

Madness in May

George Speight and the unmaking of modern Fiji

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I would like to begin, if I may, with the month of May. It is an ill-fated month of some moment in the modern history of Fiji. It was on the 14th of May 1879 that the first group of 60,000 Indian indentured labourers arrived in Fiji, where their descendants now comprise about 43 per cent of the population. It was the election of a government headed by one of them that ostensibly precipitated the present crisis. Exactly 108 years later, on 14 May 1987, the Fijian military, acting on behalf of other social interests and institutions, attempted to close the parenthesis opened by the earlier voyage by overthrowing a duly elected government in which Indo-Fijians had finally found a measure of equitable representation. Thirteen years and five days later, on 19 May 2000, George Speight and six other gunmen once again interrupted democracy by hijacking the parliament, holding the prime minister and his government political prisoners and tearing up a constitution, once so widely praised, which had brought to power a multiracial People's Coalition. The forces unleashed by that cataclysmic event, still unfolding and gathering momentum, could potentially re-shape Fijian social and political life and re-structure traditional power relations in novel and significant ways, beyond what the makers of the May 19th mayhem may have imagined or wanted. The madness of May is likely to be with us for sometime yet.

Nonetheless, it possible to make some tentative assessments about what has happened and why, and to identify some possible future trends, mindful of the fact that historians are much better at predicting the past than divining the future. The present crisis has left in its wake an impressive list of casualties. The process of political reconciliation, symbolised by the 1997 constitution which was approved unanimously by a parliament dominated by indigenous Fijians, blessed by the Great Council of Chiefs and warmly welcomed by the international community, is among them.¹ The road of reconciliation had never been easy and yet political leaders of different

communities and political persuasions had, over years of intense and open-hearted discussion, managed to forge a common national agenda. That paved the way for the appointment of a constitution commission whose widespread consultation throughout the country over some 12 months had not only reviewed the contested 1990 constitution but suggested a way forward and, in the process contributed significantly to national healing. 'The primary goal of Fiji's constitutional arrangements should be to encourage the emergence of multi-ethnic governments,' the Commission recommended. 'Power-sharing should be achieved through voluntary cooperation of political parties, or increased support for a genuinely multi-ethnic party. The people of Fiji should move gradually but decisively away from the communal system of representation. They should adopt electoral arrangements which encourage parties to seek the support of other communities as well as their own.' Those words hark back to an era now almost vanished beyond recall.

Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, president of the republic, a central figure in contemporary Fijian public life and a paramount chief in his own right, was asked by the army to step aside, while the Republic of Fiji Military Forces assumed executive control of the country, sending him, after the presentation of a customary forgiveness-seeking *tabua* (whales tooth), under the cover of darkness, guarded by soldiers, on a patrol boat heading towards the Lau sea. It was a sad end to a distinguished though not uncontroversial career. Mara sought to play the role of the saviour as he had done so often in the past. He abandoned his democratically elected government and promised to review the constitution to enhance and further entrench Fijian rights in the hope of appeasing the rebels. But they saw him as a part of the problem, not a part of the solution, an imperious man, Speight said, who harboured dynastic ambitions. He, too, had to go, and he did reluctantly. His departure marked the final eclipse of the long reign in Fiji politics of powerful paramount chiefs with overarching authority and wide personal influence who were tutored for national leadership by the colonial government in the years following the Second World War.² No chiefs with even remotely close national influence are on the horizon. Many are embroiled in local, provincial and regional machinations to command national loyalty and support. And Rabuka's example shows that capable or ambitious commoners can rule just as well as those of chiefly blood. The old assumption that the business of national leadership is the business of chiefs no longer holds.

The crisis also ruined the reputation of once sacred institutions of Fijian society in previously unthinkable ways. Among them is the military, with a proud record of service in the jungles of Solomon Islands in World War II, in Malaya against the Chinese communist insurgents in the 1950s, and as peacekeepers in the Middle East in the 1970s. In the face of the coup, the

army stood divided and confused, unable or, worse still, unwilling to uphold the constitution or protect the security of the state. The security forces were shown to be infected by the virus of provincialism and regionalism, insubordination and indiscipline.³ Had martial law not been declared when it was, and the rebels gone further than they had, the army might well have fragmented into factions defending their own *vanua* (land, province) and chiefs. Once the bastion of indigenous Fijian power, the army is now a captive of indigenous vested interests.

The Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), seeking in recent years to enlarge its role and status as the guardian of national, and not only indigenous Fijian interests, failed the test of national leadership. 1997 gave constitutional recognition to this body for the first time in Fijian history. The Commission recommended that the GCC be set up as an independent body with its own secretariat and chairperson rather than coming under the ambit of the Fijian Affairs Act. The GCC would nominate the president and the vice president to be voted, without debate, by both houses of parliament though the Constitution dispensed with this and left the matter entirely in the hands of chiefs. The expectation was that with their independence guaranteed, the GCC would exercise a greater national role besides its traditional functions, as the guardian of the national interest. Sadly, the Chiefs failed the test of national leadership. They vacillated while the country awaited their wise counsel, which never came. Their deliberations got embroiled in traditional confederacy and provincial politics, their proceedings dominated by younger, more assertive chiefs wanting their own place in the Fijian sun, leading to further division and fragmentation. They backed Speight but then asked Ratu Mara to lead the country. Wittingly or unwittingly, they allowed themselves to be pressured by rebels to accede to their wishes, which kept escalating as the crisis dragged on. As army spokesman Col. Filipo Tarakinikini put it, the chiefs 'are riddled with personal agendas'⁴ and incapable of impartial, decisive action.

