

Strange siege as Fijian racialists mount 'coup' against Labour government

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For four days a strange standoff has been taking place in Suva, the capital of the Pacific Island nation of Fiji. Last Friday a small group of armed gunmen led by George Speight, a failed businessman and son of former MP Sam Speight, walked into the parliament, took Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his cabinet hostage and proclaimed “a coup”. Declaring he was defending the rights of ethnic Fijians, Speight suspended the constitution and appointed his own interim cabinet.

Fiji's President, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara issued a state of emergency, and described the coup attempt as “unlawful” and “unconstitutional”. The heads of the police and the army as well as public service chiefs and the church have all declared their support for Mara's stand. Police and troops are stationed around the parliament building and on the streets but little action has been taken against Speight who has been permitted to receive supplies, bolster his forces, conduct media interviews and speak to supporters.

None of the major political parties and no substantial section of the security forces appears to be actively “for” Speight. But equally, no one seems to be willing to take any decisive measures against him. The main ethnic Fijian political figures, including former army chief and prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka, who led two military coups in 1987, appear to be jostling for position in the lead up to a meeting of the country's unelected Great Council of Chiefs, due to be held tomorrow. Even if Speight surrenders, the future of the Chaudhry government has been cast into considerable doubt.

Speight and his thugs took over the parliament buildings at 10am last Friday as an anti-government march numbering several thousand, and organised by the extreme Fijian nationalist Taukei movement, began in the streets of Suva. The march had been called on the first anniversary of the election of the Labour Party-led government, headed by Chaudhry, the country's first ethnic Indian Prime Minister. By 10.30am most of the country's phone lines had been cut, while radio announcements warned schools not to let children out unsupervised.

When news of the takeover reached the marchers, one group went to the parliament buildings while another broke off towards the city shopping centre and began burning and looting. By the end of the day, the rioting crowd had grown to some 15,000 and Suva had been devastated with buildings set on fire, and many Indian-owned businesses ransacked and emptied. Ethnic disturbances were also reported over the weekend in the western area of the main island, Viti Levu. In the port city of Lautoka, an historic Indian building was firebombed.

Speight himself is a dubious and rather unstable character. The son of a prominent member of the Soqosoqu ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei

(SVT), the political party formed by Rabuka, he was sacked last year by the government as chairman of two government-owned businesses—Fiji Pine Ltd and Fiji Hardwood Corp Ltd. Last Monday he appeared in the High Court and pleaded not guilty to charges of extortion and exchange rate fraud. He was due to reappear in court today.

After taking over parliament, Speight declared he had formed a new government, with himself as head of state. He named Ratu Timoci Silatolu, former president of the Telecom Employees Association, as Prime Minister, and listed six politicians, including four from the SVT, as his new cabinet. A total of 44 government and opposition MPs were seized. Ten MPs, mainly ethnic Fijians, as well as some parliament building workers, have since been released after signing “letters of resignation” at gunpoint. Chaudhry has apparently refused to sign. According to some reports, Speight has threatened to kill Chaudhry and his ministers—a threat the “coup leader” later denied.

Speight's group attempted to generate support for the takeover by appealing over public radio for ethnic Fijians to rally outside parliament. But he has received little in the way of active support. SVT secretary Jone Banuve gave his endorsement to Speight as he entered parliament house to meet him. He also issued a statement in the SVT's name, saying: “We will never accept the reinstatement of the Chaudhry, nor any non-Taukei [ethnic Fijian] leadership.”

But as the *Australian Financial Review* noted: “The SVT's parliamentary leader, Ratu Inoke Kubuobola, said he knew nothing about the statement—confirming the fluidity of the situation, in which virtually all Fiji's politicians, some of whom lost valuable patronage when Mr Chaudhry became prime minister, are attempting to leverage favourable outcomes.”

Above all that is true of former coup leader Rabuka, who is chairman of the Great Council of Chiefs and will play a significant role in tomorrow's meeting. He has cast himself in the role of mediator and held talks with Speight in the parliament buildings soon after the takeover. While Rabuka issued a statement saying there should be “no amnesty” for Speight and his followers, his ambiguous position was summed up in comments to the media: “I sympathise with your [Speight's] cause, but I don't agree with your methods.”

Rabuka has been forced to deny that he was involved in instigating the “coup”. He said in an interview with the *Fijilive* website that Mara had asked him on the first day if he was involved in the hostage taking. Suspicions were further aroused when it was revealed that members of the Fiji army's elite counter-insurgency group, including a former British-SAS trained soldier, were directly involved in the hostage taking. Rabuka has also been compelled to deny any knowledge that the armed group trained on his property—the Valavala

Estate on Vanua Levu.

