolution . . .’

The soldiers were watching buses and trucks going into Parliament as they talked about rugby.

‘Nothing is happening in Suva Sunday, just another day in the decline of Fiji, another day when inertia is mistaken for action. And the mongooses, brought in from India by the British to deal with the poisonous snakes they mistakenly believed existed, brazenly run across the main road to Parliament.’

Fiji has no cobras. The British imported the mongoose to control pests on cane plantations. The speedy little creatures, who have infested Suva, found easier meals in domestic hens. Recently a poultry farmer near Suva seriously contemplated suing London for the damage their import continued to do. Britain also imported mynah and bulbul birds to control ticks on

cattle; the mynah has now taken over much of coastal Fiji. The celebrated American writer James A Michener, in a particularly racist and ugly passage in his book *Return to Paradise*, compared Indians and mynahs; Michener, long after he caused the damage, apologised.



Tupeni Baba's first-born, 31-year-old Peter, arrived with his mother Maraia from Hawai'i. Unaisi recalls:

Both Mela and I were really excited at the thought of seeing Peter who stood some six feet tall, a duplicate of the father he had seen a few times in his life. Tupeni had told me that only he and his best friend George Tavanavanua had met Peter in person. His two other children, Raijieli and Viliame, and his relatives had never met Peter. Early in July Mela and I walked into the Red Cross to be greeted by Peter and his girlfriend, Jessica, who like me was carrying a son (Sebastian Baba). Funny coincidence, I thought. There was no mistaking this was Tupeni's son; it was just a beautiful meeting, in sad circumstances though. Peter was a sociable person and in no time, I had introduced him to everyone. It was a nice surprise for us.

'Hi Dad,' Peter wrote to his father in Parliament. 'Hope you're doing fine. Our prayers are with you all. I hope we would have had the chance to meet. I'm visiting here for about three weeks. I'm here with my girlfriend Jessica Schiltz and she's about six months pregnant. And everyone says it's going to be a boy. I am very proud of you for the strength you have shown through the crisis. I hope to see you soon. Love Pita.'

Tupeni wrote to me at the same time.

'I am happy you met up with my son, Pita. He is modest but determined about his future. You can see the drive in him and he will

make a good family man. It is amazing how God ensures that kids born in this situation resemble their father. All kids especially boys need a father figure and I have tried as early as possible to provide that and of course, with a lot of opposition . . . but not from the kids. The kids love to keep in touch . . . though they haven't met.'

Customs of my people in Vugalei tell me that he was to be welcomed home. We therefore held a feast and I made sure all his father's relatives were present to meet him. His mats I had spread, a selection of the very best I had, befitting a firstborn. His mother, Maraia, could not attend as she and I cannot consume certain foods together like fish and pork, such is our traditional relationship, so she stayed back in their home in Tamavua. Mela and I picked Peter up and brought him home to meet his relatives.

We were to take him to my mother's village at Vugalei for a Sunday church service of welcome and shared food, but the roads had been closed as the situation got tense. Peter himself, his mother and Jessica had to return to Hawai'i as the US Government had announced that all their citizens should leave Suva. Peter did not get to see his father after all, but did promise my Mela that he would be in touch from now on.





19

Muanikau Accord

Sunday 9 July 2000

As the drama dragged on, attention switched to ‘Iloilo’s house’, the official residency of the vice-president, a little way uphill from Parliament. Its last occupant had been Ratu Josefa Iloilo, and before him Prime Minister Rabuka. Chaudhry had refused to live there. It was notable for its unattractive concrete semi-modern design complete with two bullet holes from Speight’s roadblock drama. Talks between the military and Speight’s people got underway in the house without Speight, who was too frightened to leave Parliament again. Talks took longer than they needed to and got lost many times because there was no strong mediator or negotiator, no solid middleman. Everybody inside Iloilo’s house was pushing a line and with no urgency to resolve matters. All pretext of a hostage situation, terrorism or international response was lost as the two men and their representatives haggled over portfolios. It was hard to know if he was serious, but Speight said he wanted to be prime minister: ‘I would be honoured to serve my country.’

Tarakinikini confirmed they were talking about a government and membership of a constitutional review group. Speight’s cause had to be given a ‘fair hearing’.

Right from the beginning of the crisis, Tarakinikini’s loyalties were open to question. At a press conference he expounded on the multiracial constitution, saying that 10 of the 14 provinces had

been against it. The GCC adopted it unanimously. While saying that the military could not surrender the country to Speight, Tarakinikini dug Fiji a little further into its hole: 'They have made their case, they have stood up for indigenous Fijian aspirations, and we sympathise with that, but beyond that the country's path forward must be charted that will bring peace, stability and economic wellbeing to our people. We cannot surrender that. We sympathise with the cause of indigenous Fijians. We will make sure that all their aspirations and fears will be covered in a new constitution. Beyond that we cannot, for the sake of our God, ignore all the people in our country.'

On 3 July Bainimarama came up with a name for the head of new interim government: Laisenia Qarase, 59. A one-time banker and senator, he was little known beyond his home Lau Islands. He had become a senator for the first time after the 1999 general elections as a member of the Rabuka's failing SVT.

Bainimarama's line-up had no Indo-Fijians: 'We approached two very well qualified members of the Indian community but they declined.' That was hardly surprising as Bainimarama said the primary function of the new government was the 'review of indigenous rights and the best method of protecting these rights'.

Bainimarama appealed to Speight to release the hostages: 'I invoke the highest authority of all and appeal to them in the name of Almighty God to do the right thing.'

Instead Speight was outraged, with none of his men in a government he said was made up of 'political opportunists'. On cue a gun battle broke out around Parliament, leaving five people wounded, including 24-year-old rebel soldier Salimoni Tuqa, who later died.

'There's blood all over the place,' a local radio journalist reported.

Speight was getting worried because he had yet to negotiate any kind of amnesty deal and had issued a freely worded demand

for, as he put it, 'President by Decree offer Amnesty for ALL from 19/5 to the day of release of hostages.' As the hostages were not released, he wanted amnesty for things yet to come. Agreement on an amnesty, he said, was 'the final act'. To underscore the point Speight cut off Red Cross access to the prisoners for a day.

Ligairi made it clear that they were not being released until a deal was signed and implemented: 'Because when you take hostages, you need to make sure that your demands are met before you release them.'

If there were any lingering doubts that all this was about Indians, Ligairi made it clear it was about Fijians. He believed that the departure of Mara had been some kind of trick. 'They say he will not return but our observations and information gathered show that Ratu Mara is still pulling strings to get the army to do what he wants.'

Fiji quickly slipped into chaos with the naming of Qarase and the reaction from the Speight supporters. Soldiers at Sukanaivalu Barracks in Labasa seized their base and declared support for Speight. People who said they were landowners marched on the Queen Elizabeth Barracks to claim their land back. The army locked the gates and put armed guards on the entrance. Fijians blocked the Queens Highway between Suva and Nadi and the airport outside the town of Labasa was closed in another land dispute. Tarakinikini acknowledged many issues had been opened by the Speight action. 'This crisis is essentially now between indigenous Fijians themselves.'

In the interior of Viti Levu supporters completed the farce of military control by seizing the Monasavu hydropower station. Providing around 80 percent of the island's power, the action left large parts of Suva in darkness for weeks. Although linked to the events at Parliament, Monasavu was really another dispute. The Rabuka government had put the dam in without negotiating a fair land-lease deal over the 8000-hectare catchment. Local

landowners not only got no money for having the dam on their land, they did not even get electricity.

Already under curfew, life was becoming distinctly harder for Suva people. Limited electricity was rationed and blackouts commonplace. Nightclubs had tended to do good business despite the curfew kicking in at 8 pm — usually starting time for the capital's night scene. Customers just drank the same amount of alcohol they would normally, in a shorter time. And taxis had to race everybody home before curfew. Schools in Suva and Labasa, which had just reopened, closed again in the wake of the shooting and new uprising.

On Saturday 8 July, things slipped even further when a group of about 100 people seized the police station in the Tailevu town of Korovou and took up to 25 soldiers, policemen and civil servants hostage. Malcolm Brown of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and I were the first reporters into the town. An abiding memory was seeing a terrified family of Indians huddling together, awaiting an uncertain fate. Another army spokesman, Captain Eroni Volavola, had the nerve to say all was peaceful — 'We are still in control' — and that the Korovou incident was not about the coup but longstanding land claims: 'They're just making a statement.'

Other statements were made in Levuka, where arsonists destroyed the century-old Freemasons Hall while workers occupied a tuna cannery. Exclusive Turtle Island Resort on Nanuya Levu Island in the Yasawa Islands was seized and Australian tourists evacuated. A couple of days later Laucala Island, owned by American Steven Forbes, was occupied by land claimants. Outside of Suva, at the maximum security prison at Naboro, a group of prisoners, tried to overpower prison officers. One prisoner died in the riot. The common feature of the various actions around the country was not so much their agreement with Speight; it was more a case of people recognising a political vacuum and moving to stake their claims before anybody else. It was a recipe for anarchy.



A Red Cross letter from Unaisi to Tupeni:

Dearest Tu (3.15 am)

Hi, tis another Saturday without you at home but I am deeply convinced all parties involved are trying their utmost to resolve the present situ . . . Aunty Vasakula [Tupeni's sister] rang from Vatu [Udu Point on Vanua Levu] they send their love but are deeply anxious. I assured her all will be well. She will come to see us when this 'bad weather' flips over . . . We've been asked by the Red Cross to keep our notes to a page or two (this was the order from inside – the soldiers/captors said they were tired of reading through our long letters and wanted them shortened. At one point one of us wives had put a cross as symbolising a short form for Christian – for this all our letters were stopped for a day or two from being taken in because they could not decipher the code . . . silly buggers).

Today I send 2 sports shirts, – 1 floral green, 1 floral blue, 1 black undie, 3 blue hankies, 12 spoons, 1 fluorescent green highlighter and 1 fluorescent orange highlighter and 1 blue mug . . . Till tomorrow! – Keep warm + in faith,

My love, Una



By Sunday 9 July it was possible to believe an end was near and Speight announced, 'We hope to sign an accord today.'

The circuit-breaker had been the arrival in the talks of the paramount chief or Qaranivalu of Naitasiri, close to Speight's district, Inoke Takiveikata. He would become a major threat to

Fiji's later stability. But the crisis at hand reached its climax that night when the Muanikau Accord, named after the neighbourhood the house sat in, was signed.

Well after dark, in a menacing tribal ritual, hundreds of Speight's supporters walked out of Parliament and up Ratu Sukuna Road towards Iloilo's house. Their march took them past the residences of the ambassadors of the European Union, France and the United States and given their eccentric behaviour throughout the drama, security forces were on alert. Inside the French ambassador's home discreet but heavily armed agents and Foreign Legion soldiers, secretly flown out from France, were ready for any intrusion. The group reached the house and, with the accompanying media, were allowed into the property and around the back. There a large swimming pool had been drained and covered with hardboard while officials waited, tucked in out of the stiff breeze. Bainimarama, accompanied by Tarakinikini, looked beaten and weary, while Speight was beaming. The hostages were to be freed, the rebels given amnesty and the arms returned to the military.

'We're excited, we're ecstatic, it's a great day for Fiji,' Speight said.

The ceremony was opened with a military chaplain's prayer in Fijian and then Bainimarama signed first, at 9.50 pm. Barely audible, he said it was 'the beginning of a long journey' and added, 'Let us unite as one people for the sake of our beloved country.'

Speight's supporters broke into a traditional Fijian warrior's victory song. It was, Speight said, 'a coup the Fijian way'. He was dismissive of any hostage release: 'They are in good health and looking forward to being released on Thursday.'

Westminster democracy had had its day in Fiji.

'All the guns and hostages are a wall to allow an agenda for us that will allow us as a nation state to examine the foundations and structure of our nation,' Speight said in one of his many

meaningless rambles, adding the accord would allow for people with 'the right convictions' to run the country. 'I firmly believe in my heart that Fiji will only be a happy and prosperous place if the interests of the indigenous Fijians are central to the country.' The coup, he said, was 'God given' to allow for indigenous Fijian self-determination and to protect a 'very unique way of life God has given us'.

It was a long-winded document which reviewed events to date. The core of it was an agreement on the 'release of political hostages held at the Parliament Complex . . ., the restoration of law and order as soon as practicably possible . . ., the return of all service personnel . . ., and the return of arms, ordnance and stores to the RFMF.' The accord covered offences committed between 19 May and 13 July.

Nothing in Fiji though is quite what it seems. Muanikau was not the endplay and it was surprising that Speight did not realise he was being set up.

Speight and gang, singing and chanting, headed back to Parliament. A stench rose from the front of Iloilo's house. Full of kava, Speight's unwashed mob had pissed copious amounts of it into Iloilo's garden.

With the deal the release of the hostages was the obvious next step, but Speight knew all the bits of paper in the world were not going to save his neck once his gambling chips had been taken away. On Tuesday 11 July he said he would release his captives in darkness and without the media present. He said this was for the 'personal dignity' of the hostages. 'When it happens it will be very secret,' he said, in what soon proved to be yet another of Speight's many lies.

The lives of 27 men were hanging on Speight's whims. Amjad Ali had hijacked an Air New Zealand plane in 1987 and lost his job as a result. He made ends meet by fishing, until he became a

backbench politician. Bill Aull respected Suva city and was an independent.

Tupeni Baba, 58, was a professor of education, a gardener and a tennis player. He was reading E.M. Forster's *The Long Journey* and was anxious about the pending arrival of his wife's baby.

Public health specialist Manoa Bale, 55, was allowed to mark his birthday in captivity with a cake he shared with his fellow hostages. Diet was a special problem for him after treatment for a brain tumour. Meli Bogidrau, 52, a telecommunications expert, also celebrated his birthday in captivity. Agriculture Minister Poseci Bune, 54, looked to have lost weight in captivity. Ganesh Chand, 40, a father of three, was so upset on the fourth birthday of his youngest son, Vivek, that he fasted for three days. He used the long weeks reading the Bible and the Koran.

Mahendra Chaudhry was the prime minister. An avid gardener who enjoyed long early morning walks, he found peace in spiritualism, devoting long hours to reading the Hindu scriptures, fasting and in group devotion. Towards the end of the confinement he was reading Mahatma Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth*. Rajendra Chaudhry, hostage, was his son. He suffered from asthma attacks and needed special medication.

Eroni Goneyali was a Methodist pastor. Gunasagaran Gounder, 52, had a medical degree from India and, while a hostage, attended to the various health problems of his fellow prisoners. Joeli Kalou had been held hostage with Chaudhry after the 1987 coup but at that time they were in captivity for only six days.

Anup Kumar, 45, was a former school principal and throughout captivity worried about his children's high school education, as schools had been considerably disrupted during the political crisis. Businessman Prince Gopal Lakshman was a diabetic who kept himself busy thinking and reading. Ponipate Lesavua had been among the first to warn of the rise of the Taukei movement again.

Vinod Maharaj was taken hostage on the day of his 58th birthday. He had had a heart bypass operation and captivity saw him lose a lot of weight. He spent his time fasting, praying and drinking kava with his captors.

Deo Narain was a backbencher and retired civil servant, while Nadi businessman Pradhuman Raniga, 53, spent his time reading scriptures, fasting and praying. He liked physical activity and spent time cleaning, mopping and sweeping the improvised hostage quarters.

Shiu Sharan Sharma, 57, was a head teacher and Hindu priest. He officiated at morning and evening devotional services for the Indian hostages and provided scriptural guidance. Anand Singh, 50, was a lawyer and a keen socialiser. He was seen smoking and taking kava with his captors in the few media images. Gyanendra Singh was the deputy speaker and a lawyer by profession.

Leo Smith ran an interisland shipping business. He fought the elections as an independent and joined government in order to give a voice to the General Electors in government. Mohammed Latif Subedar was a cane-farmers' activist from Vanua Levu.

Muthu Swamy, a backbencher, trade unionist and cane-farmers' advocate, was another with a heart condition. Joji Uluinakauvadra had a heart problem and needed special medication and drugs. He was let out briefly for treatment but was then taken back in without his family members being allowed to see him. Ratu Moses Volavola held the key portfolio of lands. Ratu Isireli Vuibau was a Suva businessman with a chequered political career. He had served as Suva's mayor.