However it is looked at, the hostage crisis-cum-coup is a disaster for Fiji. The economy, which was just beginning to recover from the downturn of the 1990s, is once again poised at the precipice.⁵ The current crisis has cost the government millions in lost revenue, and the government's Microfinance Unit (in a paper prepared for the military) predicts a trade deficit of F\$400 million. If the economy continues to decline, as it will, GDP would suffer a reversal of 13 per cent, exports decline by 22 per cent and imports by 20 per cent. Already, hundreds of workers, often those at the bottom of the economic ladder and, therefore the most vulnerable, have been laid off, especially in the handicraft, garment and tourism industries, and more will follow. Even if no trade bans were imposed, unemployment was expected to rise by 6 per cent, and some 7,000 workers are likely to be retrenched. Many local investors have already fled the country in the wake

of riots which ravaged the commercial district of Suva, and their foreign counterparts will be equally hesitant to invest in a country wrecked by continuing civil unrest and breakdown of principles of good governance.

Some costs, though, are less easily measured. Within the indigenous Fijian society, for instance, old assumptions about the traditional structure of power have been questioned in novel and potentially significant ways. It is almost a truism now to say that this crisis, as it unfolded, became more about intra-Fijian rivalries than about race. Even George Speight himself admitted that 'the race issue between Fijians and Indians is just one piece of the jigsaw puzzle that has many pieces' (interview, *Fiji Sun* 10 June 2000). In this respect, it is unlike the crisis of 1987 which was seen largely as an ethnic conflict between Fijians and Indo-Fijians. It can be argued that the 1987 coups were about protecting the foundations of the Fijian establishment. Then, there was much sympathy for the Fijian 'cause' across the Pacific whereas now there is condemnation.⁶ But this crisis is a coup against the Fijian establishment and traditional power arrangements. Some have argued convincingly that George Speight represents the interests of the Kubuna confederacy against the long ascendancy of the traditional hierarchies of the Koro Sea. His demand that Adi Samanunu should be appointed prime minister supports that contention. Tailevu chief Ratu Jope Seniloli is already one of two vice presidents. Fijian political analyst Jone Dakuvula's claim to this effect brought upon the local television station broadcasting his remarks the wrath of the Fijian mob allied to George Speight.⁷

As the crisis dragged on, the western chiefs, long aggrieved about their absence from the national centre of power threatened to secede from the state of Fiji, failing which they promised to settle for a much-cherished and long-demanded fourth confederacy, the *Yasayasa Vaka Ra*.⁸ The west, they say, drives the engine of the national economy. Sugar, pine, gold and tourism are produced from its soil, and they want representation in national councils proportionate to their contribution to the national economy. The demand for a western confederacy is longstanding, and criticism of step-brotherly treatment of the west has been aired in various ways and in different fora for much of the twentieth century, beginning with Apolosi R. Nawaii and articulated by Apisai Tora and Ratu Osea Gavidi and other chiefs in the 1960s and since. The east-west divide exists, but it is not a sharp, clear line, extensively crisscrossed now by marriage and kinship ties that blur the distinctions of old (see *The Fiji Times* 10 June 2000). It is also important to emphasise that those Fijians who champion the cause of the fourth confederacy do not necessarily support democracy or espouse multiracialism. Tora is a classic example of one who champions one and rejects the other. The threatened secession of Western Viti Levu was followed by a declaration of partial autonomy by the province of Cakaudrove

proposing to set up a separate Tovata state, but the declaration lacked conviction or authority (*Sunday Times* 11 June 2000). What it did indicate, however, was the willingness of the Fijian people to consider options unthinkable in the twentieth century. We may be witnessing the first fumbling efforts to dismantle the structure of power set in place in the latter half of the nineteenth century and blessed and nurtured by the colonial government. Fijian politics in future may be comprehensible only in terms of its pre-colonial, pre-cession past.

Race relations have been severely strained just when things looked to be on the mend following the successful review of the constitution; the scars of the present crisis—reflected in the images of looting and violence on the streets of Suva, the fleeing of terrorised Indo-Fijians from parts of the Rewa delta to safe havens in western Viti Levu, the destruction of schools and desecration of places of worship, the unruly Fijian mob roaming the neighbourhoods around the parliamentary complex—those scars will take a generation to heal. There are also deeper questions here than I can deal with, questions about culture and history and identity. The Fijian, the *tauvei*, the indigenous owner of the land, who has lived side by side with his/her Indo-Fijian neighbour, still regards him/her as a *vulagi*, a foreigner, welcome to stay and enjoy the hospitality of the host but knowing fully well whose house it is.⁹ Even the chiefs of western Fiji, who have—or should have—a better understanding of Indo-Fijian fears and aspirations and who oppose Speight, want Fiji to be declared a Christian state so that Hindus, Muslims and Christians can all solve their problems in the proper Christian way.

It is hugely ironic that many—not all—Fijians regard Indo-Fijians as the cause of their difficulties: noisy, insensitive, self-seeking, ungenerous, grubby, ungrateful, alien in their religion, social relationships and world view, altogether a most undesirable people. It is ironic because Indians were brought to Fiji to work on CSR sugar cane plantations in conditions often akin to slavery so that the indigenous population could be spared the fate of other similarly situated communities whose interests and aspirations were subjugated to those of the settler community. So Fijians continued to live in their subsistence villages, under the leadership of their chiefs, their lifestyle closely regulated by 'Native Regulations' and carefully formulated programs of work. The Indo-Fijians, on the other hand, laboured on plantations and when indenture ended in 1920, they established themselves through thrift and self-reliance on leased lands in scattered settlements in the sugar cane belts of Fiji. To escape the shadow of indenture and the petty humiliations and poverty that was their lot, Indo-Fijian parents struggled to provide their children education secure in the knowledge that while they could earn their livelihood from the farm, their children and grandchildren would not be able to. No affirmative action, no helping hand for them. It has been said often, and lost some of its force in

reiteration, but it is true that Indo-Fijian labour contributed crucially to Fiji's economic and commercial development. Indo-Fijians, now fourth or fifth generation, are hurt to be still regarded as outsiders in the land of their birth, threatened with the denial of equal citizenship and equal protection of the law. Sometimes, those who applaud the indigenous Fijians for maintaining their culture and tradition ask the Indo-Fijians to subjugate theirs in the cause of assimilation. Salman Rushdie, writing about the Fiji crisis makes a telling point. 'Migrant people do not remain visitors forever,' he has written. 'In the end, their new land owns them as their old land did, and they have a right to own it in their turn' (*New York Times* 8 June 2000).