Significantly former MP Apisai Tora, leader of the racist Taukei movement, has distanced himself from Speight. In comments on Monday reported by *Fijilive*, Tora, like Rabuka, said he sympathised with the cause but did not approve of the methods. "Tora said the Taukei movement had nothing to do with the attempt to topple the Chaudhry government the way Speight did and does not endorse the action," the report stated, adding: "He said the Taukei movement had its own plan which he says was a much more logical approach." In 1987, anti-government agitation and attacks on ethnic Indians by Tora and his thugs were used by Rabuka and the army as the pretext for seizing power.

Whether or not Rabuka and Tora were directly involved in planning the seizure of the parliament buildings, they both now appear to be exploiting the situation for their own political ends. Discontent with the Chaudhry government is not limited to the Taukei movement and other Fijian racist groups, but extends to sections of the working class who have been hit hard by the Labour government's austerity measures imposed over the last year. Teachers and nurses have recently been involved in strikes over their deteriorating conditions.

The economic slump in Fiji and lack of investment, particularly in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, prompted the Rabuka government to modify somewhat the country's racially-based constitution in order to change its international image. In elections last year, the Labour Party headed by Chaudhry, a former trade union head and a minister in the 1987 ousted Labour government, won a clear majority of seats.

Chaudhry's coalition government rapidly proved its willingness to carry out the demands of big business and retain many of the repressive laws, including anti-strike legislation, put in place under Rabuka. It ditched its election promise to introduce minimum wage legislation and establish a national minimum of \$120 per week. Major job losses have begun with the announcement in April by the Fiji Sugar Corporation that it is to shed 400 jobs in an effort to cut costs.

The Taukei movement in particular has attempted to capitalise on growing anti-government sentiment over the loss of jobs and continuing high rates of unemployment and poverty. But the issue that has been seized upon by rightwing ethnic Fijian politicians is the renewal of land leases for ethnic Indian sugar farmers.

Of Fiji's population of 800,000, 51 per cent are ethnic Fijian and 43 per cent Indian, descendants of labourers brought over in the late 19th century to work the sugar plantations. The land ownership system imposed by the British colonial authorities of the time locked in place a communal arrangement largely under the control of the tribal chiefs. A significant amount of this land has, over time, been leased to Indian farmers. The Fiji Indians' 30 year leases on land owned by indigenous Fijians began expiring in 1997, with the bulk of the leases up for renewal over the coming two years.

Fijian tribal leaders want an end to the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act that provides a mechanism for the lease renewals, insisting that the land be returned to them. However, the government has not only retained the legislation but has sought to strengthen it by providing for 60-year leases with rents set at the current level of 10 percent of the unimproved land value. In this, Chaudhry is acting under pressure from international agencies such as the IMF, the World Bank and the Australian government who regard the current land tenure system as a barrier to international investment.

By strengthening the Act, and introducing a Land Use Commission to increase the productivity of the land, the government has directly

challenged the chiefs' control over land use and thereby threatened to undermine their considerable economic and political privileges. In January, Rabuka warned the government that it would "face the consequences" of its actions if it continued to ignore the Council of Chiefs' call to scrap both proposals.

In April, a march organised by the SVT party mobilised 5,000 demonstrators through Suva demanding Chaudhry's resignation, over both the land issue and his continuing "disrespect" of the Great Council of Chiefs. After another march at the beginning of May, the government banned rallies by its political opponents. Just a week before the coup attempt, the SVT had moved to exploit the grievances of workers affected by the government's austerity measures by organising its women's wing to take over a demonstration through Suva by striking nurses.

If Rabuka and the tribal chiefs have decided not to support Speight's aborted coup, it is because they are weighing up their options. In his biography, *Rabuka of Fiji*, published in March, the former coup strongman warned of a growing mood of "disenchantment" and "regret" among "grassroots Fijians", but claimed that there was also a "wait and see" attitude. "The Government should be aware of this wait and see approach on the part of the Fijians," he said.

Looming large in the calculations of Rabuka and his fellow chiefs is the fragile state of the Fijian economy. President Mara has already warned that the economic consequences will be "disastrous" and that currency devaluations would follow. "That is the price we have to pay," he said. Fiji depends on tourism, sugar exports and foreign investment in labour intensive manufactures such as clothing. There has already been widespread international condemnation of Speight's actions, including from the governments of the US, Australia, New Zealand, India and Canada, concerned at the potential for further political volatility.

There are undoubtedly also concerns in the ruling elites over the considerable opposition in the working class and among Indian Fijians and others to the overthrow of the Labour government. Thousands of Fijians, who were forced to flee after the previous coups, held protest meetings and marches in Australia and New Zealand over the weekend. At a meeting on Saturday, the Fijian trade unions leaders, who are closely tied to the Labour Party, called for an indefinite general strike to protest over the "illegal takeover of government" and the seizure of Chaudhry and his ministry.



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