20

Meeting my husband's captors

Monday 10 July 2000

At the time it was easy for most to get into Parliament. Unbeknown to the media, among those going were hostages' spouses.



Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, Tupeni's wife, tells of a visit:

By chance a friend told me that church ministers were going into Parliament three times a week for evangelical work in the new village at Parliament. I heard from church workers that Ligairi (some distant relation of my husband) was asking about my pregnancy and that he was quite keen to see me, or so I was told. I thought for a while and decided it was a good idea to go in and have a look for myself.

On 10 July I went in accompanied by my close friend Lice and her husband Daniel, good folks and well placed in the Adventist Church. I took the opportunity to buy more food and supplies than normally accepted to take for my husband and his colleagues. On arrival, my huge and protruding stomach must have caught the eyes of a few. I met Simione Kaitani, now a cabinet minister, in the corridors of Parliament. I also met Rakuita Vakalalabure, or Q, a former classmate, who hugged me and said he was sorry that this had to happen to me.

I replied that I was deeply upset with him as I expected a lot from him as a former university mate.

I was met by CRW officer and former neighbour Apaijia Waqaniboro, who gave me a sense of peace. Here was a man, I thought, who I could trust. Waqaniboro was deeply religious and very kind to his wife Losalini and his children. Waqaniboro took me straight to Ligairi. On the way up to Ligairi's room, I saw hostage Anand Singh and gave him a huge hug. God, was I so happy and relieved; at least I could give his wife and my best friend Vinay the good news. Up to see Ligairi on the top floor, I saw two familiar faces: Rabici Seniloli and Apenisa Seniloli, both ex students of mine at Queen Victoria School. They came forward to greet me but I guess did not have anything else to say. At the corner of the building I saw Q's wife, I thought she looked a mess, excessively fat and not put together. I wondered briefly whether she was tired of waiting for Q to come home – something about the way she looked told me she was really down.



The mysterious
commando
Ilisoni Ligairi.

Matelita Ragogo

I walked into Ligairi's room and Waqaniboro saluted and left. I was given the most comfortable chair and my friend Lice sat next to me. Ligairi is a gentleman but for 'The Cause'. Really, he was totally out of place. He told me in no uncertain terms how he distrusted old Fijian leaders like Mara and old and failed politicians like Duvuloco. He had a hope that younger Fijians who were 'cleaner' would take over the reins of power. On his table was a Fijian Bible, it looked so clean. Everything about him and his room was spotless. His army sandals were clean and shiny; the man was just unbelievable. After speaking with him, I returned home convinced that it was only a matter of time before Tupeni came home. There was something about Ligairi and Waqaniboro that reassured me that the captives would not die, not if they were there anyway.

Later that day I wrote this to Tupeni:

'Dearest Tu,

I have been here at Parliament to see Major – I'm very very relaxed + at ease now – was able to hug Anand Singh – I have taken the opportunity to pass a new pink shirt, some apples, cashew, biscuits (2), mixed fruit, and canned fruits – I hope you remain in prayer. Major Ligairi is deep in prayer, a kind dignified man. Till tomorrow,

My love and Prayers

Una

P.S./ This was my first trip to Parliament – !!

P.S.S./ Take care of chest'





21

Freedom

Thursday 13 July 2000



Extracts from Tupeni Baba's Red Cross letters to his wife:

July 4: We were expecting to be released, even yesterday as I understand an interim administration has been announced. That cuts the ground on which one stands and therefore our being here does not make sense. The negotiations appear to have reached a dead end as an interim solution is in place. Under the circumstances, our being here does not make sense . . . Anyway, I hope good sense will prevail so we could be released. As I always say, we will await God's time. He knows best and he will prevail on all concerned when the situation is right'

July 7: It's now Saturday morning and no news of release yet as expected yesterday. The reps of the GCC were meeting here last night and we were expectant. I guess we will hear in the course of things . . . It is difficult say when exactly and I guess we should take it a day at a time as usual . . . it shouldn't be long now . . . !

July 9: Today Sunday 9th is our 52nd day in captivity. I am sure it is going to be a record for any arrest of MPs in the world. We, meaning Fiji, will soon enter the *Guinness Book of Records* on this and we will be in line with other banana republics in the world. Other arrested people in other African countries were not kept in the Parliament House like ours. Anyway, that's for history and posterity and our people here

will be the heroes of tomorrow for it . . . Anyway, we are well despite our conditions. There's a definite feeling we will be out next week, hopefully early rather than late. We are looking forward to joining our families. As for me, I am keener than most of them because of my special situation regarding Junior.'



Early on the morning of Wednesday 12 July nine hostages were freed, leaving 18 still in the compound. Anup Kumar's wife, Kushma, confirmed her husband was home: 'He was really excited, kept doing most of the talking. Health-wise he's very good, he's lost a lot of weight.'

Rumour suggested the rest of the hostages would come out on Thursday 13 July, but Joe Nata, who was showing signs of becoming the bush lawyer he would need to be, reckoned military failure to promulgate various decrees would torpedo the whole process. They were simply so far from reality they seemed to believe Bainimarama's pact with the devil had to be gazetted to be made legal.

On Thursday the GCC met at the Barracks to discuss the accords. Bainimarama told the council there were elements 'who have continued to harbour and fester havoc and disorder among our communities.

'The capture of police stations and police officers, the construction of roadblocks and threats of public disorder are not only not in the spirit of the accord but are not the manner in which the Taukei deals with these issues . . . The remainder of the world has been keeping a very close watch on the developments in Fiji and our next steps will dictate what actions they will take in response to the path that we will be taking. Our markets, education, and even our participation in international peacekeeping could be jeopardised depending on which path we will be taking.'

The GCC named Josefa Iloilo the new president. He was 79 years old and suffered from Parkinson's. Speight saw Iloilo's appointment as a win for 'The Cause'. The new vice-president was Jope Seniloli, the same man who Speight had phoned up to come over and swear in the Taukei government. Rabuka as GCC chairman denied they had capitulated to Speight.

'He is free to enjoy his self-perceived victory. We've just resolved the crisis we were in. The resolution is the victory.'

Most of the media were outside the cordon around Parliament that Thursday 13 July afternoon. The military snapped the barricades shut, allowing nobody in. Because release rumours had been commonplace, only a small part of the media group was inside the zone around Parliament itself. Just before 4 pm Asha Laxhan phoned me to say the hostages were being released. Looking around I could see nothing, so ran around to the other entrance to see two white Red Cross vehicles drive into the Ratu Sukuna Road entrance. For this long awaited end, only a handful of media watched. Over at the ceremonial entrance to Parliament we could see the hostages for the first time. They looked gaunt and tired. John Scott was supervising the operation. At 4.11 pm the trucks drove out through the gates of Parliament, clapped and cheered by their captors. The coup-plotters broke into singing as if they regarded the event as a victory. The last of the men had been hostages for 55 days, five hours and 26 minutes.

To see Chaudhry in the distance climbing into a little white truck was a strongly emotional moment. This was big-time 'breaking news' and every movement from the arrival of the trucks to the loading and then the leaving was accompanied by various grades of wire-stopping urgents. First out from AFP (and no doubt similar on other wires) was a bulletin — all in red which rang bells in global newsrooms: 'SUVA — Deposed Fiji Prime Minister handed over to Red Cross — AFP reporter at scene.' It was quickly followed with another: 'SUVA — Deposed Fiji Prime

Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and 17 other political hostages held in Parliament since May 19 were freed Thursday — AFP reporter at the scene.’

Feelings were powerful and like a tremendous weight being lifted; I had been coming to Suva since 1975 and it’s a place I had grown to embrace and the good people there were always welcoming to me. What had happened to it was not deserved, and it was possible to believe the nightmare was now over. As the two trucks came out the entrance a young Australian photographer leapt into the back of one, landing at Chaudhry’s feet. As we followed behind in cars we reached the roadblock Speight had been shot at, and the soldiers hauled her out of the truck. She was roundly cheered by all the others. The trucks, with the media behind, drove through Suva, down the hill to the Red Cross headquarters on Gorrie Street. Radio stations were running the news live and dozens of people were coming out to wave and cheer. Relief was strong and could be tasted. Gorrie Street was partly blocked off but hundreds were pressing against the barricades wanting to welcome the hostages who were in the building for reunion with family.

Tipped off that Chaudhry would not speak there, we headed for his home. It was now after dark. We risked driving by Parliament, which Speight and the gang were still holding. A victory party was underway. It sounded full of menace, a reminder that the crisis was not really over.

As Chaudhry got to his fairly ordinary home at Suva Point, he picked up his granddaughter in his arms. Although he looked tired and unshaven, he was unbowed. Supporters cheered him and waved placards; a typical one read, ‘Welcome home Mr Prime Minister. You are our PM.’

Yes, he confirmed, he had been beaten: ‘I am a tough guy. I can take it.’

He said he had found his fellow captors to be good company.

‘In many ways we were our own therapists. We used to take one day at a time. There were some anxious moments, I must say that.’

That first night Chaudhry was vague about whether he believed he would be prime minister, saying the priority was to end the suffering in Fiji caused by the coup. On Saturday following release, his political instinct returned with a press conference on the front lawn of his house. He demanded reinstatement of his government, saying that to do otherwise would be to condone anarchy.

‘At all costs we must uphold constitutional democracy. A vocal and violent minority holds the whole country ransom. In this moment of national crisis, the challenge before us is to vigilantly defend our nation, its noble heritage of multiracialism, religious tolerance, human rights and constitutional government. Our commitment to these principles requires the reinstatement of the legitimate, democratically elected People’s Coalition Government.’

He said he was the elected leader of the country and he punched the table when he said the coup had cost Fiji heavily: ‘Who is going to pay the price for this? There is widespread suffering, thousands of people have lost their jobs, people are starving.’

Chaudhry spoke at that press conference to the distinctive background sound of rifle firing; the army were practising on the rifle range near his home.

MP Ema Golea Tagicakibau, who had been warned of the pending coup but had taken it as a joke, said another MP who had warned her visited them and told them if only they had listened to what he had said, they would not be in that state. ‘I must admit that there were too many Judases in the last Parliament and there are still many around. The biggest lesson, however, is about human nature and the principles that we stand for,’ Ema said.

She said she was very upset when she thought of the parliamentarians who were planning the coup, knowing full well that

they had sworn oaths of allegiance to be faithful to the institutions they represented. Those involved were mostly Fijian parliamentarians who had sworn on the Holy Bible to be faithful and bear true allegiance ‘according to law, so help me God’.



Both politicians and their partners had, in different ways, been hostages in the drama. Tupeni first:

Prayer time was the only occasion we hostages were allowed to sit together and discuss what was supposed to be some theological topic. Using that as a cover we would talk of various predictions about our possible release. At first, we used 1987 as a yardstick – we were held for seven days – but seven days came and nothing happened. Then there was the other prediction that it would happen as soon as Mara assumed emergency powers under the constitution, after the appointment and then resignation of Tevita Momoedonu as acting prime minister. This made it legally possible for the president to take over and made us redundant; but nothing followed from that. We then waited for the establishment of the interim administration under Qarase but this passed and still there was no release. We were no longer the government but it was clear Speight wanted to keep us for whatever design – only he knew.

Those of us who were religious turned to the charismatic Jay Lal and his prophecies, but he turned out like many others in the history of Christianity to be a false prophet himself. We had received the secretary-general of the Commonwealth and the special UN envoy but nothing had flowed from that either. Even the GCC, with all its failings and compromises, we could not bank on, even though it was very important in the eyes of the people Speight was listening to. The GCC had met several times while we were in the complex and we kept hanging our faith on its resolutions as therein lay, we thought, what might be the basis of our release.

We had got to the stage that we became cynical of any promise of release. Speight was keen to demonstrate he was willing to release us and at the same time he had nothing else to offer as a bargain. He had already released the women MPs including Koila Nailatikau, Ratu Mara's daughter, but he was no longer dealing with him and now the deal had to be brokered with Ratu Iloilo, the new president.

Sometime past the 50 days of captivity we heard the GCC was meeting again. Two days before the meeting our hopes were rekindled. We had been listening to the speeches at the vanua chiefs' meeting a few days before but it gave us little encouragement. I had seen many chiefs coming to that meeting but they seemed more concerned with their political agendas and they did not raise the issue of our release. I became disenchanted and wondered to myself whether they would be any different to the GCC. I said to myself that I should not communicate my scepticism to the others as I was expected to provide encouragement to the group.

A day before the meeting, we could sense a new sense of anxiety and we could not work out what it was. The activities in the complex rolled on as usual and now that we were all together in one place, provided some greater sense of security especially to our Indo-Fijian MPs. The smoking group outside the porch took a livelier turn. I do not smoke but I joined them for the company. We slept that night fairly late; our thoughts were at home with our families. That was the 55th day of our captivity and it was 12 July, 2000. I glanced at my diary which I had guarded jealously from the security, and wrote on the page 'NOTHING HAPPENING TODAY!'

Next day, the day of the GCC meeting, we finished breakfast and we were getting to about lunchtime when we saw some movements in the complex. A meeting was being held with Speight. After some time, Speight advised that we would be released immediately. A sense of calm fell on me and I could see from the expressions of our colleagues, including a Muslim MP from Labasa, Mohammed Latif Subedar, who had been sick for the last few days, that they were feeling psychological

and emotional release. We embraced and shook hands at this news but we realised we were still in their hands and anything could happen until we were out and away from the complex.

The news filtered through the complex very quickly and even the Nationalist–Tako Lavo section with Iliesa Duvuloco and others, who had been outspoken against our release, joined us all. We quickly mixed some kava and as we drank we were reminded of our Fijian protocols which our Indo–Fijians also appreciated. We were sitting together, hostages and our captors, passing around bowls of yaqona or kava and observing our relationship in the sequence kava is offered and drunk and the clapping that follows each serving.

We were all there: Speight, Ligairi, Duvuloco and his group and all MPs: Chaudhry and I and all our remaining MPs, and as I looked around I couldn't help seeing our security people whom we had come to know. Most had removed their balaclavas. Suddenly, traditional cobo or clapping broke out, signalling a presentation. Most of us sat on the floor, in accordance with custom.

Duvuloco made a presentation. In front of him was a bundle of waka or kava roots. This was ai bulubulu, a public apology. Duvuloco's eloquence showed his traditional connection to the ancient vanua of Verata. His ratu had urged the chiefs at the GCC to suspend the meeting until we were released. This was not lost on Duvuloco. He spoke and sought our apology in accordance with custom for all that had happened over the last 56 days. He urged our understanding of what had happened in the light of what Fijians hold dear to their hearts and expressed the hope that a greater understanding of these issues should guide future governments in Fiji.

For a moment everything stood still. Duvuloco's voice and its eloquence soothed our emotions, even if only for the moment. The kava was served and in accordance with custom we drank first and Speight, Ligairi, Duvuloco and others drank as well. Kava and custom has brought us together. I thought how this would look from the eyes of an outsider. I rejected the thought; we were not outsiders, we had

to carve our relationships the way it makes sense to us. It was a day to remember!

The truck pulled up and we were ready to hop aboard. There was hugging and handshaking; some could not contain their tears. *Sa moce, sa moce*, (goodbye) they chanted as we left for the Red Cross headquarters.

The clapping and the shouting as we passed people on the road echoed through Suva and in a moment we were at the Red Cross. Our relations were advised to wait at home. We looked expectantly for our loved ones. At the Red Cross we went through medical examination and debriefing. We were then driven to our homes.

Eight Davila Place was oozing with fresh flowers. I knew I was home. Una was extraordinarily big with Junior. Mela looked as if she might just jump, the excitement on her innocent face simply lifted my spirits. She had grown taller.

Other relations were there. My son Peter was calling from Nadi on his way out to the States. He wanted his son, who was due to be born a few weeks later, to carry my surname; I agreed gladly. Raijeli and Viliame, my daughter and son from my first marriage, had heard I was back and arrived home in no time. My brother Laisiasa had already set in motion celebrations for the whole clan, my Vatumabu Clan.

The presence outside of members of the media and the constant phone calls from journalists reminded me of the our political situation and its continuing challenges but I said to myself, all that will have to come second to savouring this moment with my family and loved ones.