This crisis is far worse than its 1987 counterpart in terms of violence and damage to property. In 1987, the army was held responsible for the maintenance of law and order. To its credit, it did manage to contain the mobs. This time around, the mobs had a free hand, directed, if they were directed at all, by invisible hands in the parliamentary complex, armed and energized by Speight's racial rhetoric, terrorising the rural Indian countryside for food and fun, as they did in the hinterland of Nausori. The main targets were Indo-Fijians in outlying rural areas, their cattle slaughtered and root crops stolen. After 1987, some 70,000–80,000 migrated from Fiji, most of them Indo-Fijians. They now live in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. It is often said that there is hardly an Indo-Fijian family in Fiji which does not have at least one member outside. Kinship has become a multinational or transnational corporation, sustaining those left behind on money remitted from abroad. Now, many more would leave—the doctors, the computer technicians, mechanics, the accountants. In short, virtually anyone who is accepted outside will go, draining the country of skills it can ill-afford. 'I would rather be a dog in America than an Indian in Fiji,' said a man whose house had been demolished and his possessions taken by Fijian mobs. He was not alone in holding that thought. Indo-Fijians will leave, in larger numbers than ever before. Perhaps, in a hundred years time, some future historian may see the Indian presence in Fiji as a temporary stopover in a long and fateful millenarian journey.

The public face, though not perhaps the principal instigator, of this crisis was George Speight. A businessman with a career littered with failures in Australia and Fiji (and possibly elsewhere as well), the 45 year old Speight was wandering on the fringes of the local commercial circles on the eve of the coup.¹⁰ He had been sacked by Agriculture Minister Poseci Bune as Chairman of the Fiji Pine Commission and the Hardwood Corporation. Shortly before he stormed parliament, he had been negotiating on behalf of the American company Trans Resources Management (TRM) to win a tender for harvesting the country's massive mahogany forests valued at over \$F300 (see *Sunday Times* 11 June 2000). The government chose the

Commonwealth Development Corporation, with a proven record in the exploitation of natural resources. Speight was declared an undischarged bankrupt and was about to face court proceedings when he launched his assault on parliament. Clearly, Speight had his own private grievances, which he carefully hid behind a fiercely nationalist rhetoric. Like Sitiveni Rabuka in 1987, Speight portrayed himself as a faithful servant of the Fijian cause, an anointed saviour of the Fijian 'race.' Speight, however, is no Rabuka, as even his most ardent supporters admit. Indeed, an important reason why the international community—as seen in Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer's and New Zealand's Phil Goff's reaction—has been so severe in its condemnation of Fiji is because of George Speight as the face of indigenous Fijian nationalism. A part-European of Fijian descent, head shaved, Speight was articulate, engaging, bantering with the international media; still, for all that, he was an unconvincing Fijian hero. And as time has gone on, his facade has been exposed. He is no champion of Fijian interests: he is a champion of his own interests. He has threatened and ridiculed the chiefs, insisted, indeed, demanded that chiefs do his bidding. Having had an ill and aging Ratu Josefa Iloilo installed as president, and agreeing to abide by the president's decision, he reneges on his undertaking and demands that his own candidate, Adi Samanunu Cakobau, a high chief of Bau, be installed as prime minister.

But it would be a grave mistake to see George Speight acting all on his own. If he were, the crisis would have had a limited and inconsequential life. Behind him, in the shadows, were individuals and groups, writing his speeches, devising position papers, building up the mass support base, and orchestrating the crowds, people who had little to lose but everything to gain from the overthrow of the Chaudhry government. Among them were politicians defeated at the last elections or otherwise excluded from power, and seeking redress and probably revenge. Apisai Tora and Berenado Vunibobo come readily to mind. The Fijian opposition leader Ratu Inoke Kubuabola was there as well, and so, strangely enough, were factional leaders of Fijian political parties in coalition with Chaudhry's Labour Party. Fijian Association Party's Adi Kuini Vuikaba Speed is the Deputy Prime Minister, but Ratu Cokanauto Tua'akitau was with Speight's group. Apisai Tora, the founder of the spectacularly mis-named Party of National Unity, wanted Chaudhry's head, but three members of his party were in the cabinet.

Speight was also supported by people like himself, young businessmen on the make, who rode the gravy train of the 1990s, benefited from opportunistic access to power, secured large, unsecured loans from the National Bank of Fiji, but then found their prospects for continued prosperity dimming upon the election of a new government. Prominent local businessmen-cum politicians in the previous SVT government

supported the destabilisation campaign.¹¹ For them, the Chaudhry government had to go before it managed to entrench itself. In this group of the ambitious, upwardly mobile, I would also include what one might call the 'Children of 1987'. This group includes those who benefited from the post-coup racially-based affirmative action programs—sanctioned by the 1990 constitution—in the award of scholarships, promotions in the civil service, and training opportunities. They were the children of privilege, sons and daughters of the well connected. Many of them had come of age in the mid-1990s, at the height of SVT government's reign.¹² This new generation of fast-tracked Fijian middle class had a narrow, limited experience of multiculturalism, and little taste or patience for it. They contrast starkly with an earlier post-independence generation of the 1970s, which grew up working in a multicultural environment, dedicated to professionalism and the principles of good governance, under governments publicly committed to a unifying vision.¹³ The 'Children of 1987' did not understand nor approve of the spirit of the 1997 constitution.

While the indigenous Fijian middle class, or at least sections of it, provided the brains for Speight's agenda, the Fijian social underclass provided the brawn. The bedraggled unemployed, unskilled Fijian youth armed with sticks, knives, bamboo spears, stones and some with guns who looted, burned and trashed Suva, terrorised the countryside, and acted as human shield for Speight and his men, had little understanding of the larger, hidden personal agendas and complex forces at work. They were in some sense the human casualties of globalisation and economic rationalism and, more immediately, the victims of the structural reform policies pursued by the Rabuka government in the 1990s. They could not understand why they remained behind, mired in poverty and destitution, unemployed and unemployable, while others had moved on. Without hope and without a future, they fell easy prey to George Speight's mesmeric rhetoric and easy solutions: get rid of the Indians, revert to tradition, put Fijians in political control, and all would be well. Speight gave them a purpose, an explanation, a mission and a brief spot in the Fijian sun. They in turn responded enthusiastically to his clarion call of racial solidarity.

How did this crisis come to a head? To understand this, it is necessary to look at events over the previous 12 months, beginning with the 1999 general elections which took place under the revised 1997 constitution.¹⁴ Chaudhry's Labour Party won 37 of the 71 seats in its own right. Together with his other coalition partners, Party of National Unity (PANU), Fijian Association Party (FAP) and Veitokani ni Levenivanua Vakaristo (VLV), the People's Coalition won 58 seats. The unexpectedly large victory was due to two factors: an effective campaign against the outrages and excesses of the Rabuka government, of which there were many, and a sharp, carefully calibrated focus on the bread and butter issues affecting ordinary working

and middle class people. Labour promised to roll back the unemployment-causing structural reform programs of the Rabuka government, introduce minimum wages, lower interests on housing rates, provide social security for the elderly, resolve the long-festered issue of expiring agricultural leases. These un-costed but electorally appealing policies were effective on the hustings, but they came to haunt the party when it came to power. The opposition National Federation Party (NFP), Fiji's oldest political party long the champion of Indo-Fijian interests, which did not win a single seat, opportunistically kept the government's heel close to the fire. To counteract criticism and keep its support base from fragmenting, the Chaudhry government embarked on a hectic program of legislative reform, setting up commissions (Education and Human Rights), instituting inquiries (into corruption), and staffing statutory organisations with competent staff (Housing Authority).

The appearance of movement and change was impressive, but it also embroiled the government in a hugely counterproductive tussle with the media. Small things were magnified in an atmosphere already rife with suspicion and distrust about the government's motives.¹⁵ Why did Chaudhry appoint his own son, not a civil servant, as his personal assistant on the public pay roll? Here was a man who, as long term secretary of the Fiji Public Service Association, had been scathing of nepotism and corruption in previous governments, but once in power, had begun to ignore his own wise counsel about transparent governance and public accountability. There was nothing illegal in the appointment: a prime minister can, of course, appoint anybody he or she wants. But the perception of the government favouring its own was created, which stuck despite repeated denial. Fijian civil servants, appointed under the Rabuka government when ethnicity and loyalty were privileged over merit and seniority, complained about being marginalised and not consulted in important decision making.

Faced with intensifying opposition, the governed battened down the hatches. To every question and all opposition, it chanted—to its opponents with constant, arrogant regularity—the mantra of having a mandate to do what it had promised in its election manifesto. The government did have a mandate, but its mandate was one among many in Fiji. The parliament is not the sole source of all power in Fiji: the Native Land Trust Board has its mandate to look after native land, the Great Council of Chiefs has its own mandate under the constitution, the Army its own. It was the failure, or perhaps the unwillingness, to balance the complex equation of competing mandates that compounded the government's problems. Chaudhry's own forceful personality, forged in the long years spent in the trade union movement, also played its part in galvanising the opposition. Chaudhry is highly intelligent and resourceful, tenacious and uncompromising (confrontational to his opponents), a born fighter who was a painful thorn

in the side of the Rabuka government for years. He was feared by Fijians, but not trusted. He was a strong and decisive leader of a generally weak cabinet, and his opponents, rightly or wrongly, saw his unmistakable imprint on every policy decision of the government.

Another problem facing the government was the fractious nature of the People's Coalition itself. As mentioned, the Coalition was a loose structure made up of four parties: Labour, PANU, FAP and VLV. Some of these parties espoused philosophies directly contradictory to Labour's. The VLV, for example, wanted to make Fiji a Christian State and have an urgent review of the 1997 constitution to address the concerns of the Fijian people, both of which Labour repudiated (see Lal 1999:14–15). Indeed, soon after the elections, Bune of the VLV had threatened to lead a coalition of Fijian parties against Chaudhry—until he was inducted into cabinet reportedly at Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's behest. PANU had its own agenda for western Fiji, as did the FAP for southeastern Viti Levu, its stronghold. But what they all had in common was their adamant opposition to Sitiveni Rabuka, both for who he was and what he had done. He was not forgiven for the coups of 1987 by one side, and punished by another for breaching the traditional protocol regarding the appropriate place for commoners in the traditional Fijian social hierarchy dominated by chiefs. Opposition to a common enemy, then, rather than commitment to a common agenda, brought the disparate groups together. And when that enemy (Rabuka) was defeated, the difficulties of internal cohesion came to the fore, almost immediately after the election. Chaudhry rightly took steps to become prime minister: his party had an outright majority in parliament. The FAP cried foul, accusing Labour of reneging on a deal that a Fijian, one of its own members, would be chosen prime minister by the Coalition. Chaudhry was helped unobtrusively and opportunistically by Ratu Mara who urged the Fijian parties to rally behind Chaudhry, but Chaudhry's ascension also split the coalition. A faction of the FAP disregarded Adi Kuini's leadership and informally aligned itself with other Fijian opposition parties, eventually going so far as to back George Speight. Tora became a fierce rabble rousing critic of the government, expressing his disgruntlement by leading a revived Taukei Movement. So the Chaudhry government was buffeted by its opponents and hobbled by internal divisions, speaking on crucial issues with discordant voices.