Unaisi Nabobo-Baba:

For the 56 days, we waited for the news of release. It came very close to happening a few times. I made sure our home at 8 Davila Place, Domain, was kept fresh with flowers in case Tupeni came home. The

flower arrangements from the florist Mrs Nagera over time gave way to my own creations; this was out of necessity as the reality that our husbands were not paid dawned on me. Tupeni and I share a love of flowers so I made sure that each time there was some hint of their coming home, I would be prepared, with our home decked out with a number of arrangements.

On that day, I had a mild headache. I had been well all through the first 55 days and then on that day I felt sick. The ordeal had just drawn itself out and was slowly taking its toll, and I was feeling burnt out.

Later in the day, after the usual trip to Red Cross at 12 pm, I went down to the city centre. I had a face massage and a pedicure and then retired home. The face massage helped reduce the headache a little, and the pedicure did a lot of good to my swelling feet, a reminder that I was eight months heavy to our Junior. Back home, Semi was cooking dinner as usual.

Later in the afternoon, at 6 pm or thereabouts, I received a call from Spike Paradarath. He was letting on earlier in the day that the release might just happen today. The call simply said: 'They are here!' I put the phone down immediately and made my way to the door, as fast as I could carry my heavily pregnant self. I drove down as quickly as I could, only to be turned back. Gorrie Street was cordoned off by the police by the time I arrived. I turned around and went back home, upset. I decided there was no point in my getting closer as my condition would not have enabled me to push my way through the crowd that had pushed and tumbled its way there – a combination of the media and supporters come to record and cheer the deposed ministers' return.

At home and a few hours later, our necks popping out the windows for any sound of a vehicle on the drive, Tupeni arrived in a Red Cross vehicle. He came with Meli Bogileka, another deposed minister who lived not far from us. Tupeni looked pale, had lost weight but was in good spirits. He wore a blue and yellow bula shirt I had bought him while on the election campaign trail. I could see straight away that he appeared a little disoriented. My friend Mita was at home with

me, with two of Tupeni's closest relations, Litia Batiwale and Sereima Nasilasila. His sister Vaseva arrived shortly after Tupeni, and the media came soon after.

The feeling that I felt that day I can't quite record on paper; suffice it to say that my headache left and a deep calmness descended on me and our home. Yes, he was home. I remember Mela looking hard at Tupeni as if to expect something different. At 12, I am sure this return and the ordeal was something that had carved its own mark on her young life. Today I still remember looking through his smiles that evening. There was something about it that told me they were a cover for a deep hurt . . . of a man whose life and dreams for his country had just been trashed once again! I quietly thought, this experience must take its toll; but pushed the thought to the back of my mind and decided just to breathe a sigh, a heavy sigh of relief for the moment. Such moments are a reminder that life ought to be celebrated and could not be taken for granted. That every time one leaves the door, it was worth every minute and effort to hug them with loads of love. But for the moment, I was just elated, simply elated in the thought that he was alive and safe in the comfort of our home.



Chaudhry was free but Bainimarama never gave him his job back, raising the question of whose coup had done what. Much later the courts in Fiji got around to deciding that Bainimarama had no authority to overrule the constitution, but by that point it was entirely academic. Speight's parliament without the hostages was turned into some kind of cheap dosshouse where the new heroes of the indigenous cause trashed it.

A couple of days later he set out to honour the part of the deal that required him to hand over the RFMF weapons he had. Speight held open day at Parliament with the weapons laid out to be handed over to a grim-faced Tarakinikini. There were 76

machineguns, M16 and Uzi assault rifles and sidearms, as well as ammunition, claymores, teargas canisters and grenades. Much less ammunition seemed on display than had been seen during the 56 days and, in keeping with lack of planning or forethought, he was not giving everything he had back.

Speight was particularly triumphant inside the compound, being treated as a national hero. He came over to me at one point and wanted to engage in the kind of conversation one might have with a rival cricket captain after a match. He had little idea what he had done and seemed perplexed that people did not like him.

He had another feast to share with his audience when his rebels seized the corpse of an unfortunate supporter, Kolinio Tabua. The 24-year-old Tailevu subsistence farmer had been wounded in shootings in Parliament on 4 July and had died a week later. Speight demanded he be buried in the grounds of Parliament, on the slope leading up to the main chamber. Around 3000 people turned out for the protracted funeral rites, which included a Methodist service and was presided over by Speight. Ligairi hailed Tabua as a 'true martyr' to 'The Cause'. Draped in tapa cloth, his coffin was carried by pallbearers to the grave. Many of the thousands then moved in to sit beside the body as the last rites were read, watched by Tabua's distressed widow and mother. Just before he was buried the casket was wrapped in traditional sleeping mats made out of the leaves of the pandanus tree. It was lifted into the tomb. Much later people suspected the grave was booby-trapped but I was right beside it, and it wasn't.

As this happened the unelected prime minister, Qarase, had his 'Blueprint for the protection of Fijian and Rotuman rights and interests, and the advancement of their development' published, detailing a range of political, employment, financial, tax and education privileges proposed for the 51 percent of the population who are indigenous.

'[The plan] is to safeguard the paramountcy of [indigenous

people's] interests in our multiethnic and multicultural society,' it reads.

'The Cause' had won, even if they disagreed with the method.

A couple of days after the hostages were freed Speight and the gang moved out of Parliament. Shortly after I went inside. A misty rain was slowly lifting over burnt out cars, rubbish, broken chairs, stray dogs and a once beautiful complex of wooden buildings that had been trashed. A white limousine, licence plate PM001, was untouched, but its tyres deflated. Through the drama hundreds of people had turned offices into campsites, dug up the grounds to cook pigs and taro and everywhere they drank kava and then used the rooms, and anywhere else, to shit and piss on Fiji's democracy. The parliamentary library was turned into a laundry where clothes hung from books to dry. The water pooled everywhere and the place stank of rotting food.

In the debating chamber the marvellous masi or tapa was torn and parts stolen, and the mace, which had been Cakobau's war club, was gone. Broken glass was scattered across the floor. In several places Speight's people had smashed floorboards, looking for secret tunnels. A handful of people moved through the complex, silent, shocked and saddened. Army engineers arrived and asked people to leave as they checked for explosives and arms. Parliamentary Secretary-General Mary Chapman, an otherwise ebullient, powerful character, looked broken by the rape of her pride and joy: 'It's sad, really sad. It's quite sad to see it the way it is now, compared with what it was before. A lot of damage has been done.'

Marieta Rigamoto, a hostage for 37 days, returned to look at the damage. 'I'm glad I've come and put a lot of ghosts to rest . . . I slept here, on the floor, and I held hands with Lavinia Padarath so that we would know that we were together and safe,' she said.

Nailatikau, hostage Koila Nailatikau's husband and soon to

be parliamentary speaker, was emotional. 'I've been coming here for a while on other occasions and it is not a great feeling today. This is a sad occasion.'

Many people believed it could never be used again, that the 61 days of desecration had been too profound.

Speight's gang moved into the Kalabu Fijian School on the banks of the Nasinu River, just off the King's Road to Nausori. In gangster style, complete with armed bodyguards. Speight took lunch one day at an old house called The Cottage which served Indian fare to business district workers. He went over to the Centra where the international media were staying and ran into a group of reporters who included Lakhan and the *Daily Post*'s Josephine Prasad. She had been in Parliament the day Speight seized it, and for a time she was a prisoner in the chamber too, paying a tough personal price for it. Speight angrily told us he did not want to be called a terrorist any more and said 'culturally sensitive' language should be used.

'I am asking you all, with respect, to stop using that from today. I have all of the chiefs of this country behind me. Every time you call me that, you insult them as well . . . Please stop using the word 'rebel', after all we have been granted amnesty, we are free people.'

Prasad asked him what he wanted to be called.

'Call me a crusader for Fijian interests and rights in my mother country.'

Prasad said that was a very elevated title.

'You make of it what you will,' Speight snapped. He saw himself as a kingmaker as Bainimarama and Qarase struggled with the continuing business of coming up with an interim cabinet. He attended the swearing-in of the new president and vice-president and said he was also involved in discussions on a new line-up for the government. He was pushing the prime ministership for Samanunu Cakobau, who was Fiji's high



Back at Parliament after the coup – Chaudhry in a media doorstop; the *Daily Post's* Josephine Prasad beside him. Michael Field

commissioner to Malaysia, and granddaughter of Seru Cakobau. Her behaviour was questionable at best. She had left her post several times and returned to Suva and was seen with Speight in Parliament. Her mention was seen by Deputy Prime Minister Epeli Nailatikau — himself a Cakobau — as crucial evidence that the coup had been about a naked grab for power by one tribal group: ‘Now the truth has come out.’

Former MP Esira Rabuno said Cakobau was unfit for government, having met Speight in Parliament during the hostage crisis. ‘To many law abiding and responsible Fiji citizens, Adi Samanunu’s questionable role and activities with respect to Speight’s overthrow of the Coalition Government, have damaged her standing for national leadership role based on the rule of law and constitutional government.’

Speight wanted his nominees to have the finance, home

affairs, Fijian affairs, lands and justice portfolios. Constitutional democracy was finished: 'It will be very, very different from the constitutional democracy, Commonwealth-style you've seen in the last 30 years. That is out, that's finished.'

Speight quickly discovered the new realities when the government was named and only one of his minor supporters had a place in the line-up. 'They are treading on some dangerous ground. It will result in a backlash. I think some of the people are trying to do me in and they are going to meet with some very strong resistance.'

Reaction was not long in coming. On Wednesday 19 July Iloilo was to have sworn in 20 new ministers and 12 assistant ministers including Qarase at a Borron House ceremony at 11 am. As the planned new ministers gathered in a tent, minus nine of them who had not shown up, Qarase announced: 'Ladies and gentlemen . . . regrettably His Excellency the President Ratu Josefa Iloilo is indisposed this morning. He is resting at home. So regrettably, the swearing-in ceremony is deferred until further notice.'

Joe Nata warned that there would be trouble if the new government was appointed. 'If they swear in the government it will lead to civil war. It is not an empty threat.'

If Speight could not read the signs that his time was up, the military spelt it out on Monday 24 July when they said they were 'extremely concerned' at what was going on at the Kalabu School, which had been turned into an encampment that resembled the kind of war parties seen in the nineteenth century. Speight's occupation was doing nothing for the education of Fijian children either. 'The RFMF continues to be extremely concerned that civilians are still in illegal possession of firearms and ammunition and has concluded that with the occupation of Kalabu by the George Speight rebel group, their illegal activities along the Suva-Nausori corridor now pose a risk to the people in the corridor,' a military statement said.



22

Desert Island

Wednesday 26 July 2000

On the wet night of Wednesday 26 July, with much of Suva blacked out, Speight, Nata, lawyer Tevita Bukarau and a minder were driving out of Kalabu towards Tamavua, one of Suva's upper class suburbs, where the gang planned to relocate. At a barricade the military grabbed them after what Tarakinikini said were threats on Iloilo's life and failure to return military arms.

'Those have not been fully accounted for and the military decree granted was conditional upon the safe return of all the arms.'

He also cited the illegal use of bodyguards: 'We cannot have private militias operating around the country.'

Assistant Police Commissioner Moses Driver said Speight was being held in the sprawling military headquarters on minor charges including unlawful assembly, consorting with people illegally armed and with burying a body — that of Kolinio Tabua — outside a designated burial site. More was to come: 'We are investigating the major crime of treason.'

Soldiers returned to Kalabu School at 6.15 am next day, where, according to Tarakinikini, 'some of the remains of George Speight supporters were holed up . . . The group have terrorised the residents in the area, stolen goods from various shops and privately owned vegetable gardens, basically creating fear and anxiety in the area.' They seized 369 men, including Ligairi and

the police commissioner's brother Josefa Savua and found the parliamentary mace, stolen computers and porn.

'This crisis has dragged on for too long and there have been so many excuses used in the name of indigenous Fijians that have really embarrassed and brought shame to Fijians,' Tarakinikini said. 'We cannot allow people of a criminal tendency to use the cause of the indigenous Fijians for their own selfish ends. We will ensure the country's return to normalcy is as quick as possible.'

Timoci Silatolu and Metuisela Mua were picked up elsewhere. The military approach was rugged; one man died from the effects of teargas and 40 others were injured. The perceived brutality and the repudiation of the amnesty so outraged the Naitasiri paramount chief Inoke Takiveikata that he vowed to take revenge.

With Speight out of the way, swearing in a new government went ahead. Iloilo warned that continued sharp divisions among ethnic Fijians vying for power were endangering national unity. 'The Fijian people themselves, in the various vanua, have become divided. This national objective of forging one nation will not be possible if Fijians begin to break up into separate groups based on provincial and other allegiances.'

Just one Indian, George Shiu Raj, was in the 20-strong cabinet with eight associate ministers and ranked last. The new agriculture minister was Apisai Tora: coups were good for his flagging career. Inoke Takiveikata was named but he quit over the failure of Samanunu Cakobau to get a job.

New finance minister Jone Kubuabola had grim news: the economy would, in that financial year, fall 15 percent, 'the largest decline in our nation's history'. This would be on the back of growth of 3.8 percent under Chaudhry. Tourist arrivals would fall 50 percent, inflation would rise to 5 percent and more than 6000 people had lost their jobs. Tough cost-cutting was needed to survive, including a 12.5 percent slash in pay for civil servants.

Near Navuso in Naitasiri on 8 August, a military patrol of 10 soldiers and a policeman was ambushed; a soldier and a policeman died and three soldiers were wounded. Five rebels, it was believed, were using RFMF stolen weapons. The policeman was Corporal Raj Kumar, who was beaten to death.

‘This is cold-blooded murder,’ Tarakinikini said. ‘There’s no doubt about it . . . This is a small renegade gang, remnants of what already has been apprehended.’

Speight supporters began again the harassment of Indians in Labasa, while in Savusavu an Air Fiji plane was seized. Its two New Zealand pilots, Maurice Parsons and James Henry, were held for 24 hours at Ligairi’s home village of Nabalebale and were released unharmed with no demands made. Air New Zealand decided it would overfly Fiji ‘because of the current political



A burnt-out Indian family home on the Rewa River bank.

Michael Field

situation'. Rebels in Labasa continued to terrorise Indians and take hostages, while the power station on Viti Levu was still in rebel hands. Asha Lakhan and AFP photographer William West got through to the remote and beautiful Dreketi Valley on Vanua Levu and discovered an Indian community in terror. Of the 90,000 people living in the area, 60,000 were Indian. Rice crops had been destroyed and Fiji's authorities had abandoned the region's Indians to their fate.

'We live here in so much fear,' said one farmer, 'it's better if they kill us.'

The road from Labasa went through breathtaking scenery and passed through Seaqaqa, where Mara owned a farm. Speight supporters had set fire to the buildings and burnt the crops. At a roadblock close to Dreketi, around a dozen Fijian men searched cars, and when asked why they were taking this action, one said, 'We want our land back.' One woman said that when she protested to raiders that she would be left with nothing, she was told it did not matter. 'What are you doing here, go back to India,' they told the 56-year-old.

'We have to get out of this situation; we have to find some way out. We cannot carry on like this,' the woman said.

'We are so scared, no one comes over to the shop these days,' said one rice farmer who owned a roadside business. 'These are people who used to be friendly, and now they've changed.'

Women and children spent their days hiding in dry river beds, or among trees on the river banks. On sighting a strange vehicle men ran off to join their wives. By five o'clock people were holed up in their shuttered homes, living in hopelessness and frustration.

At the end of July the military announced that Nukulau, near Suva, was the new house of detention for Speight, Nata, Silatolu, Ligairi, Mua and several others. Nukulau and the neighbouring island of Makuluva were off-limits, and remain so five years



A covert photo of George Speight detained on Nukulau Island. Permanent facilities have since been built. *AFP Photo*

on. For Fiji's Indians it was richly ironic: Nukulau had been the quarantine station earlier generations had been forced to stay in before going onto the sugar lines. Delinquent boys used to be kept on Makuluva but it was closed because the inmates would often try to swim for freedom and end up bashed to death on a reef, or taken by tiger sharks.

On the way out to Nukulau aboard a navy boat Speight said he was attacked, receiving a sharp blow to the back of his head from what he believed was a rifle butt, and was abused in Fijian before being severely beaten.