The issue which united the Fijians was land. Land has always been a sensitive issue in Fijian politics (see Lal 1992:224–7). The question always has been the use rather than the ownership of land. Now, 83 per cent of all land in Fiji—3,714,990 acres—is held in inalienable rights by indigenous Fijians, 8.2 per cent is freehold, state freehold is 3.6 per cent and Crown or State land 5 per cent.¹⁶ Much of the country's agricultural activity—in particular sugar cultivation—is carried out on land leased from Fijian

landowners. The country's 22,000 cane growers, the overwhelming majority of whom are Indo-Fijians, lease native land under the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act. This Act, which came into existence in 1969, provides for 30 year leases, whose renewal is negotiated between the tenants and landlords upon the expiry of the leases. These leases are beginning to expire and some, but by no means all, landlords want their land back either to cultivate the land themselves, re-zone it for commercial or residential purposes, or use the threat of non-renewal to extract more rent. They are led by the head of the Native Land Trust Board, Marika Qarikau. He is by all accounts, a hard-line, abrasive nationalist who has used every means available, from addressing the provincial councils to using the network of the Methodist Church, to rally Fijian landowners behind him and against the government. The NLTB is Qarikau's power base, and he, too, claims a mandate: to protect native Fijian land. Three weeks after the coup, Qarikau circulated a 20 page 'Deed of Sovereignty' which demands, among other things, the return of all state and freehold land to native ownership.

Chaudhry did not contest the land owners' desire to reclaim their land. Nor, on other hand, could he—or any government for that matter—ignore the human plight of the tenants, unskilled, uneducated, poor, evicted from land their families had cultivated for four or five generations. The government offered the displaced tenants F\$28,000 to start afresh in some other occupation, and about F\$8,000 to landlords who repossessed their former leasees' land to become cultivators themselves. Meanwhile, it also resuscitated the idea of a Land Use Commission (LUC), mentioned in his party's manifesto but with a history going back nearly forty years, to work with landowners to identify idle land and to put it to productive use, including, if possible, for resettlement of the displaced tenants. With the NLTB on a war path, the government went directly to the Fijian landlords. Early in 2000, it sent a delegation of Fijian landowning chiefs to Malaysia to familiarise themselves with the work of a similar commission there. The chiefs returned impressed but by then, Qarikau had already orchestrated a move among the provincial councils to reject the concept outright. Poseci Bune, the Agriculture Minister, recalled the malicious misinformation spread among the people. In one province, he was told, the LUC was a ploy by Chaudhry to bring Indians to Fiji. Apparently Air India had expressed an interest in opening an office in Suva. But this was a false front. The main aim behind setting up an Air India office was to bring Indians from India to settle on land identified for development by the LUC. Faced with this malicious propaganda, the government then did what it should have done earlier: it took the proposal to the Great Council of Chiefs, which approved it in principle but asked the government and the NLTB to develop it further cooperatively. It was a hard fought victory for the government.

Just when the government seemed to be gaining an upper hand as shown in generally approving polls, Tora's Taukei Movement re-surfaced in western Viti Levu, fuelling and galvanising extreme Fijian opinion against the government. The Cakaudrove Provincial Council passed a vote of no confidence in the government, and others followed. Ratu Tevita Bolobolo, Tui Navitilevu, formed a landowners' council, Matabose ni Taukei ni Vanua, attacking the government and threatening non-renewal of leases. Ratu Tevita had lost to Labour in the 1999 general election. Taniela Tabu, former Taukei Movement stalwart and a trade unionist with a chequered career, formed the Viti National Union of Taukei Workers and attacked the Chaudhry government for 'Indianising the public service.' The charge was baseless—the upper echelons of the public service, and nearly 90 per cent of the permanent heads of government departments, were dominated by indigenous Fijians—but effective among many Fijians already distrusting of the government. The Christian Democrats labelled the government—in which it was partner—anti-Fijian over its hesitation to renew the work visa of expatriate Fiji TV head Kenneth Clark, because the Fijian provinces held the majority shares in the company headed by Clark.

The protest movement, small and disorganised at first, gained momentum and focus as May drew near. The government continued to chant the mantra of mandate and refused to acknowledge that trouble was in the offing, dismissing the marches as the work of a few miscreants and misguided people. The police commissioner Isekia Savua's public warning to the government to raise its political antenna to catch the grumbling on the ground was ignored, and Savua chastised for daring, as a public servant, to advise the government on questions of policy. Convinced that its policies were beginning to bear fruit and were popular with the electorate, which had learned the hard lessons of 1987, the government adopted a business-as-usual approach as tension mounted around the countryside. Ignoring all the warning signals, the government sent the Commander of the Military Forces, Commodore Frank Bainimarama to Norway on an official trip. The Police Commissioner was on holidays, and the President was away in Lau celebrating his 80th birthday. When the parliament met on 19th May, marking the first anniversary in government, no special security precautions were taken, no special police forces were deployed around the parliamentary complex. While the police force focused on the 5,000 protest marchers downtown heading towards the Government House to present a petition to the president, Speight and his men stormed parliament around 10 am, led by 20 year SAS veteran Major Ilisoni Ligairi and members of the Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit he had set up at the request of the 1987 coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka.