'The abuse included slapping, punching, kicking and the use of rifle butts to the head, face, neck, back, chest and stomach,' he said, adding that the officer leading the assault 'went through us one by one many times. At times the abuse on us was carried out simultaneously by two, three and four soldiers. One soldier took pleasure in holding my head down with his boot from behind me on numerous occasions.'

Other Speight supporters were locked up at a police academy on Queen Elizabeth Drive while hundreds of their pitiful families, facing poverty, gathered outside the chainmail fence hoping to see their men. The first 150 appeared the following Monday in the Suva Magistrates' Court on charges of unlawful assembly. They all pleaded not guilty and were bailed for \$50. The processing would take years.

A new ritual descended on Suva. Each time Speight came to court it was a complex and at times disruptive operation. The inmates would be picked up, often before dawn, from Nukulau and brought into Walu Bay naval base on the western side of Suva. The men would be put aboard a distinctive red 'riot bus' which had a platform on top where teargas-equipped police could operate. At Government Buildings, a two- and three-storey



The Nukulau Island prisoners arrive for a court hearing at Government Buildings. Michael Field

concrete complex that housed the courts, armed soldiers would be atop the roof while police, slowly returning to something of a law and order function, would control access to the buildings and keep the handful of Speight supporters across the road. A crucial piece of public order equipment was deployed: a long, thick rope strung out around Government Buildings. For a while it was manned at strategic intervals by policemen but social training took over and its mere presence, with its undisclosed special powers, became deterrence enough.

On Friday 11 August in the Suva Magistrates' Court Speight and two CRW men, Vilimone Tikotani and Jitoko Soko, were charged with treason and intending 'to levy war'. It was the beginning of a judicial process that shows little sign of flagging after five years. Dealing with Speight would turn out to be relatively easy, although many a ploy and hitch was to come. First off the judicial rank was the always irritable Chief Magistrate Salesi Temo, who sat in a small, uncomfortable courtroom with wooden benches, little room and no air conditioning. The prisoners arrived at holding cells downstairs and came up through the stairs to stand around, often with members of the public while waiting for things to get underway. Speight sometimes got to go outside with his girlfriend Torika Rawlinson.

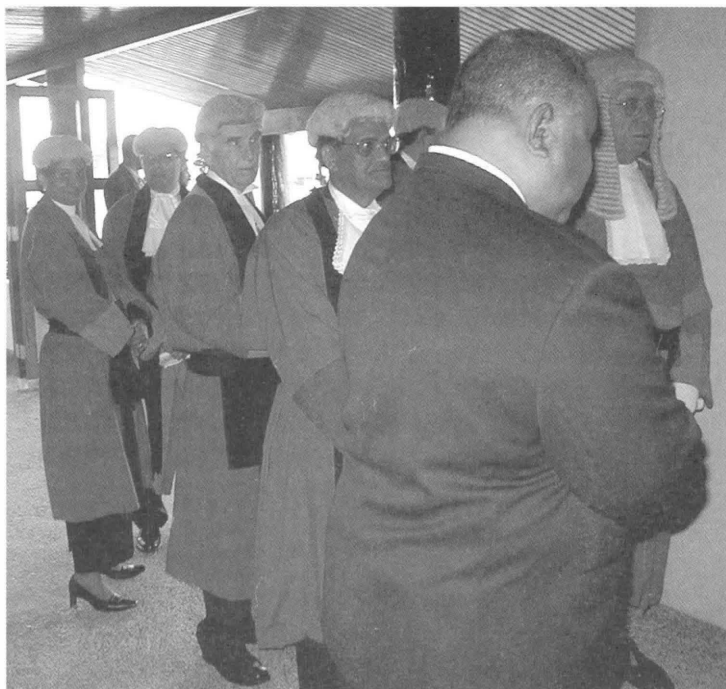
At times Temo acted as if he was dealing with moderately serious driving offences, ruling at one point that wives and girlfriends of Speight and the prisoners on Nukulau could mark Father's Day with them on Nukulau. Temo did not pay for the act of generosity, Fiji taxpayers did. Temo tossed out an attempted murder charge against Isoa Raceva Karawa over the shooting which had wounded a television cameraman. He said Karawa was covered by the Immunity Decree granted Speight's gang. The state appealed his action and in the High Court Justice Peter Surnam ruled that the immunity deal Speight had signed had been breached by their failure to return stolen military arms.

'If there has been a failure by the Speight group to return all the weapons, ordnance and stores then, in my judgement, this will indicate a fundamental breach of the conditions of the accord which in turn will mean the provisions of the Immunity Decree would not operate.'

Karawa was sent to trial and eventually convicted. Surnam's Monday 2 October ruling was crucial and must have sounded like a death knell on a capital charge.

The court system was like some kind of badly played tennis match with a serve and smash followed by pained appeals to judges and umpires, on many and varied motions, including an application for a writ of habeas corpus (Speight and Nata quickly developed as prison lawyers), which even the most arcane lawyers found tedious. It was not as if any of the lawyers were making much money either; the prosecution were civil servants earning less than the expense accounts of some of the journalists covering the courts. When international legal prosecution arrived, it was often on pro bono or basic fees. Defence lawyers were stuck with poor clients, most notably bankrupt George Speight. For the diminishing band of reporters trying to cover it all, in the rosy hope that light and truth might emerge, it was to be a keen disappointment; full notebooks and nothing to write. For the magistrates and judges involved, it was an opportunity, not always grabbed, to restore the tarnished record of the judiciary over the action of Chief Justice Timoci Tuivaga and fellow judges Daniel Fatiaki and Michael Scott in helping write up military decrees used to dump the constitution.

As the Speight hearing was proceeding in the nearby High Court, Justice Michael Scott gave the go-ahead for general elections. The lobby group Citizens Constitutional Forum (CCF) had challenged the constitutional basis of the elections. When it originally came to court before Fatiaki CCF sought to have him disqualified, saying he had joined Tuivaga and Scott in helping the



Fiji's High Court justices: Nazhat Shameem, Anthony Gates, Peter Surman, Devendra Pathik and Chief Justice Sir Timoci Tuivaga, at Parliament's 2001 opening. Michael Field

military. Two other judges, John Byrnes and Nazhat Shameem, swore affidavits against Fatiaki, now chief justice. He removed himself from the electoral case, saying in his ruling that the High Court made Hamlet's Denmark look like 'a holiday camp'.

The preliminary manoeuvring reached another mark on 11 October when treason charges against nine soldiers were dropped. The appearance before Temo saw the arrival on the scene of a Christchurch and Hong Kong based Queen's Counsel, Gerard McCoy. Part funded by the New Zealand Government,

and also heavily out of his own pocket, McCoy was to be one of a number of lawyers drawn not only by the notion of the need for justice, but by the fascination of prosecuting something as rare as treason.

McCoy told Temo that the treason charges against the nine 'foot soldiers, highly disciplined members of a military force' would be dropped and while the men could walk out of the dock, they would go straight into military custody. 'They will face serious charges like mutiny, desertion and larceny of arms.'

One of the problems in putting them up on a treason charge was that the offence did not allow the defence of following higher orders or duress, but they could plead this before military justice. 'The military will deal with them, this is a wholly adequate circumstance.'



23

New coup

Thursday 2 November 2000

By early October 2000 rumours of another uprising were mounting, but the problem with Fiji rumours was that they were half right half the time. Security was markedly increased around Bainimarama's home. The official residence was at the top end of Ratu Sukuna Drive, overlooking USP and next to the New Zealand High Commission residency. Rumours were specific: senior army officers and chiefs still loyal to Speight were expected to lead the uprising on 10 October, Fiji's thirtieth anniversary of independence. The day passed calmly with Qarase making a speech saying Fijians wanted 'better and stronger' guarantees that they, and not Indians, would control the nation.

'No one condones the coup, and the perpetrators are now being dealt with according to law. But the general feeling among Fijians is that there must be better and stronger guarantees for indigenous Fijians to be in control of their political destiny . . . Fijians feel insecure about their political future in their country in which they own more than 83 percent of the land, and Fiji is the only country in the world they can call their homeland. They need more than constitutional protection. They want to be in control of policy making in government.'

On 20 October Radio Fiji acting chief executive Francis Herman, news director Vasiti Waqa and journalist Maca Lutunauga were

led away at gunpoint by the military for a day of questioning over their reports of discontent in the military.

Fiji's army has a proud history. Formed during the Second World War it fought largely as a commando unit in the Solomon Islands against the Japanese. Its most famous son, Sefanaia Sukanaivalu, was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously for his valour on Bougainville. The nearly 10,000-strong force carried out most of its modern service under United Nations colours, for 25 years in Lebanon. Thirty-five Fijians died on duty there, including, in 2000, Private Anare Waqavonovono, 20, who was shot in the back. Fellow soldier Henry Ali was accused of his murder and that drama was quietly festering among soldiers. On Monday 19 June — the prophet Mohammed's birthday public holiday and while the hostages were still being held — three soldiers, including Lieutenant Papu Waqavonovono, father of the dead private, seized the Nabua police station where Ali was in custody. Their aim, family sources told me before the incident, had been to kill Ali, but they could not find him in the cells. The stand-off was resolved within an hour or so. Ali later went to trial and was convicted of murder.

On Thursday 2 November hell broke loose with a mutiny inside the Queen Elizabeth Barracks. It had one aim in mind: kill Bainimarama. It was a fairly simple affair. Naitasiri paramount chief Inoke Takiveikata had been outraged at the way the military broke what he saw as his Muanikau Accord and, in seizing people at Kalabu School, they had attacked his clan. Revenge was to turn the dozens of pro-Speight CRW soldiers, led by a Captain Shane Stevens, on Bainimarama. With both sides heavily armed, death and destruction was inevitable and Bainimarama only narrowly escaped with his life by leaping down a steep bank. Although the commander's death would have had a coup-like effect, the mutiny was much more visceral than that. Bainimarama believed that the mutineers had hoped that if they could seize the camp,

hundreds of supporters who had flooded Parliament earlier in the year would join them. Eight soldiers were killed and 30 wounded. Rabuka showed up quickly, wearing military uniform. He did not take part in the fighting on either side and even Bainimarama later said he found Rabuka's behaviour confusing.

Seruvakula, the Third Battalion commander who said he knew the 19 May coup was coming, led the counter-attack against the rebel soldiers. He said it was a myth that Fiji soldiers would not shoot at their own people. 'As a soldier there is no way that you allow someone to take over the base. Even if civilians had come in there would be a bloodbath as we would not allow turning this place into a Parliament situation.'

Later it was found that five of the mutinous soldiers had been tortured to death. Australian pathologist Stephen Cordner found torture-like injuries, including fractured eye sockets, bruising of the tongue, abrasion around the neck which suggested the use of a rope or an instrument to keep them against a wall, dislocation of collar bones, bruising in the heart, collapsed lungs, bruising to the back of the knees and other injuries which suggested that the soldiers were tied at the wrist and ankles.

One badly injured soldier arrived at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital with only his underwear on, and another with a black T-shirt and underwear. Some were dead on arrival and others arrived with severe injuries. Some had their fingers forcibly separated with rips in between them, one with a crushed thumb and Adam's apple. Most injuries were caused by blunt objects and one soldier suffered an impact that almost split his kidney in two.

CRW Corporal Selesitino Kalounivale suffered 31 injuries to the neck and head. There were 56 injuries to his body. Cordner said he could not rule out the possibility Kalounivale had been tied by his hands behind a vehicle and driven over a rough surface. He said while there was no injury consistent with this,

there was a possibility that the areas tied up were covered with clothing that the soldier wore.

Warrant Officer Epineri Bainimoli was alive when he arrived at the hospital but died despite attempts to revive him. Corder said there were 17 injuries to his face and head, including a fractured eye socket and nose. He also suffered bruising deep inside his mouth. Bruising around the victim's wrist suggested it had been tied up. Private Osea Rosinavosa suffered extensive bleeding and inhaled blood with seven metallic fragments discovered on the side of his face. He suffered injuries to the back of his tongue extending down to his throat. He was shot on the right side of his head and choked and drowned in his own blood.

'His tongue was almost separated from the back of his mouth. His injuries were unsurvivable,' Corder said.

Bainimarama became almost biblically vengeful in the wake of the mutiny and was in no mood to apologise over the way some soldiers in the mutiny were beaten to death.

'They all had a role to play, these men knew about the mutiny.'

He would not let arrested and locked-up soldiers see their families: 'These CRW men are murderers and should be treated as such. All that is important is that they are alive and are eating and sleeping. What are the wives moaning about? Why should they be granted visitations?'

Stevens was a traitor: 'Even during the coup he was hiding the guns from me, something that I was later told by my officers . . . 'I asked him where on earth he brought that idea from that 50 CRW men could cripple the army. This naivety we are cautious about because there are still some people out there trying to destabilise an institution like the RFMF.'

Bainimarama said a big black cloud hung over Fiji.

'This is an attempt by Satan to destroy us. They say Fiji will soon be blessed but we have yet to see. Maybe the sunshine will come after the rain, I don't know. But it seems we are hating each

other more than ever. Some people are really trying to help our country but there are others wanting to destabilise it.'



Unaisi Nabobo-Baba:

Before the coup, relatives from Wainibuka (Speight's home district) and a district in Tailevu North had been complaining of the enormous difficulties they faced trying to reach town centres. There is no one in the whole province of Tailevu that does not know of the difficulties one goes through when trying to reach Wainibuka, the roads and bridges are in a constant state of disrepair. The Wainibuka, one of Fiji's biggest rivers, provides desirable fertile land and the district is home of the so-called Wainibuka cum Rewa Milk that provides the country with fresh milk. Successive ethnic Fijian-led governments since independence have not 'seen' or 'heard' this people's cry for development.

Naitasiri, the other prominent province in the coup has also been one like Tailevu North in that successive Fijian-dominated governments have overlooked it in terms of development. Naitasiri is the home of Fiji's largest hydroelectricity supply. It is ironic, therefore, that in all these years since the Monasavu dam began to supply the rest of Fiji, most if not all the villages in Naitasiri, especially the districts which own the land on which the dam was built, still do not have electricity. Now and again there are roadblocks by landowners demanding their rightful dues; this too has not been settled properly. Leading up to the coup of 2000, the province, the people of the vanua Nabuobuco, were demanding \$50 million from the Fiji Electricity Authority that runs the Monasavu dam. In the mix of things, the landowners have brought up the name of the former and deceased Governor-General Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau as the person who begged them on behalf of government (Mara's Alliance government) at the time to give up their land for the national hydroelectricity scheme. Ratu Penaia Ganilau had made verbal promises of the payment that never came to fruition. Again, Ganilau, a

high chief of the east, had been trusted by the people; as he was chief, his words alone were sufficient – or so the landowners thought.

During the coup I daily watched from my home, not so much as a stone's throw from Parliament, busloads of people, my people, arriving to *veisiko* or visit their relatives, and who made Parliament and its immediate grounds their home. At times I did not know whether to laugh or to cry. The situation was complex. I was told by some relatives who had come on the bus that they were invited to come to Suva to have lunch and dinner as well as enjoy some entertainment in the Parliament grounds, all for free, then be returned to their villages. Having heard the stories of the merrymaking going on in Suva, they boarded the bus; later when they wanted to return they found out that it was a one-way trip. A lot of the villagers who came 'to visit their people in Parliament' could not return until they found people to lend them money for their fare back home. This was one reason why such big numbers of Fijians rallied around Parliament buildings during the coup, proving very useful to the coup-makers as a 'human shield' and making it impossible for the army to go in to dissolve the situation.





24

Death by hanging

Monday 18 February 2002

A year after the coup, courts got down to business. George and Jim Speight, Silatolu, Nata, Ligairi, Josefa Savua, Duvuloco, soldier Apenisa Rovutiqica who had harassed reporters outside Parliament, and five others were charged with treason, alleging that they did ‘together and with other persons unknown, between the 1st day of May 2000 and the 27th day of July 2000 inclusive, at Suva, in the Central Division and in other places in the Central Division and elsewhere in Fiji, conspire to overthrow the Government of the Republic of the Fiji Islands as established by law and for that purpose and in furtherance thereof did use unlawful force and other unlawful means’.

The charge contained 13 ‘overt acts’ which covered key details of the coup, including taking hostages, declaring an illegal government, abrogating the constitution, fomenting civil commotion, murdering policeman Filipino Seavula and seizing military arms, all ‘in order to deploy potential, threatened or actual force against the Government of the Republic of the Fiji Islands as established by law.’