How the crisis unfolded since the early days is a subject that requires separate treatment. But that account would include a discussion of the

violence and terror unleashed upon an unsuspecting population by Speight's gang, the struggle for power among important sections of indigenous Fijian society, the muddled, and as it turned out unconstitutional, attempts to maintain a semblance of constitutional normalcy amidst a grave and rapidly deepening crisis, the tense stand off between the army and the rebels, the takeover of police and army barracks throughout the country, the roadblocks designed to immobilise the country, the disabling of utilities, the international condemnation and the imposition of sanctions. Within a fortnight after he had staged his coup, Speight had achieved virtually all his goals. Mahendra Chaudhry's Peoples' Coalition government was out. Ratu Mara was also forced to vacate his office. The 1997 constitution was abrogated with promise made by the Great Council of Chiefs to install a new one entrenching Fijian political paramountcy. And Speight and his co-conspirators had received pardon for their deeds with full and unconditional amnesty to follow upon the release of all the hostages and return of illegally seized arms. But I want to turn now to the basic question: what do George Speight and his supporters want?

Of course, they want power for themselves and their 'cause' but that cause is explained to the world in various ways. One, emotionally appealing in nations of dispossessed and disadvantaged indigenous minorities is 'indigenous rights'. To gain sympathy, Speight has often equated the supposed fate of the indigenous Fijians with that of the Maori and the Aborigine, and judging by media reports, not altogether unsuccessfully. And he has invoked various international conventions on indigenous and civil rights to bolster his claims. Speight is not the first to play the indigenous card. Ratu Mara had sent a similar message to the Lau Provincial Council in 1988, when he had said: 'The Fijian people are all too aware of the destiny of the indigenous Aztecs of Mexico, the Incas of Peru, the Mayans of Central America, the Caribs of Trinidad and Tobago, the Inuits of Canada, the Maori of New Zealand and the Aborigines of Australia, to name a few' (*Fiji Times* 11 May 1989). But Fijians are not Maori or Aborigines or Hawaiians or Kanaks. The majority of Fiji's population now, they own nearly all the land in Fiji as well as fisheries and forests, and receive substantial royalties from the extraction of mineral resources. The army is theirs, as well as 75 per cent of the permanent heads of departments and the police force, to name only a few. They have their own separate system of administration and parliamentary power of veto over all legislation affecting Fijian rights and interests.

Speight and his nationalist supporters have frequently invoked international conventions on indigenous rights in support of their claims or their 'cause.' In particular, they have cited *ILO Convention no 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples* and the *Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.¹⁷ I admit that these instruments are susceptible to multiple

readings, but as we (the Constitution Review Commission) read them, it was clear that neither instrument assumes that tribal and indigenous peoples will necessarily be a minority in the country where they live. In the main, they are concerned with situations in which the land, culture and separate identity of indigenous peoples may be at risk, as, for example, in Hawaii, New Zealand and Australia. That being the case, the relevance of these instruments to indigenous Fijians is remote. As already noted, Fijian land and distinct cultural identity have always been protected through the Native Land Act and the Fijian Affairs Act. The two instruments focus on the special rights of indigenous peoples as a distinct community, but make it clear that indigenous people equal citizenship rights with other communities in society. Article 2 of *Convention 169* requires governments to ensure that

Members of these peoples benefit on equal footing from the rights and opportunities which national laws and regulations grant to other members of the population.

Article 3 (1) provides

Indigenous and tribal peoples shall enjoy the full measure of human rights and fundamental freedoms without hindrance or discrimination.

The *Draft Declaration* makes similar provisions. Article 1 provides that

Indigenous peoples have the right to the full and effective enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms recognised in the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights law.

Article 4 provides

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, economic, social and cultural characteristics, as well as their legal systems, while retaining their rights to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, social and cultural life of the State.

The Commission concluded from these documents that 'at the national level, the political and other rights of indigenous peoples are on exactly the same footing as those of other members of the national society. Both instruments see the special rights of indigenous peoples as distinct communities as supplementing the fundamental human rights and freedoms they already share with all other citizens. Nothing in either instrument gives an indigenous people superior or paramount rights in taking part in the government of their country.'¹⁸ As far as self-determination is concerned, the *Draft Declaration* (Article 3) provides that

Indigenous peoples have the right of self determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

The Commission advised that the phrase 'freely determine their political status' should be read in context. The phrase refers to indigenous peoples 'taking control of their own affairs, not their political status as it affects their participation in the national government.' The indigenous Fijians already, and still, exercise complete self-determination over their land and social and cultural affairs. The point the Commission sought to emphasise was that no political community, by reference to either 'self-determination' or 'sovereignty', can legitimately claim that it has political rights which entitle it to a position of dominance over other groups forming part of the same national society'.¹⁹

Speight has also frequently invoked the emotionally charged phrase 'paramountcy of Fijian interests' in support of his claim. The phrase has a long and contested history in Fiji politics. Many who invoke it assume its origins in the Deed of Cession. That assumption is factually incorrect. These words do not occur once in the document. The chiefs, the Deed noted, had 'determined to tender unconditionally' the sovereignty of the islands to Queen Victoria and her successors 'relying upon the justice and generosity' of Her Majesty in dealing with her subject peoples. Cession, the Chiefs hoped would promote 'Civilisation' and 'Christianity'—their words—in the islands and secure good and stable government for all its residents, native and while, putting an end to the turbulence of the preceding decades. Towards these ends, the Crown promised that the 'rights and interests of the said Tui Viti and other high chiefs of the ceding parties hereto shall be recognised so far as it is and shall be consistent with British Sovereignty and Colonial form of government.' Nonetheless, from the early years of the twentieth century, the colonial government, and even some of the very same planter community which coveted Fijian land, used the phrase.