Temo opened a committal hearing, sitting in the room which had been the original Assembly Rabuka had overthrown. Gerard McCoy opened for the state, saying the prosecution only had to prove a single overt act against any one individual to successfully

A 'classic Fijian' and a policeman in the lobby of Fiji's High Court – which, as the original Parliament, had also seen Rabuka's coup.

Michael Field



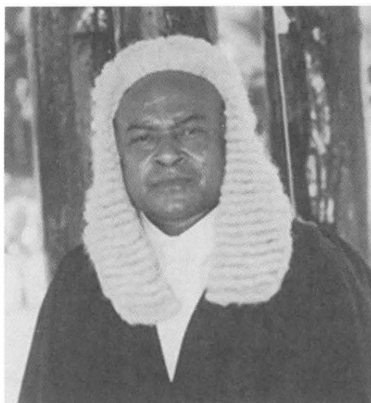
hold the treason charge against that individual: '13 accused, 13 overt acts, 169 combinations'. The plotters were traitors who planned to blow up banks, sink ships and seize Mara. They had wanted to dynamite Parliament and the Westpac and ANZ banks in central Suva, as well as issue petrol bombs to Fijian youths to attack shops and to watersiders to sink ships. Speight had attended meetings at Duvuloco's home in Mitchell Place, and at the last had confirmed firearms and soldiers for the coup would be available. McCoy said many of the weapons used had seen service in the 1987 coups: 'a classic case of recycling'. McCoy said during the hostage period Ligairi 'brutally grabbed' Chaudhry and, holding a gun to his head, threatened to shoot him at any time. Chaudhry was beaten up by Fijian youths in the Parliament so badly that he needed to be put on oxygen that night, McCoy said. Ligairi was 'hysterical' for much of the time.

The opening prosecution statement was barely over before Speight's lawyer, Matebalavu Rabo, who acted for the other accused too, won an adjournment saying Speight needed a separate lawyer. Any prospect of a trial revealing the truth of what happened died at that point. Matters over the following days and weeks became farcical, with Speight, plainly with nothing else to do and looking tanned and healthy from his time on Nukulau, toying with the court. Finally he revealed he had found a new lawyer, one Navin Naidu from the United States. The capacity for Fiji to attract people like Tame Iti and Naidu was no surprise, but the Singapore-born 'ecclesiastical lawyer' was a different, expensive novelty that handicapped justice. He flew in saying he wanted 'to defend a Christian brother' who was not a criminal but a patriot.

'I want to make sure that God's word is done and completed and justice is served . . . People should avoid calling him a rebel or criminal. I understand his reason for taking over the democratically elected government was all for the native cause.'

He said he planned to call '3000 native witnesses'. Instead he was arrested over a false law degree he used to join the Fiji bar. He was bailed for \$500 and fled Fiji. Speight acted hurt by all this: 'I have been locked on this island, I have had no contact with anybody except for 20 minutes at a time, I haven't had the opportunity to see anybody, speak with anybody . . . I have not been given full opportunity by the court or by this illegal interim administration in respect to my right to find a lawyer. This had been denied me outright.'

Procedural hearings were held in camera on Nukulau. Director of Public Prosecutions lawyer Asishna Prasad, a Victoria University law graduate, would make the 45-minute trip on the navy patrol boat Kula from Walu Bay. Temo would get there faster on a speed-boat. On arrival they would be searched and for an hour the defence lawyers would see their 13 clients before court at 9.30 am.



Speaker of Parliament,
Apenisa Kuruasqila.

Ministry of Information, Fiji

‘The court was, needless to say, rudimentary,’ Prasad said. ‘Under a regulation issue army tent, classroom desks served as the bar table and the bench while the accused persons sat cross-legged on a groundsheet. Court procedure was paramount though and people on the floor or otherwise all rose when the magistrate entered the tent.’

Speight used to say that they were privileged as they had the police, the army and the navy all looking after them.

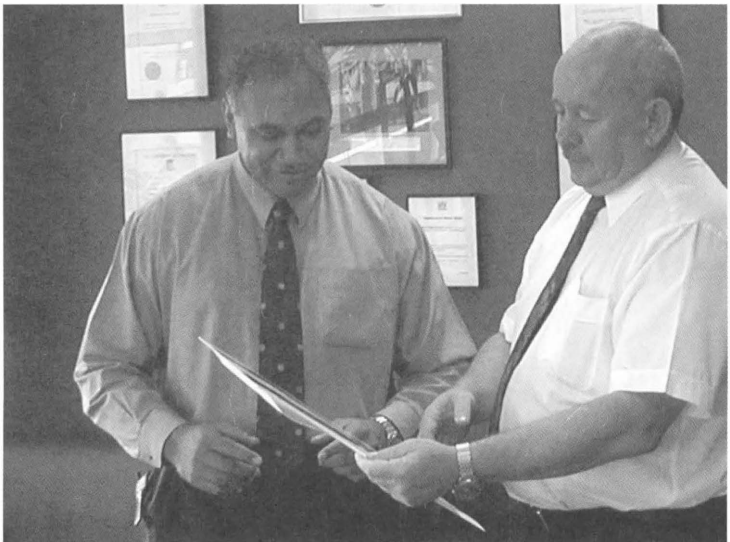
‘It was surreal to see the sun, sea and coconut palms all around on what used to be a popular getaway for Suva-siders and then to spot a soldier lazily swat a fly with a K2 rifle in his hand,’ said Prasad. On the first trip the prisoners were in army tents but soon after they were in wooden huts: ‘We’d often see shoes of the accused, all shiny and lined up on the veranda, waiting for inspection. The prison officers told us that the prisoners were well behaved and orderly; after all, where would they run to from Nukulau?’ said Prasad.

Temo, who had proven adept at issuing final warnings, gave another saying that he would give the Speight brothers ‘one final chance of finding legal representation for themselves . . . Treason

carries a penalty of death and given the seriousness of the case and the rights of the accused to legal representation, in the interests of fair trial, I must lean backwards to see that the rights of the accused people are respected.'

Prosecutor Peter Ridgway, a new arrival funded by Australian aid, slammed Speight: 'This is not a game, not a circus, I will not have this categorised as a game or anything trivial.'

On 11 July 2001 lawyer Kitione Vuetaki, backed by Sydney lawyer Marc-Michel Gumbert acting for Speight, opted for a paper committal hearing rather than an oral one which would have seen all the witness statements read into the records and subjected to cross-examination. Gumbert said Speight did not dispute the fact that he was in Parliament; the issue would be his immunity under the Muanikau Accord. 'It is patently apparent



Director of Public Prosecutions Josaia Naigulevu and treason prosecutor Peter Ridgway. Director of Public Prosecutions

that George Speight did not do this out of personal ambition. It is apparent that he did not obtain any office whatever.'

Speight had other issues on his mind too: general elections started 25 August, and he was, as Ilikini Naitini, the star candidate for the new Conservative Alliance/Matanitu Vanua Party in the Tailevu North Fijian seat: 'It's very exciting stuff. I am in jail. How can I campaign?' Speight won the seat but never got to take it up and continued his residency on Nukulau.

The pending treason trial looked to be in trouble again when his lawyer Gumbert suffered a stroke. The case was then reset for 18 February 2002 but Justice Peter Surnam pulled out because the trial could have gone past his scheduled retirement. A slightly younger Justice Michael Scott took over.

Speight and 12 others charged with treason probably had no expectation that they would be hanged — independent Fiji had never hanged anybody — but just to make sure, the week before the trial Attorney-General Qoriniasi Bale said the government was going to immediately scrap the death penalty.

Three days before the trial a legal source told me Speight would plead guilty and, while he would not hang, there was political mileage to be had in the theatre: 'He wants to motivate his people with the "d" word.' Speight had a new lawyer, West Australian Ron Cannon who, at age 74, was Australia's oldest practising lawyer.

'This is an ethnic issue with tribal loyalties playing a big part,' Cannon said. 'Ethnic tension can create problems and often people overreact in their endeavour to change what they consider to be a path towards disaster.'

The court was full that Monday when the trial opened, an hour late. Cannon said his client would plead guilty. After the other 12 accused were taken out of the court, Scott said he knew it was an absurdity but asked: 'Are you George Speight?' to which he replied, 'I am indeed.'

The charge was put to Speight and he was asked to enter his plea. He stalled, asking Cannon if the other 12 had been taken care of. He then said: 'I'm guilty, your worship.'

McCoy told the court that while there was a mandatory death sentence the Mercy Commission was ready to sit 'at a moment's notice' and he urged Scott to forward the necessary paperwork as quickly as possible.

Cannon told the court that while passing death was distasteful, his client understood the position and appealed for his supporters to keep the peace. 'This penalty will not be carried out.' He said Speight had pleaded guilty at the first available opportunity and the issue would go to the Mercy Commission. 'The sentence for treason is best left in the hands of politicians. It's Fiji's problem, best left in Fijian hands.'

Wearing a red gown and a horsehair wig, Scott looked deeply moved by what he was about to do. In a piece of religious symbolism, with shaking hands, he placed a black silk cloth on his white wig — in order to hide from God as he imposed death on another man.

'George Speight, you have been convicted on your own admission of treason, the most serious criminal charge against a nation. The events of May 2000 have been an unmitigated catastrophe for Fiji but also for you. By pleading guilty you have done the right thing . . . and I am certain you will be given credit for the course you have taken . . . I have no option but to pass the sentence upon you which is laid down by law.'

Sentence came: 'George Speight, the sentence of the court upon you is that you be taken from this place to a lawful prison and thence to a place of execution and that you there suffer death by hanging and may the Lord have mercy upon your soul.'

McCoy directed Speight to be taken from court and into a van which took him down to the navy base for the trip back to Nukulau. He looked to be crying; certainly his girlfriend Torika



Speight's pleasant prison on Nukulau.

was. Later that afternoon the Mercy Commission, presided over by the president, commuted the sentence to life imprisonment.

Of the others who had faced treason, 10 men, including Ligairi and Jim Speight, pleaded guilty to the charge of wrongfully keeping in confinement abducted prisoners, a felony carrying a maximum charge of seven years, although with time served in remand taken into account they would do no more than three years eight months. Duvuloco was sentenced to 18 months on Nukulau on coup charges. Ligairi was jailed for three years. Vuetaki said his client had been loyal to his men but that he did not know a coup was taking place. He believed it was an exercise and when he discovered it was not, he acted to protect people involved from harm. 'The accused decided to stay on in Parliament and carry the burden. It was supposed to be an exercise.'

Scott was not impressed and said Ligairi had authorised what was 'a criminal and illegal action involving the detention of people for many days . . . Without your involvement the . . . misery would have lasted no more than a few days.'

Joe Nata and Timoci Silatolu kept the agony going for Fiji by pleading not guilty and insisting on a full treason trial. While

Ridgway later pointed out that the trial could not be ‘a political exposé of the whole coup’, it did have the virtue of revealing Vodafone records. Ridgway said they were ‘very telling evidence’ revealing the plotting and those involved; ‘footprints in the sand’ and a ‘countdown to a coup’.

The day before the coup Speight phoned Jope Seniloli, who on the day of the coup was proclaimed president. Speight also phoned the day before the coup a former finance minister and millionaire businessman, Jim Ah Koy. No explanation was given in court.

Speight and Nata claimed not to have known each other before the coup occurred, but Ridgway had the phone records and, as he put it, the eve of the coup ‘was a night in which nobody slept’.

In court he produced a diagram and commentary which showed the sequence of calls. Between 1.43 am and 2 am there were four calls from Speight’s home to Silatolu’s mobile.

‘How would Speight know that Silatolu was available on his mobile at that hour if they had not met earlier?’ Ridgway told the court. More calls were made between the two at 2.58 am and 3.15 am, one from Speight to Nata. Then at 3.45 am Speight phoned Duvuloco.

‘Can it be credibly suggested that Duvuloco was not part of the planning for this coup?’ said Ridgway. ‘He was the march leader. Can it be suggested that he did not know what was about to happen?’

Another call at 4 am and then Silatolu called Nata at 4.50 am.

‘Both admit this call but say it was to discuss some business

Opposite: This diagram was crucial in the Nata and Silatolu treason trial. It showed the phone calls between the plotters on the eve of the coup. Like a clock it starts at the one o’clock position with the first of the calls and ends around 11 o’clock, after Parliament had been seized.

concerning a motion of no confidence that might have come up in the following week in the house. This must be nonsense.'

Then there was a sequence of calls up until 10 am and then Silatolu was in his office at Parliament where, records show, he called Speight and Nata.

About 17 minutes before the coup Speight called Duvuloco: 'Speight and those armed men with him must have been in transit to the Parliament. Why would Speight ring Duvuloco at this time except to check the progress of the march?'

At 10.26 am Speight and Duvuloco spoke for 34 seconds. Then at 10.29 am Speight tried Silatolu three times and finally got him for 28 seconds at 10.33 am.

'At this point, Speight and his men must have been very close to the Parliament — close enough to get there, get out, run to the Parliament chamber and enter by 10.45 am,' said Ridgway. 'Why would Speight call Silatolu at this critical time — after having just spoken with Duvuloco who was leading the march? There is only one credible inference and that is that the coup was coordinated to occur with the march.'

At 10.40 am Silatolu phoned Speight with minutes to go. Said Ridgway: 'Was this a call of brotherly love? No . . . This last call must have been the check call, the green light, the go sign.'

Then Speight had Parliament and made three calls, at 10.47 am, 10.51 am and 10.59 am, all to Duvuloco.

'Why?' asked Ridgway. 'Note the evidence of [MP] Leo Smith who said Speight was "frantically trying to make contact . . . he was walking up and down, getting the Vodafone to his ears, and, from what I saw of him, he was frustrated; appears not to be making contact, because every few seconds he would make another attempt. And he stated we would be 'surprised to see who was coming to address us in a few minutes'.'"'

Ridgway asked who that person could have been: 'The answer — the only reasonable inference — is that this Duvuloco and his

collection of losing candidates [from] the 1999 elections . . . this coalition of losers was marching to Parliament to take by the gun what they had been refused at the ballot-box. Speight was their instrument. An ignorant and gullible Taukei was the shield and camouflage around them.'

Among the losers he named Duvuloco, Tora, Viliame Savu, and others — including a current Qarase cabinet minister, Simione Kaitani. Ridgway said the coup and the march were the horns of a common bull: 'What it shows is that these two events were so interrelated, so locked together, you cannot separate them.'

The trial also put on the record the prosecution view that other people had been involved who to this day have not been charged. Ridgway said Rabuka's veteran finance and foreign minister, Berenado Vunibobo, and the then leader of the opposition, Inoke Kubuabola, had attended meetings after the coup and advised Speight that they should tell the United Nations of the 'new



The 'coalition of the losers' — the men behind the coup: Timoci Silatolu, Speight, 'attorney-general' Rakuita Vakalalabure and Iliesa Duvuloco.

regime' in place and that the seat in the world body should go to them.

On 27 June 2003, Nata and Silatolu were convicted and sentenced to life terms for treason. Neither man had friends or supporters in the court. Nata had told the court he came from Lau and Mara had been his paramount chief.

'I wish to express my regret and to say sorry to the people of Fiji for any events that I had taken part in . . . I regret the things that I have been convicted of. It was an action that I should never have taken part in, the whole of the events of 2000 should never have taken place.'

His voice breaking, he told the court his father had refused to speak to him because he felt his son was insulting the island's chief. His father had since died: 'He was a particularly broken man when he heard what had happened and my name.'

It was an apology most of Fiji endorsed — but Nata and Silatolu have appealed the treason convictions.



25

So what was it all about?

More coups?

When the first of the trials ended a group working for Australia's Auscript, which had produced the court transcripts, was checking out of the Centra. Like some of us reporters, they had made the hotel home and, without any organisation, a big group of hotel staff gathered and broke into that most Fijian of songs, 'Isa Lei'. With its male and female parts, its deep harmony and the long, rolling 'r' sounds, it captures Fiji's essence. Ratu Mara's father, Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba, composed 'Isa Lei' in 1918 as a song of farewell for a Tongan girl he had fallen in love with. The word isa is heard in the context of sorrow and sadness and put into a song like 'Isa Lei' and quickly the emotion of what Fijians call vakanananu or nostalgia rises. There is seldom a dry eye in the house and no Fijian — Indian or indigenous — can be unmoved by it.