The government did so partly out of genuine concern for the welfare of the indigenous community so that it could boast of at least one colony in the world where the protection of indigenous interests, over and above the interests of settler and other immigrant communities, formed the cornerstone of colonial policy. But, of course, the principle also served the interests of the colonisers for by invoking it, the government was able to blunt the Indo-Fijian demand for political change which accorded them power in a compartmentalised colonial society roughly commensurate with their numbers and contribution to society. 'Paramountcy of Fijian interests,' in its original usage referred to protecting indigenous Fijian institutions and social and cultural practices which were then placed above and beyond the purview of ordinary public debate. Other communities accepted this

arrangement, which was given watertight legislative and later constitutional protection. But to extend this to demand political paramountcy at the expense of the fundamental democratic rights of other citizens makes a mockery, and is in breach, of virtually every international instrument on civil, political and human rights.

Moreover, the ideal of permanent Fijian political unity. The Fijians, like other people in Fiji and elsewhere, have a diversity of interests across occupations, regions and social and economic interests. In the past, many Fijians lived a subsistence lifestyle in villages united by a common purpose and aspirations, but today nearly 40 per cent of them live in urban and peri-urban areas, facing a variety of conflicting challenges and opportunities. That makes it difficult, if not impossible, for one political party to cater for a huge multiplicity of interests. As the Commission pointed out, the 'emphasis on Fijian unity also means that Fijians are not free to vote out a Fijian government if it does not deliver what they expect.' The idea that 'a Fijian government must be maintained in office at all costs has grave consequences for political accountability. It requires setting aside the normal democratic controls on a government's performance in office. That is bad for the Fijian community as well as for the country as a whole.'²⁰ In any case, indigenous Fijians, under the 1990 constitution, had an outright majority in parliament, but they fragmented politically to such an extent that they could form government only with the support of non-Fijian parties and independents. No constitution can keep a Fijian government in office permanently unless, of course, it jettisons all pretence to democratic rule altogether.

Speight and his supporters want affirmative action for the indigenous Fijian and Rotuman people. The 1997 constitution already provides for affirmative action in its Compact: 'Affirmative action and social justice programs to secure effective equality of access to opportunities, amenities or services for the Fijian and Rotuman people, as well as for other communities, for women as well as men, and for all disadvantaged citizens or groups, are based on an allocation of resources broadly acceptable to all communities.' Broadly acceptable could be interpreted in the context of the previous section which enjoins the government to continue applying the principle of the paramountcy of Fijian interests as a protective principle 'so as to ensure that the interests of the Fijian community are not subordinated to the interests of other communities.' Fijians could reasonably expect to receive more than 50 per cent of public assistance on the strength of their population size, as, indeed, they were. But the assumption that only Fijians are in need of assistance is misleading. Study after study of income levels and poverty has shown that, among Fijian and Indo-Fijian households, each group has a roughly comparable percentage living in

poverty, though there are some differences, depending on what measure of poverty is used and whether the household is urban, or in a village or settlement.

It is also important to stress that indigenous Fijians are not as disadvantaged in the public sector as is often claimed. In 1985, Fijians made up 46.4 per cent of established public servants, Indo-Fijians 48 per cent and General Voters and expatriates 5.6 per cent. The figures by October 1995 were Fijians 57.3 per cent, Indo-Fijians 38.6 per cent and General Voters and expatriates 4.1 per cent. In 1995, of the 31 permanent secretaries, 22 were Fijians, 6 were Indo-Fijians and 3 were General Voters.²¹ The pattern of disproportionate Fijian representation in the upper echelons of the public service, the police and some other sectors has continued. It is, of course, true that in the commercial sector, indigenous Fijian participation has been disappointing, but affirmative action for them in this area has been in place since the 1970s. The Fiji Development Bank, established in 1967, has for many years provided loans for a range of economic activities to Fijians through the Commercial and Industrial Loans and the Joint Venture Loans schemes. In 1974, the Project Evaluation Unit was created in the Ministry of Fijian Affairs to 'assist Fijians both individually and in groups to understand, cope and operate within the modern business world' (Lal 1992:232–3). The name of the Unit was changed to the Fijian Business Opportunity and Management Advisory Services (BOMAS). Between May 1975 and December 1984, Fijians received, without parliamentary debate, soft loans to the sum of \$F6,721,553, not an insignificant sum for a small island nation like Fiji. And these and other schemes have continued since then. If they have not been attended by a reasonable level of success, Fijian leaders need to ask why. Merely enacting more affirmative action plans will not achieve the desired results.²² Cultural as well as institutional factors would need to be thoroughly examined to identify the causes of commercial failure among Fijians.

George Speight laments the 'gradual erosion of things that are important to Fijians in their own country' (see *Fiji Sun* 10 June 2000). This erosion has been taking place for many decades. In the early 1980s, Fijian geographer and administrator Isireli Lasaqa had sounded similar warnings about the gradual disintegration of rural Fijian society: 'the weakening of Fijian social organisation and kinship ties as a means of providing some measure of social welfare to its members,' 'the encouragement of an enquiring mind and a willingness to question tradition, rather than a passive acceptance of fate.' The social system, Lasaqa said,

has become increasingly coarse so that more and more elderly Fijians pass through the net and cannot derive much support and benefit from the system. In other words the kinship links have weakened and

the younger generation, with their increased commercial sense, greater individual needs, and commitment to their nuclear family, are either unwilling or unable to look after their aged relatives (in Lal 1992b:111).