No 'official' toll or score exists from the events of 2000. By my own estimate, at least 20 people died violently as a direct result of Speight's folly — no small matter in a place the size of Fiji. Also on the score sheet is the tremendous disruption to thousands of lives. This was not just the inconvenience of putting up with roadblocks every day; hundreds of people lost their jobs as a direct result of what happened. Many faced ruin and poverty, and still feel its

effects five years on. Thousands of school children lost a year of schooling, although they learnt more than they needed to know of guns and chaos. What of the kids at Draiba Fijian School across the road from Parliament; can Speight say he has done anything for their hopes and dreams? Thousands of skilled people have since left Fiji, and not just Indo-Fijians. Fiji's unwanted turn out to be highly sought in New Zealand; well motivated, hardworking, English-speaking and with a comprehensive knowledge of rugby's national provincial championships. All of them, though, know that they have left 'home'; and when they hear 'Isa Lei', it quietly breaks their heart. Like Tahiti's Chinese and Vanuatu's Tonkinese, the Indo-Fijians are disappearing; pieces of lost diversity.

In any tragedy there are always victims, but in Fiji few see Chaudhry as one. While it might sound like blaming the victim for what the mugger did to him, Chaudhry did make a coup more likely. He had come to office with a decisive style and a strong five-year mandate. Business-as-usual under the old Rabuka era was over. Many people lost access, privilege and loot. One of those was George Speight. As Chaudhry had also badly handled land issues, he succeeded in creating five years' worth of political enemies in six months. Chaudhry had few personal skills to offset his ambitions. In one year the Coalition Government did a lot, especially in economic terms. There were more Fijians on the government side than in the opposition. Yet Fijian policies, especially on land, ignored landowners' concerns. Chaudhry reflected a lack of understanding of Fijian customs and values on Fijian land. He failed to consult even his Fijian cabinet colleagues on such issues. This was exploited by critics during the one year of government and the coup. But although Chaudhry brought the events on himself, that does not make it right.

Fiji's upheaval continued after Speight's conviction. Other trials and courts-martial were heard and many of the issues unresolved. Bainimarama and Qarase are locked in a power struggle, in part

over the possibility of the early release and pardon of those who took part in the coup. Speight sits on Nukulau like Napoleon on Elba with rumours he has found God, gone mad and/or wants revenge. Were he to return from the island, some would give him a hero's welcome; others would want revenge.

To quote Hughes Mearns, the coup was a case of 'a man who wasn't there. He wasn't there again today.' Speculation on who that man or men were, who were the 'real plotters', has been a destabilising part of Fiji life. The police, implicated themselves, have not been able to resolve it and the government has mishandled the issue, preferring, as it did in 2004, to mount an apology and reconciliation campaign without first finding out the truth behind what happened.

Within minutes of Speight taking over Parliament, it was obvious that there were other people linked to him. He told his hostages somebody else was coming. He made furious phone calls and the records show most were to political failure Iliesa Duvuloco who led the march. Perhaps they were coordination calls: Speight had Parliament and wanted Duvuloco's masses there before the army arrived. They had gone off to plunder Suva instead. While the phone records pointed to Duvuloco having a major role, it is difficult to imagine him organising a coup. Ligairi told Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, in Parliament, that he distrusted Duvuloco.

Rabuka was sure there was a shadow force behind Speight. 'I don't think that Speight was the mastermind behind the coup,' he said. 'I think he is just one of the players. The real players are remaining faceless in the background.'

Rabuka was not above suspicion because CRW had been on his farm the weekend before the coup. I don't think Rabuka was involved, if only because he had begun his apprenticeship as an 'international statesman' with a Commonwealth role in the Solomons.

Mara much later told Fiji TV that on the Sunday after the coup police chief Savua and Rabuka came to his office and he pointed at them and said, 'You have a hand in this thing.' Asked what their reaction was Mara replied: 'Oh, you could see it on their face.' Hardly the kind of evidence to hang a man, and Savua said he told Mara he had not supported a coup because he did not believe a coup would solve anything. The 1987 coup had not produced change.

'Fijians were told it would improve their way of life. I don't think anything much has happened. I do not ever believe that is the correct way of going about it.'

Poseci Bune, one of the hostages, believed Savua had pulled out at the last minute. 'In the first stage [Speight] had indicated that Savua was involved and he had chickened out. George Speight is so mad at him. Savua was the leader who was supposed to come in . . . we waited 40 minutes for him.'

The suspicions about Savua deepened, forcing the government to institute an inquiry into his role. Chief Justice Sir Timoci Tuivaga cleared him but had sat in secret, ruining the credibility of the investigation. New police commissioner Andrew Hughes had a look at Savua and files were reviewed by the state prosecutor and the New Zealand police. No charges followed.

Lieutenant Colonel Viliame Seruvakula believed he knew the real plotters: 'They are failed businessmen, chiefs and politicians.' The Nukulau convicts had not planned the coup: 'People who came up with the idea are still walking the streets, working and getting paid today.'

Seruvakula said he was offered \$260,000 in cash to switch his allegiance. 'It was a substantial amount of money that was sitting on my table for two days before it was taken back.'

'Our assessment is that they are mainly people who owe millions of dollars to the banks and individuals who haven't been paying taxes for the last three to six years. I think the Inland

Revenue Department is owed some \$96 million in taxes and the Asset Management Bank is owed \$210 million. That is a lot of money owed by a handful of people,' said Seruvakula.

The role of Filipo Tarakinikini has remained confused. New Zealand Foreign Minister Phil Goff said Tarakinikini was a key player in the coup: 'There is some suspicion that the person that rebel forces have been trying to replace Commodore Bainimarama with is . . . Tarakinikini.' The soldier said he was 'disgusted and appalled' by Goff and would sue. He didn't, and fled any prospect of facing Fiji justice. Initially seconded to the UN Peacekeeping Office in New York by the Qarase government, he refused to come home when ordered to by Bainimarama and then said he was resigning from the RFMF. By early 2005 the military were planning to charge him with desertion but Tarakinikini, then based in a UN office in Jerusalem, felt it was part of a Bainimarama grudge.



The military back in Parliament – in a formal, ceremonial role at its reopening after the coup. Michael Field

'It is personal and a political campaign against me by these guys. I was first accused of knowing about the coup and they wanted me charged. Nothing eventuated out of that. Now they want me to come back and assist in investigations. This is totally ludicrous. Clearly he has a personal agenda against me.'

Coup rumours were strong, and it could well have been more than one coup on the taxi rank. Speight's ineptness is offered as a piece of circumstantial evidence for the view that somebody bigger and better was involved in the coup. The obvious counter to that would be to ask why this 'real plotter' had entrusted the first round to a man out of his depth. The more one looks at Speight, though, the more likely it has to be that he was not really the leader of the coup. He just queue-jumped on a bigger coup waiting to go later.

The one ominous, unanswered question is, who made the First Meridian switch from protecting the government to overthrowing it? How could this élite unit, set up to protect the government, turn out to be the viper in its midst? Undoubtedly CRW was involved in the planning long before 19 May, and to take a corps like that and turn them into traitors had to be quite an operation. The government has been unwilling to find the truth behind that. Unless the truth is found, though, perhaps the government should scrap its military force altogether. It has never fought a foreign enemy; only itself. By 2005 many of Fiji's finest soldiers had quit to become security mercenaries in Iraq.

Bune said the 19 May coup was not the real coup. A much bigger one was to have occurred the following week. 'The real power behind the coup was the failed politicians, failed businessmen and disgruntled professionals and senior civil servants. A combination of all these were involved in the May 19 event. My view is that this coup was a middle-class coup. This is why George Speight ruled out the involvement of politicians but it was a coup that had gone wrong.'

Many of the coup players made only passing reference to the issue of Indians.

'Hating the Indians is an excuse to unite us,' Bainimarama said. 'Everything including the coup is the result of some greedy people out there with their own agendas. These people instigate unrest and then they run away. When things become calm they shake it again. They are even trying to overthrow the military, thinking it would have been a picnic.'

One of the plotters, Viliame Savu, said that they had planned for Duvuloco to present Mara with a tabua, the traditional way of requesting resignation. 'We didn't believe his leadership of the indigenous people was effective anymore.'

The 2000 coup was a cellphone and Internet affair. Cellphones were also the coup-plotters' downfall; without them, some would not have gone to jail. Prosecutor Ridgway said the phones were 'footprints in the sand'. While most businesses, particularly those in Suva, took a hammering in 2000, Vodafone Fiji Ltd scored a record profit of \$10.5 million. 'Because of the political turmoil caused by the May 19 coup, Vodafone became an important source of telecommunications for a significant sector of the population, which helped increase its customer base,' managing director Aslam Khan said in his annual report.

Can Fiji ever have an Indian leader? Probably not, but late in 2006 with general elections the issue will be tested again. Chaudhry and the FLP are by no means out of the political equation. Even if Chaudhry was not prime minister but the FLP was a major partner in any new government, that could well prompt another coup. A simple fact has to be accepted in any version of a modern Fiji: indigenous Fijians hold more than 90 percent of all land in Fiji. They also control crucial institutions of democracy like the military, the police, the Senate and the Native Land Trust Board; their perceptions about government and democracy need to be understood by any government of the

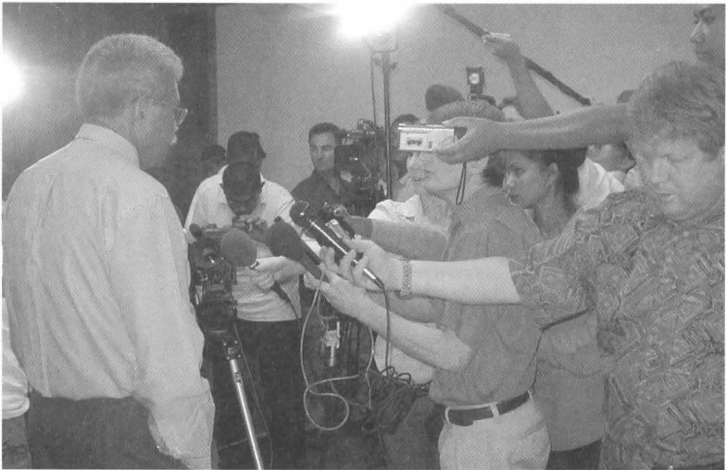
day. No government can operate successfully without the support of Fijians and Fijian-dominated institutions.

Did the coup succeed? Following the mantra, 'disagree with the method, agree with the cause', Speight's coup was a resounding success. Chaudhry was dispatched, an indigenous government installed and a policy established to favour the Fijians. This is a worry because for the third time in 30 years of independence it was demonstrated that coups succeed. As if to underscore that point, Speight is being treated as special and given privileged prison treatment. That sends a signal to any political malcontent in the future; coups have a good chance of succeeding and, even if they do not, the penalty will be easy time. The Qarase government was not part of the 2000 coup; but they did legitimise it. The economic effects of the coup were offset by booming Australian and New Zealand economies, which send tens of thousands of tourists to Fiji each month, while the conflict in Iraq sucked in hundreds of otherwise unemployed Fiji soldiers who found work as mercenaries for both the British army and private security companies.

Fiji likes to think it's the way the world should be, but in its passion for coups and glorification of indigenous culture it has forgotten the rest of the world it belongs to. During the coup crisis Suva was seen as a romantic South Seas spectacle with some shaven-headed guy on the nightly news. It had romantic resonances: Union Jack on the flag, loyalty to Queen and, inevitably, nineteenth-century cannibalism. It was a sideshow; the Australian high commissioner, Susan Boyd, who later claimed she knew something was happening, had gone off to Asia for a holiday. Washington took over two weeks to acknowledge democracy had died in Fiji, and New Zealand fretted about how it would affect the rugby schedules. The Commonwealth and the UN tried to resolve the crisis with day trips. When it was all over, the 2001 elections held and Qarase in office, his new cabinet

trekked off to Government House to be sworn in. That was 12 September and no one was watching Fiji; the World Trade Center in New York on the other side of the dateline was under attack.

Fiji will not be allowed to get away with a 56-day hostage sideshow. The Solomon Islands offers future coup-plotters some pause: its coup and subsequent civil war were ended two years later by large-scale regional military intervention. The world has decided it can no longer tolerate rogue states. Another coup in Fiji risks regional intervention. The next coup is likely to be a much bloodier affair — perhaps tanked up by disenchanting, well armed, unemployed mercenaries back from Iraq. In 2001 in various linked court cases over the constitution, judges ruled that the constitution was still in place and still valid precisely because the coup had failed. Provided the next set of coup-plotters brings more intellect to proceedings than Speight did, the message is plain; the only real way to protect yourself as a plotter is to quickly succeed.



Fiji moves on post-coup: Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase meets the media following 2001 election victory. Michael Field

Fiji's churches still represent a political threat in modern Fiji, although some leaders have begun to see the error of their ways. Catholic Archbishop Petero Mataca early in 2005 expressed concern over the way some churches and political groups were calling for indigenous unity ahead of elections in 2006.

'Why call Fijians to unite? Are they under threat?' Mataca said, asking why Fijians needed to unite against Indo-Fijians, Chinese, mixed races and other Pacific Islanders. 'Is the threat real or imagined? It would seem that some political leaders want to create or rather perpetuate a sense of fear among Fijians about a threat from Indo-Fijians and others . . . We have had enough of coups supposedly instigated to protect indigenous Fijian rights. We have had enough of those who stir up unfounded fears among the ordinary people to serve their own agenda. We have had enough of politics designed along racial lines . . . The church has a role to play in the political life of the nation but that role is not one of promoting particular parties and their agenda.'

The much maligned 1997 constitution remained in place, untampered with, although not for want of trying.

As for the players, it's been a troubled time since: only Speight has had it easy, sitting in comfort on a tropical island ahead of likely release around 2010.

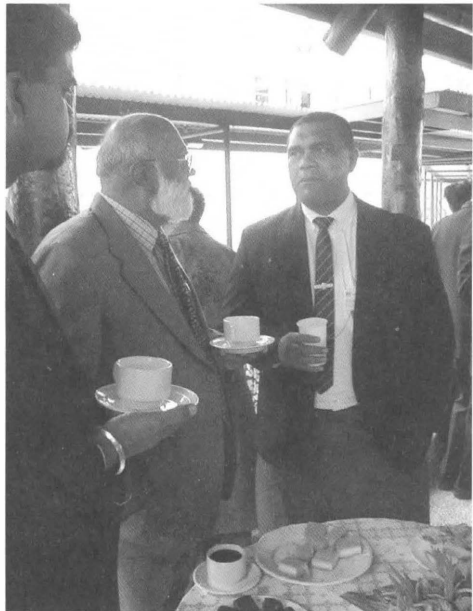
Seniloli, who swore in the Speight gang, became vice-president. In 2004 he was convicted on coup charges. In the kind of staggering double standard common in Fiji, he went to jail as vice-president on full pay and served only four months of his four-year sentence. When he was released he resigned his job but kept his pension.

Rakuita Vakalalabure, the lawyer who with great emotion was sworn in as attorney-general in Speight's line-up, went on in 2001 to win a seat in Parliament and became deputy speaker. In 2004 he was convicted of taking an illegal oath and jailed for six years.

Ratu Mara died aged 83 in April 2004, and three months later Lady Ro Lala Mara passed away. He died bitter; his multiracial dream had ended in internecine Fijian struggles.

Tragedy struck one of the few undisputed heroes of the coup in July 2001 when Fiji Red Cross director John Scott, 53, and his partner Gregory Scrivener were murdered in their Suva home. High Court Justice Nazhat Shameem found the alleged killer, Apete Kaisau, 29, was mentally unfit to go to trial and declared him innocent by reason of insanity.

Unaisi Nabobo-Baba was devastated by the murder: 'Today, the thought of John still brings a tear to my eye, inexplicable . . . and today in terms of closing a chapter on John's murder and the elusive murderer, much still remains to be seen from a justice system that I think is just so wanting.'



The bizarre sight of Speight's rebel attorney general Rakuita Vakalalabure, back in a democratic parliament as deputy speaker, talking with one of his coup hostages Krishna Datt.

Michael Field

After the hostage crisis was over, the families had a huge feast and formally thanked Scott and the Red Cross: ‘. . . families hugged him and his team and celebrated the man’s sense of loyalty to his duties and achievements and it was just like John. All he ever did to our praise was to smile and thanked his team and to acknowledge the beauty of knowing the families closely . . . It is the memory of the decent man in his white shirt and brown trousers, standing in front of us spouses daily at the Red Cross, that I remember; his unfailing efforts to link us to our loved ones. And as he was put to rest, I pondered how he would now join the many Scotts that have gone before him, who like John had also called Fiji and its soil “home”, like so many of our Fijian countrymen of European descent and all who have chosen Fiji as home.’

At the time of writing six members of the Coalition Government held hostage have since died: Joeli Kalou, Muthu Swamy, Pravin Singh, Abdul Latif Subedar, Krishna Chand Shama and Isireli Vuibau.

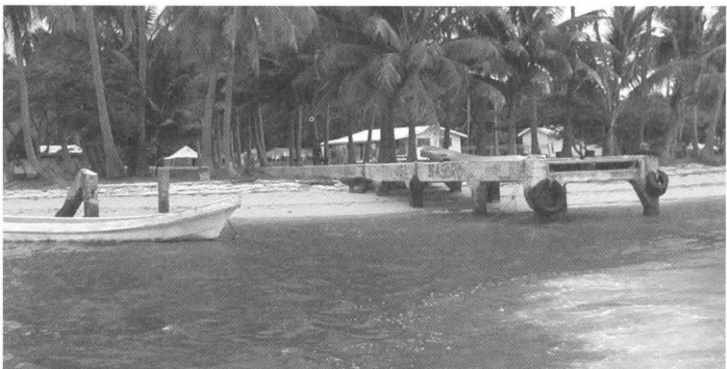
Nukulau remains a prison island and is off-limits to the people of Suva, who once used it for picnics. In 1990 I was there for a journalists’ conference and among those prominent was one Joe Nata. He was complaining about the feminisation of journalism — a problem I have yet to identify with. During the Second World War a young Edmund Hillary had been a navigator on Catalina flying boats operating out of Laucala Bay, now home to the University of the South Pacific. As he recounted in his book, *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win*, he and a friend went sailing from the base and pulled up at a little island where they met its sole resident, Muhammad Abdullah, ‘a most impressive looking man, about forty years old with very expressive eyes and a short curly beard . . . During the evening I had a long talk with Muhammad about the problems in India and he expressed his belief that the conflict between the Hindus and Muslims was less a matter of

religion than of economic difference.’ That island was Nukulau and it played a small part in moulding a New Zealand hero.

A year after the coup Torika Rawlinson gave her only media interview to Kelera Muavesi and Ilisapeci Tamanisau for USP’s student magazine *Wansolwara*.

‘I feel that in a way this coup is the greatest thing for George and I. Spiritually we have found the Lord and the Lord has just brought us so closer to each other,’ she said. ‘It was hard at first, especially during the coup it was a soul searching time for me. You could never trust anybody to talk to. My communication with George was . . . our relationship was always on the phone. If we are not together, we’re always on the phone. When the coup happened, he was taken to Nukulau, it just cut out. It’s a bit hard to get used to.’

Rawlinson said she and Speight prayed during Nukulau visits: ‘We always pray for the victims. It’s sad because in every situation like this there are people who suffer and we’ve asked the Lord for forgiveness and I know that hopefully in time they will forgive us.’



A forbidden view: the wharf at Nukulau with the comfortable prison buildings holding the coup perpetrators among the coconuts.

Rawlinson married local businessman Sean Brodie soon after the interview.

Joe Nata and Timoci Silatolu were locked up in tougher circumstances in the main maximum security prison outside Suva. Nata has since written an apology to Chaudhry.

Kubuabola, who was the opposition leader in Parliament on the day of the coup and who was a key organiser of Rabuka's 1987 coup, was never charged with anything linked to Speight and is now Fiji's high commissioner to Papua New Guinea. Savua left the police and became Fiji's UN ambassador.

Speaker Apenisa Kurusaqila has died since the coup he witnessed, but his son Wilisoni was a prosecution lawyer in the Nata and Silatolu treason trial and in one of those poignant moments history offers, he submitted to the court the Hansard which this book opened with.

Romika Nair, the 16-year-old girl terrified on the banks of the Rewa River, got work in a garment factory in Nausori. Her mother remained in the family house, but wanted her to get married and leave the country. Over 11,500 people left Fiji in the two years after the coup. Most of them were Indian but a disturbingly high number of educated Fijians were among their number too.

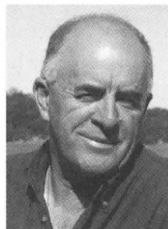
Parliament was eventually restored and the dead rebel, Kolinio Tabua, was exhumed at a cost of \$12,000, his remains placed in a special lead-lined, air- and watertight casket and taken to his village where he was reburied, with a tomb built on top. In Fiji even the dead cannot rest in peace.

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Authors



Michael Field first went to Fiji in 1975 and has covered the Pacific region for much of the time since. As well as attending Harvard as a Harkness Fellow and working in Botswana, he lived and worked in Samoa and has covered most of the major events in the region in the last 20 years, including the Tongan democracy movement, the Solomon Islands civil war, Bougainville and numerous elections. His book *Mau: Samoa's Struggle for Freedom* charts Samoa's twentieth-century struggle for independence. During the period covered by this book Field was the Agence France-Pressé South Pacific correspondent, a position he held for 15 years.



Dr Tupeni Baba was deputy prime minister and minister for foreign affairs and external trade in the People's Coalition Government. Dr Baba was a founding member and founding vice-president of the Fiji Labour Party in 1985. He served in Dr Bavadra's government as minister for education, youth and sport until it was deposed in Rabuka's coup of 14 May 1987. Dr Baba has also spent much of his life as an educator and an academic and has served in senior management and academic positions at the University of the South Pacific. He was professor of education and head of the Department of Education and Psychology before being elected to the Fiji Parliament in 1999. He is currently senior research fellow at the Centre for Pacific Studies at the University of Auckland.



Unaisi Nabobo-Baba is a Vugalei Fijian and has been a lecturer in education at the University of the South Pacific for the last seven years. Based in Suva, she has worked and researched widely in the Pacific, with specific research interests in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji. Unaisi has a number of publications, including coediting *Researching Pacific and Indigenous People*. She is currently completing her PhD in Education at the University of Auckland, in the area of indigenous epistemology.

Acknowledgements

To our friends and families who supported us during the 2000 coup. And to the spouses of deposed ministers and to the late John Scott and his team at the Red Cross, for their love and support.

— *Tupeni Baba and Unaisi Nabobo-Baba*

Having attracted banning orders and pressure from Pacific officials I am somewhat cautious in citing many of the people who helped: my thanks could cause them trouble. They know who they are and my debt is considerable. Those who can probably tolerate the thanks: Matelita Ragogo, Robert Keith-Reid of *Island Business*, Sandhya Nayaran of FBCL, the *Fiji Times*' Asaeli Lave, TVNZ's Barbara Dreaver, Sudeepta Vyas for editing and commentary, Peter Dowling and Gillian Kootstra of Reed Publishing for coming up with the idea, to AFP, and to my family Ma'ina, Palemia and Teuila for the years of absence.

— *Michael Field*

Index

- 8 Mitchell Street 73–75, 101, 249
- Adbullah, Muhammad 272
- Adi Cakobau School 22
- African, Caribbean and Pacific
Convention 63
- Agence France-Presse 63, 170, 218
- Agricultural Landlord and Tenants Act
64, 66
- Ah Koy, Jim 91–92, 111, 161, 256
- Air Fiji 234
- Air New Zealand 41, 102, 198, 210, 234
- Ali, Amjad 41, 54, 210
- Ali, Henry 243
- Ali, John 59, 115
- Ali, Noora 112
- Alliance Party 32, 37–38, 44–45, 50–51,
246
- ALTA *see* Agricultural Landlord and
Tenants Act
- Annan, Kofi 121
- Assemblies of God 150, 159, 200
- Asset Management Bank 265
- Associated Press 170
- Associated Press Television 128
- Aull, Bill 211
- Auscript 261
- Australia, attitude to coup 110
- Australian Associated Press 170
- Australian Broadcasting Commission 109
- Baba, Peter 202, 224
- Baba, Laisiasa 156, 224
- Baba, Mela 90, 105–106, 127, 142,
156–157, 185, 202, 224
- Baba, Tupeni Jr 15, 225
- Bainimarama, Voreqe 110, 134–142,
144–146, 191–192, 199–200, 205,
209, 217, 226, 229, 242–245, 262,
265, 267
- Bainimoli, Epineri 245
- Bale, Joana 147
- Bale, Manoa 53, 59, 147, 164, 211
- Bale, Qoroniasi 39, 253
- Balenauca, Mitieli 55
- Baravilala, Wame 104
- Batiwale, Litia 226
- Bau 25, 27, 28
- Bavadra, Timoci 37–41, 43–44, 48, 89,
102
- blueprint 227
- Bogileka, Meli 50, 59, 211, 225
- Bole, Filipe 39, 42
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich 165
- Bose Levu Vakaturaga *see* Great Council
of Chiefs
- Boyd, Susan 268
- Brodie, Sean 274
- Brown, Malcolm 207
- Browne, Joe 128, 135, 196
- Bua 25, 51, 55, 57,
- Bukarau, Tevita 232
- Bulanauca, Mitieli 55
- hulbul 201
- Bull, Shauna 91
- Bune, Poseci 55, 59, 76, 81, 84, 166, 211,
264, 266
- Burebasaga 28, 29,
- Butadroka, Sakeasi 33–34, 42
- Byrnes, John 240
- Cakaudrove Provincial Council 66

- Cakobau, Epenisa 167
 Cakobau, George 32–33, 39
 Cakobau, Litia 28, 47, 61, 121, 167
 Cakobau, Samanunu 167, 229, 233
 Cakobau, Seru 25–26, 28, 228, 230
 cannibalism 20, 25
 Cannon, Ron 253–254
 Centra Hotel 33, 107–108, 136, 140,
 168–169, 171–172, 187, 261
 Chand, Ganesh 59, 166, 195, 211
 Chand, Pratap 51, 53, 55–56, 59,
 104–105
 Chand, Vivek 211
 Chapman, Mary 84, 228
 Chaudhry, Madhu 110, 111
 Chaudhry, Mahendra 25, 37, 43, 45,
 49, 51, 52, 61–72, 79, 81, 83–84,
 88, 96, 98–100, 107, 110–111, 113,
 118–122, 128, 139, 144, 151, 164,
 166, 179, 195–196, 199, 204, 211,
 230, 233, 262, 267–268, 274
 beating 114–116, 120, 249
 becoming prime minister 55–60
 release 218–220, 223, 226
 Chaudhry, Rajendra 61, 114, 195, 211
 Chaudhry, Virmati 110, 150, 196, 199,
 200, 201
 Citizens Constitutional Forum 239
 Clark, Helen 102, 110,
 Cokanasiga, Isimeli 59, 87,
 Cokanauto, Tuakitau 87–88
 Commander Bill *see* Tikotani, Vilimone
 Commonwealth 121, 146, 161, 198–199,
 221, 263, 268
 Commonwealth Development
 Corporation 64
 Confederacies 29
 Conservative Alliance/Matanitu Vanua
 14, 253
 constitution
 1990 43
 1995 review 46
 1997 45, 47, 110, 137
 Cordner, Stephen 244–245
 Council of Rotuma 32
 Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit 18,
 74–78, 83, 89, 93–94, 114, 162, 165–
 166, 214, 238, 243, 245, 263, 266
 coups
 first coup 38, 39, 40, 56, 83, 86, 88,
 110, 166, 176
 second coup 42
 curfew 135–136, 139, 148, 207

Daily Post 68, 70, 73, 84, 229, 230
 Dakuvere, Marika 77
 Dakuvula, Joni 62, 131–132
 Datt, Krishna 53, 56–57, 271
 Datt Lal, Jay 151, 160
 de Mello, Sergio 121–122, 161
 Deed of Cession 26
 Dorney, Sean 109
 Dovi, Ratu 52, 53
 Downer, Alexander 110, 198–199
 Draiba Fijian School 78, 262
 Dreaver, Barbara 173–174
 Driver, Moses 232
 Drole, Simione 75–76,
 Duvuloco, Iliesa 47, 54, 70, 73–77, 85,
 91, 95, 132, 161, 163, 215, 223,
 248–249, 255–256, 258–259, 263

 economy, coup effects 43, 120, 144, 146,
 217, 233
 elections
 1977 34, 57, 58
 1987 45
 1994 43
 1999 14, 47, 96, 143
 Eli, Laufa 113
 Elizabeth II, Queen 32, 145
 Emberson Bain, Atu 88, 115
 Epworth House *see* Methodist Church
 European Union 146
 Everyhome Church 159

- Fatiaki, Daniel 134, 239, 240
 Federation Party *see* National Federation Party
 Fiji Broadcasting 133
 Fiji Cane Growers Association 55
 Fiji Development Bank 14
 Fiji Electric Authority 246
 Fiji Hardwood Corporation 64, 92
 Fiji High Court 240
 Fiji Intelligence Service 90, 190
 Fiji Labour Party 37, 41, 43–45, 48–56, 58, 62, 65, 88–89, 267
 Fiji Pine Ltd 64
 Fiji Public Service Association 37, 55
 Fiji Reserve Bank 120
 Fiji Retailers Association 103
Fiji Sun 64, 69, 93, 153
 Fiji Telecom 101, 109
Fiji Times 62–63, 70, 81, 168, 178, 195, 196
 Fiji Trade Union Congress 56
 Fiji TV 55, 64, 86, 95, 100, 131, 133, 163, 177, 196, 264
 Fiji Visitors Bureau 151
 Fijian Affairs Board 26, 27
 Fijian Association Party 45, 48, 50–52, 55, 75, 87, 88
 Fijian Nationalist Party 32
 First Meridian Squadron *see* Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit
 Forbes, Steve 207
 Freemasons 163, 207
- Gaffar, Ahmed 59, 115
 Gandhi, Indira 183
 Ganilau, Ateca 136
 Ganilau, Penaia 41–43, 246
 Gates, Anthony 240
 Gaunavuivuda, Epeli 101
 GCC *see* Great Council of Chiefs
 General Electors Association 45
 Girit Centre 51, 183
 giritiya 30
- Goff, Phil 198, 265
 Gonelevu, Viliame 38
 Goneyali, Eloni 50, 97, 165, 211
 Gordon, Arthur 28
 Gounder, Gunasagaran 114, 195, 211
 Grand Pacific Hotel 40, 107
 Great Council of Chiefs 14, 24, 28–29, 32, 43, 45, 47, 54, 61, 66–67, 120–121, 131, 144–145, 159, 162, 171, 180, 191, 205, 216–218, 221–223
 Gumbert, Marc-Michel 252, 253
- Hanks, Tom 69
 Hansard 17–18
 Harmer, Jerry 128
 Heath Fiji Limited 92
 Henry, James 234
 Herman, Francis 242
 heroin 172
 Hillary, Edmund 108, 272
 Holy Trinity Cathedral 154, 159, 165
 House of Representatives *see* Parliament
 Howard, John 69, 143
 Hughes, Andrew 264
- Iloilo, Josefa 60–79, 187, 204, 218, 222, 231–233
 Iloilo's House (Ratu Sukuna Road) 169, 188, 204, 209, 210
 Immunity Decree 238–239
 indenture 30, 31
 India, reaction 110–111
 Indians, arrival 30
 'Indo-Fijian' 47
 'Isa Lei' 261
Island Business 38, 47
 Ito, Tame 197–198, 250
- Jannif, Ikbal 104
 Joske's Thumb 35, 108
- Kadavulevu, George 39, 69
 Kaisau, Apete 271