Other Fijian leaders and intellectuals have echoed similar sentiments, expressing deep doubts about the efficacy of traditional institutions and practices in the modern arena.

Sitiveni Rabuka

I believe that the dominance of customary chiefs in government is coming to an end and that the role of merit chiefs will eventually overcome those of traditional chiefs: the replacement of traditional aristocracy with meritocracy (*Fiji Times* 29 August 1991).

Ropate Qalo

[Traditional authority] is a farce, because Fijians want the new God, not the old traditional Dakuwaqa or Degei. The new God is money and the new chapel is the World Bank. Like all the rest of the world, traditional authority has to go or be marginalised (*Islands Business*, January 1991).

Asesela Ravuvu

Most Fijians have taken the opportunity of being freed from the yoke of subservience to traditional authority and obeisance then supported by statutory sanctions. They have continued to assert their individual rights and freedom and made new social links and political alignments. This has posed a threat to the long established Fijian traditional order and its hierarchical structure of chiefly authority (Ravuvu 1988:189).

Jale Moala

[The Fijian people] are now facing so many issues that challenge the very fabric of traditional and customary life. Things they thought were sacred have become political topics, publicly debated, scrutinised and ridiculed. The Fijians are threatened and this time the threat is coming from within their own communities where the politics of numbers are changing loyalties and alliances. For the first time in modern history, the Fijian community is in danger of fragmentation; democracy is taking its toll. The chiefs are losing their mana and politicians enjoy increasing control (*Fiji Times* 21 March 1992).

Simione Durutalo

If the average Fijian worker doesn't see the bus fare coming down and his son has graduated from USP and doesn't have a job, he's not going to be very amused. No matter how much you talk about tradition and the GCC (Great Council of Chiefs), you can't eat them (*The Review* December 1993).

Two decades later, the problems remain. They will not disappear. The solution? Army spokesman Col. Filipe Tarakinikini

The social problems facing our country cannot be solved by putting in place a constitution that guarantees 100 per cent the rights and paramountcy of indigenous Fijians in this country. It will not safeguard, it will not ensure, that indigenous Fijians will succeed. The only way we indigenous Fijians will succeed is to make sure that we make sacrifices today for the sake of our prosperity tomorrow (Talk on Radio FM 96, 4 June 2000).

He is echoing a point Ratu William Toganivalu made several years ago: 'We, the indigenous people of this country, should not be tempted into the notion that by suppressing the Indian people, it would enhance our lot. If you do that, we are all suppressed' (*Hansard* 30 June 1992).

Forces of social and economic change cannot be arrested by the barrel of the gun. The ultimate, inescapable truth is that Fiji is an island, but an island in the physical sense alone. There is no alternative to co-existence.

Notes

This chapter is based on a Paper given at the Stout Research Centre, Victoria University of Wellington in July 2000.

- 1 The making of the 1997 constitution is covered in Lal 1998.
- 2 The four great chiefs of the latter half of the twentieth century groomed for leadership by the British were Ratu George Cakobau, Ratu Edward Cakobau, Ratu Penaia Ganilau and Ratu Kamisese Mara.
- 3 See Army spokesman Col. Filipe Tarakinikini's statement on *fijilive*, 14 June 2000: 'The army is just a reflection of society, so what is happening there [fragmentation] is happening in the army as well; you can't deny that.'
- 4 Interview in *The Australian* 14 June 2000. See also *Daily Post*, 9 June 2000 for a similar view from Marika Qarikau, manager of the Native Land Trust Board.

- 5 See *Pacnews* 9 June 2000 and *Sunday Sun* 4 June 2000 for more discussion.
- 6 There are some notable exceptions, though, including Cook Island's Geoffrey Henry (*Cook Island News* 27 May 2000), and New Zealand Maori lawyer Anthony Sinclair (*fijilive* 3 June 2000) who declared, without irony: 'We believe that revolution is a legitimate part of the democratic process.'
- 7 Information such as this is a part of the public record, broadcast by *fijilive*, hence it is not necessary to provide documentation. A copy of the transcript is at the Centre for the Contemporary Pacific, The Australian National University.
- 8 This is discussed at length in Simone Durutalo, 1985.
- 9 For more discussion of this concept, see Asesela Ravuvvu, 1991.
- 10 For a profile of Speight, see *Fiji Times* 23 May 2000.
- 11 In the papers, Fiji businessmen Kanti Punja and Jim Ah Koy, among others, have been identified, but both have denied involvement.
- 12 Good representatives of this cohort would include Speight's legal advisor Ratu Raquita Vakalalabure, Ro Filipe Tuisawau, Saimone Kaitani, Ratu Timoci Silatolu among others.
- 13 Among them would be names such as Josefata Kamikamica, Mosese Qionabaravi, Savenaca Siwatibau, among others.
- 14 I have discussed the elections in Lal 1999.
- 15 See, for example, Bingham 2000.
- 16 For more discussion, see Josefata Kamikamica 1997.
- 17 I base my comments here on the Report of the Fiji Constitution Review Commission, 43ff.
- 18 Ibid:44.
- 19 Ibid:46.
- 20 Ibid:15.
- 21 Ibid:228.
- 22 The latest example is Laisenia Qarase's 'Blueprint for the protection of Fijian and Rotuman rights and interests, and the advancement of their development,' a Paper presented to the Great Council of Chiefs on 13 July 2000.