- Kaitani, Simone 128, 132, 213, 259
 Kalabu Fijian School 229, 231–232, 243
 Kalou, Joeli 37, 58–59, 88, 90, 130, 211, 272
 Kalounivale, Selesitino 244
 Kamikamica, Manoa 162
 Kanailagi, Tomasi 153
 Karawa, Isoa Raceva 128, 238–239
 Keith-Reid, Kathleen 178
 Keith-Reid, Robert 47, 72, 136, 177–179, 187–188
 Khan, Aslam 267
 Khan, Jahir 69
 Koroï, Jokapeci 45, 55–60, 88, 115
 Koroï, Josateki 153
 Koroï, Mesake 68, 70, 73
 Koroitamana, Akanisi 50, 89, 197
 Korovou 91, 207
 Koya, Siddiq 32,
 Kubuabola, Inoke 19, 38, 67, 69, 76, 94, 95, 161, 259, 274
 Kubuabola, Jone 233
 Kubuna 28, 29, 121
 Kumar, Anand 59
 Kumar, Anup 147, 196, 211, 217
 Kumar, Kushma 217
 Kumar, Raj 234
 Kurusaqila, Apenisa 17–19, 82, 86, 251, 274
 Kurusaqila, Wilisoni 274

 Lakhan, Asha 62–63, 72, 199–201, 229, 235
 Lakshman, Prince Gopal 211
 Lal, Brij 46–47
 Langi, Jone 159
 Lau 20, 25, 205, 260
 Laucala Island 207
 Lave, Asaeli 164, 195
 Lelean Memorial School 89
 Leonidas 30
 Lesavua, Ponipate 50, 59, 66, 97, 211
 Levuka 26, 163, 207

 Leweniqila, Militoni 37
 Ligairi, Ilisoni 77–78, 89, 93–95, 100, 152, 164, 176, 190, 206, 213–215, 223, 232, 234–235, 248–249, 255, 263
 Lodhia, Himmat 103
 Lumuni, Kaliova 66
 Lutunauga, Maca 242

 Ma'afu, Henele 26, 28
 Macuata 25, 55
 Madraiwiwi, Joni 28,
 Maharaj, Vinod 166–167, 195–196, 212
 mahogany 64, 167, 170
 Makuluva 235
 Malaita Eagle Force 149
 Mara, Finau 39
 Mara, Lala 28, 271
 Mara, Ratu Sir Kamisese 27–28, 32–34, 37, 39–43, 45–46, 50–51, 75, 85–86, 89, 96, 99, 110, 113–115, 117–121, 128–129, 136, 159, 162, 170, 199, 206, 215, 221–222, 235, 246, 249, 260–261, 264, 267, 271
 steps down 135
 Marawaya, Jone 101
 March, Edmund 166
 martial law 136–137, 140
 Mataca, Petero 270
 Matanitobua, Suliano 191
 McCoy, Gerard 240–241, 248–249, 254
 McGowan, Losana 113
 McKinnon, Don 121–122, 161
 media 14, 30, 61–63, 67, 100, 124–126, 131, 136, 148–149, 168–180, 196, 218
 Mercy Commission 254–255
 Methodist Church 25, 27, 38–39, 54, 134, 151–153, 159, 161, 187, 211
 Michener, James A 202
 Military *see* Republic of Fiji Military Forces
 mobile phones, use 77, 83–84, 87, 267

- Moli, Emily 133
 Momoedonu, Tevita 59, 87, 128–129, 221
 Monasavu 23, 206, 246
 mongoose 201
 Monuriki Island 69
 Morrell, George 93
 Motufaga, Akanisi 196
 Moucavu, Serei 18,
 Mua, Metuisela 90, 152, 190, 233, 235
 Muanikau Accord 204–210, 209, 243, 252
 Muaniwani 181, 184
 Muavesi, Keleru 273
 mutiny 242–246
 mynah 201, 202
- Naboro Prison 207
 Naidu, Navin 250
 Naigulevu, Josaia 252
 Nailatikau, Epeli 28, 138–139, 228, 230
 Nailatikau, Koila Mara 28, 54, 59, 89, 96, 115, 138, 162, 197, 222
 Nair, Romika 181–182, 183, 274
 Naitini, Ilikimi *see* Speight, George
 Nand, Suruj 89, 115
 Narain, Deo 195–196, 212
 Narayan, Sandhya 133
 Nasilasila, Sereima 226
 Nata, Josefa (Joe) 44, 74, 76–77, 95, 139, 141, 189, 197, 217, 231–232, 235, 239, 248, 255–256, 258, 260, 272, 274
 National Bank of Fiji 14, 44
 National Farmers Union 37, 48, 65,
 National Federation Party 32–34, 43, 51, 54, 57–58, 89
 Nationalist–Tako Lavo Party 161, 223
 Native Land Trust Board 26–27, 31, 65, 267
 Native Lands Commission 23
 Natoga, Kasanita 183
 New Zealand Army 112
New Zealand Herald 102
 New Zealand High Commission 242
 Nukulau 26, 30, 75, 235–238, 250, 255, 263–264, 272–273
- Operation Kidacala *see* coups, first coup
- Padarath, Adishwar ‘Spike’ 130, 194, 197, 225
 Padarath, Ben 147, 196
 Padarath, Lavenia 59, 89, 147, 197, 228
 Parkinson, William 131
 Parliament (House of Representatives) 15, 24, 32, 40, 43, 78, 80, 124, 127, 129, 132–135, 140–141, 143, 151–153, 156, 158–159, 163–164, 166, 168, 172, 176–177, 181, 189, 191–194, 206, 210, 218
 burial at 227, 274
 damage to 228, 274
 May 19 seizure 17–18, 76–78, 81–90, 229, 258, 263
 prayer 17
 seating 32, 43, 45, 55, 216, 226
 Parsons, Maurice 234
 Party of National Unity 48–50, 52, 55, 66, 88
 Pathik, Devendra 240
 People’s Coalition 50, 54–55, 68, 79, 161, 220, 262, 272
 Pettit, Marshall 64
 Politini, Howard 77
 population 24, 31, 38, 46–47
 Prasad, Asishna 250, 251
 Prasad, Gyanendra 166
 Prasad, Josephine 84, 229, 230
 Prasad, Lagan 183
 Punja and Sons Ltd 111
- Qaranivalu *see* Takiveikata, Inoke
 Qarase, Laisenia 27, 64, 68, 129, 205–206, 221, 227, 229, 231, 242, 259, 262, 265, 268–269

- Qarikau, Maika 167
- Queen Elizabeth Barracks 41, 97, 136, 206, 243
- Queen Victoria School 70, 214
- Rabo, Matebalavu 250
- Rabuka, Sitiveni 14, 38–47, 52, 54, 56, 62–64, 67, 70, 74, 76, 83, 86, 89–90, 92–93, 95, 97, 109–110, 120–121, 131, 135, 143–145, 152, 162, 198, 204–206, 218, 244, 248, 262–263, 264, 274
- Rabuno, Esira 88, 230
- radio, role in coup 94, 131–132
- Radio Australia 109, 176
- Radio Fiji 132, 242
- Radio New Zealand 173
- Radio Tarana 101
- Ragogo, Matelita 81–84, 177, 195
- Raikivi, Tomasi 39
- Raiwai 35
- Ram, Bhagat 115
- Raniga, Pradhuman 212
- Rawlinson, Torika 92, 238, 254, 273, 274
- Red Cross 116, 127, 142, 145, 154, 156, 165–166, 168, 185, 192–195, 197, 199, 202, 206, 216, 218, 219, 224–225, 271–272
- Reddy, Jai Ram 54
- Reeves, Paul 46–47
- Reeves Report *see* constitution review
- religion 150–154, 159–161, 221, 270
- Republic of Fiji Military Forces 38, 69, 71, 90, 97–98, 110, 144, 164–165, 210, 226, 231, 234
mutiny 242–246
- Reuben, Anil 152
- Reuters 170
- Rewa 25, 108, 158, 181, 234
- Ridgway, Peter 252, 256, 259, 267
- Rigamoto, Marieta 55, 59, 81, 89, 197
- Rinakama, Peceli 88
- Ritova, Stan 54
- Robie, David 62, 112
- Rosinavosa, Osea 245
- Rotfians 47, 177, 178
- Rotuma 29, 31, 55
- Rovutiqica, Apenisa 117, 248
- Royal Suva Yacht Club 36
- Sabeto, Tui 66
- Savu, Viliame 75, 95, 267
- Savua, Isikia 69–71, 78, 85–86, 95, 103, 110, 127, 135, 264
- Savua, Joseph 126–127, 163, 233, 248
- Sayed-Khaiyum, Riyaz 65, 131–132
- Scott, John 116, 165, 186, 192–194, 218, 271–272
- Scott, Michael 134, 239, 253–255
- Scrivener, Gregory 194
- Seavula, Daniel 134
- Seavula, Filipino 134, 141
- Seavula, Sisilia 134, 248
- Seinimili, Tui Ba Adi 66
- Senate 29, 32, 267
- Seniloli, Apenisa 214
- Seniloli, Jope 77, 95, 96, 113, 144, 159, 177, 187, 218, 256, 270
- Seniloli, Rabici 214
- Seruvakula, Viliame 71, 244, 264
- Sese, Jacque 104
- Shama, Krishna Chand 272
- Shameem, Nazhat 240, 271
- Sharma, Sachida 56,
- Sharma, Shiu Sharan 59, 195, 212
- Sharpham, John 39
- Shiu Raj, George 233
- Silatolu, Timoci 18, 75–77, 79, 84, 87–88, 90, 95, 100–101, 113–115, 117, 133, 146, 190, 233, 235, 248, 255, 258–260, 274
- Singh, Anand 59, 166–167, 194, 196, 199, 212, 214, 215
- Singh, Gyanendra 212
- Singh, Pravin 272

- Singh, Shiu Charan 166
 Singh, Vinay 130, 194, 196, 199, 200, 214
 Siwatibau, Savenaca 105
 Smith, Leo 147, 212
 Smith, Leslie 147
 Soko, Jitoko 238
 Soli 27
 Solofa, Esekia 104
 Solomon Islands, coup 149
 Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei 43, 52, 54, 67, 69, 71, 88, 91, 205
 Speed, Clive 50
 Speed, Kuini Vuikaba 43, 48, 50–51, 54, 59, 87, 102
 Speight, George 14–15, 24, 28, 64, 73–79, 81–87, 91–101, 108–109, 111–128, 131, 133–134, 138, 140–147, 149–154, 159, 161–162, 164, 174–176, 181, 190–191, 196–197, 199, 204–210, 218–219, 221–223, 226–231, 234, 242, 246, 256, 258–259, 261–263, 266, 268–269, 270, 273
 arrest 232–233
 assassination attempt 187–189
 death sentence 254
 election candidate 253
 in court 238–239, 248, 253
 on Nukulau 235, 236, 251
 treason 248–250, 253, 254
 Speight, Jim 74–75, 78, 126, 147, 173, 248, 255
 Speight, Sam 91, 147
 Stevens, Shane 243, 245
 Subedar, Abdul Latif 212, 222, 272
 sugar 30, 45, 53, 64–65, 146, 167, 170, 171
 Sukanaivalu Barracks 206
 Sukanaivalu, Sefanaia 243
 Sukuna, Lala 27
 Surnam, Peter 238, 240, 253
 Suva Magistrate's Court 237–238
 Suva Point 35, 75–76, 219
 Suva Stock Exchange 170
 Suva, description 34–35
 looting 102–103, 106–107, 123, 139, 150
 Suvavou 35
 SVT *see* Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei
Sydney Morning Herald 207
 Swamy, Muthu 212, 272
- tabua 75, 136, 140, 267
 Tabua, Kolinio 227, 232, 274
 Tagicakibau, Ema 59, 71, 88–89, 140, 220
 Tailevu 28, 85, 91, 124, 158, 207, 227, 246
 Takiveikata, Inoke 208, 233, 243
 Tamanisau, Ilisapeci 273
 Tamavua 35, 232
 Tamavua River 36
 Tanaburenisau, Atonio 88
 Tarakinikini, Filipino 97, 137–138, 141–142, 144, 148, 188–189, 196–198, 204–206, 209, 226, 232–234, 265
 Taufa'ahau 26
 taukei, defined 20–23, 39
 Taukei movement 38, 40, 67, 69, 71, 74, 77, 85, 95, 151, 211, 259
 Tavanavanua, George 202
 Teaiwa, Teresia 151
 Telecom New Zealand 101
 Television New Zealand 173
 Temo, Salesi 238, 240–241, 248, 251
 'The Cause' 14, 91, 118, 122, 127, 139, 215, 218, 227, 228
 Third Battalion, Infantry Regiment 71, 244
 Thurston, John 26, 28
 Tikotani, Vilimone 78, 89, 98, 99, 120, 238
 Tikotikoca, Romanu 184
 Tokainavo, Savenaca *see* Speight, Sam

- Toko, Apete 153
 Tora, Apisai 39, 42, 48–49, 51, 66–68, 94, 233, 259
 Tovaata, Mareta 194
Toward a United Future 46
 Tradewinds Hotel 40, 61
 Trans Resource Management 64, 92
 treason, charge 248, 249
 Tuatoka, Alfred 110
 Tui Nayau 25–26, 28, 32
 Tui Viti 26
 Tuifagalele, Salesi 74
 Tuisawaga, Leone 88
 Tuivaga, Timoci 134, 239, 240, 264
 Tuqa, Salimoni 205
 Turtle Island Resort 207
 Tuwera, Ilaitia 23, 152–153, 159
- Ulufa'alu, Bartholomew 149
 Uluilakeba, Tevita 261
 Uluinakauvadra, Joti 59, 70, 88, 197, 200, 212
 Uluiviti, Torika 62
 United Nations 121–122, 161, 221, 243, 259, 265, 268
 United States, attitude to Fiji 110, 268
 University of the South Pacific 53, 87, 104, 112, 186, 242, 272, 273
- Vajpayee, Atal Behari 110
 Vakalalabure, Rakuira 77, 95, 123, 213, 259, 270, 271
 Vakatora, Tomasi 46
 Vandercook, Margaret 40
 vanua 20–25, 27, 91
 vanua chiefs 24, 158, 166, 222
 Vanua Tako Lavo 47, 70, 71
 Vatu, Ulaiasi 96
 Vayeshnoi, Lekh Ram 59, 115–117
 Veisamasama, Jone 38
 Veisamasama, Malakai 174
 Veitata, Taniela 39, 40
- Veitokani ni Lewe ni Lotu Vakarisito 55, 88
 Verata 25, 223
 Verebasaga, Pauliasi 131
 Vidi, Jone 75
 Vidiri, Joeli 102–103
 Viseisei 39
 Vivian, Young 104
 Vodafone Fiji Limited 256–258, 267
 Volavola, Eroni 141, 207
 Volavola, Mosese 37, 59, 88, 212
 Volavola, Viliame 81, 95, 154
 Vuetaki, Kitione 252, 255
 Vuibau, Isireli 87, 100, 114, 163, 196, 212, 272
 Vuikaba, Kuini *see* Speed, Kuini Vuikaba
 Vunibobo, Berenado 76, 96, 161–162, 259
 Vunivalu 28
- Waite, Terry 195
Wansolwara 112, 273
 Waqa, Vasiti 133, 242
 Waqaniboro, Apaijia 214–215
 Waqavonovono, Anare 243
 Waqavonovono, Papu 243
 Waqavuki, Soloveni 71
 West, William 235
 Williams, Esther 105
 Williams, John 26
 Wise, Margaret 62
 World Trade Organisation 69, 146

‘This is a civil coup!’

In May 2000 a gang of soldiers and failed politicians, with George Speight at their head, burst into Fiji’s Parliament and captured the nation’s government led by its first Indo-Fijian prime minister, Mahendra Chaudhry. As the politicians were seized, hundreds of rebels ransacked Fiji’s capital Suva.

This was supposed to be a coup by indigenous Fijians angry at their loss of power. But as the drama unfolded and Speight’s rebels continued to hold the politicians hostage, the spectacle turned into a power struggle pitting Fijians against each other. This climaxed in a violent military mutiny.

Speight of Violence offers an insiders’ view of what happened. Extracts from a secret diary kept by Deputy Prime Minister Tupeni Baba during his 56 days in captivity tell of Speight’s behaviour, the conditions inside Parliament, and the beating of Chaudhry; and Red Cross letters between Tupeni and his partner Unaisi Nabobo-Baba reveal the distress and deprivations suffered by the hostages’ families. Veteran Pacific reporter Michael Field, who covered the coup and the treason trials which followed, reports the barricade, court and media dramas and offers a powerful analysis of what it all meant.



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