

Political crisis intensifies as Fiji's chiefs encourage racist gunmen

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Fiji's political crisis has intensified following last night's rejection by armed gunmen headed by George Speight of extensive concessions made to them by the country's Great Council of Chiefs. For the eighth day, Speight and his backers, who include senior military personnel, are continuing to hold Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and about 30 cabinet ministers and government officials hostage inside the parliament building. Speight is due to meet a delegation of 14 chiefs later today for further negotiations.

After three days of closed-door deliberations, the chiefs' council yesterday offered to secure most of the demands of the racist thugs and military officers who staged a self-proclaimed coup last Friday. The 40 unelected chiefs presented Speight with a 10-point plan to replace Chaudhry's Labour Party-led coalition government with a caretaker administration appointed by President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.

This interim council would not only include Speight and some of his associates, but would also oversee the rewriting of the country's constitution to give indigenous Fijians a monopoly on political power, disenfranchising ethnic Indian-Fijians. Moreover, the chiefs proposed that Mara would ultimately pardon the gunmen and others who staged the coup, once they had laid down their arms, released the hostages and agreed to stand trial.

Having been allowed to rule the roost inside the capital for a week, Speight's group flatly rebuffed the chiefs. They demanded immediate immunity from prosecution, the complete scrapping of the 1997 constitution and Mara's replacement as President by their own nominee. Simone Taikani, information minister in Speight's self-styled government, declared: "They (the chiefs) have just escalated the crisis by coming with all these proposals that are totally beyond our imagining."

All week Speight has spouted racially derogatory remarks about the island nation's ethnic Indian people, seeking to whip up communalism among impoverished Fijian villagers and slum dwellers. Last Monday, for example, he vowed to "disenfranchise" other races, saying that Indian-Fijian people could elect MPs but these MPs would have no vote in parliament. Of the Indian Fijians, who make up some 43 percent of the population, he said: "They have their own religion, they don't dress the same, they don't speak the same language, they don't smell the same."

With such inflammatory language, Speight and other Fijian racials have incited pillaging, house-torching and other violence against ethnic Indian shopkeepers, small business operators and villagers. After an initial orgy of looting and burning in the capital Suva, the attacks spread to rural areas. Balaclava-hooded youth armed with sticks, stones, knives and axes robbed and terrorised villages.

Soldiers and police officers have largely turned a blind eye to the violence, but there were reports of ordinary Fijian people protecting their neighbours and friends.

Speight evidently calculates that whipping up communalism will strengthen his bargaining position and, moreover, forge a social base for a new regime.

Speight's contemptuous rejection of the chiefs' plan also reflects the fact that he has key backers both inside and outside the Council of Chiefs. According to several media reports, Speight, a failed businessman facing bankruptcy and currency smuggling charges, is simply a front man for others. At least seven members of Fiji's military Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit took part in the seizure of parliament, at the instigation of former colonel Ilisoni Ligairi.

Ex-general Sitiveni Rabuka, the previous prime minister and leader of two military coups in 1987, has said the soldiers take their orders from Ligairi, who once served with the British SAS. Ligairi is close to Rabuka, having established the Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit after the first 1987 coup. One of Ligairi's subordinates, Sergeant Vili Tikotani, told reporters that Speight was a latecomer to the current coup, joining just two days before the event.

Rabuka, who has denied any involvement in the coup, yesterday criticised the Council of Chiefs for submitting to Speight's "blackmail". He said the chiefs' plan would set a precedent for any aggrieved group to use violent means to achieve political gains and do so with impunity. He further predicted an international backlash, describing the implications for the country's reputation as "very bad".

At the same time, Rabuka argued that the chiefs had sought the "least damaging" option for ending the hostage taking and declared that President Mara would have to remove Prime Minister Chaudhry as a "necessity". Rabuka and Mara combined to take a similar course in 1987, ousting Labour prime minister Timoci Bavadra, with Rabuka offering the same justification as Speight: that there was no other way of defending native Fijian interests.

In the current crisis both Rabuka and Mara, who has extensive business interests, appear to be trying to straddle between the financial markets and the racials. On the one hand, they are extremely sensitive to the demands of international investors and financiers, who have rapidly withdrawn funds from the country, as they did following the 1987 coup. Fiji's central bank has raised interest rates to 25 percent and imposed controls on cash transfers out of the country in a bid to halt the flight of capital.

Like the Bavadra government before it, the Chaudhry administration was seeking to implement international demands for changes to land laws to weaken the grip of the hereditary chiefs. The chiefs retain nominally communal title over more than 80 percent of Fiji's land

under the system orchestrated by the British colonial authorities, who created the Council of Chiefs in the 1870s. Much of the arable land is leased to small Indian sugar cane farmers, whose 30-year leases are currently expiring.

Both Bavadra and Chaudhry sought to introduce a Land Use Commission to restructure land ownership. On April 3 Chaudhry declared that Fiji would remain poor as long as the land remained undeveloped. That “development” requires larger plantations and more secure titles in order to attract investment. Chaudhry also offered small Indian growers \$28,000 each to leave their farms and proposed that leases be extended for 60 years at the current low rents. Both the Council of Chiefs and the Native Land Trust Board, which administers the rents on behalf of the chiefs, opposed these measures, accusing Chaudhry of favouring the Indian tenant farmers and undermining the Council of Chiefs.

In addition, global investors want stable and conducive conditions to continue using Fiji as a cheap labour platform for manufacturing low-cost garments, footwear and furniture. Chaudhry's government showed its commitment to meeting those requirements by abandoning its election promises to establish a national minimum wage of \$120 a week.

Those foreign powers whose companies have the greatest investments in Fiji, notably Australia, New Zealand, Britain, the United States and the European Union, have denounced the coup and condemned the Council of Chiefs' 10-point plan for legitimising it. Their concerns are two-fold.

In the first place, they want a government that can deliver land reform and continued economic restructuring. Secondly, they are concerned at the breakdown of political stability and the undermining of the credibility and legitimacy of the state itself, under conditions where there is widespread impoverishment and a growing working class.

British Foreign Minister Robin Cook urged Fijian leaders to resolve the crisis “in a manner consistent with democratic and constitutional principles”. Australian Prime Minister Howard said Speight had behaved like a terrorist in taking hostage “a democratically elected prime minister”. Commenting on the Council of Chiefs' offer of an amnesty for the gunmen, Howard stated: “If you give that person a pardon, you are suspending the rule of law.”

Claims by the Western powers to be defenders of democracy in Fiji are belied by their record. In recent years they have worked closely with Rabuka to draw up and impose the 1997 constitution, which continued, in a modified form, a racially-based electoral system and stipulated that the presidency be held by an ethnic Fijian. This system was a direct product of Rabuka's coups. Moreover, during the 1990s the one-time military strongman facilitated the establishment of low-wage factories, where Indian and Fijian workers toil side by side. In return, the major powers restored full economic and diplomatic ties with Fiji, such as membership of the British Commonwealth.

The Western governments seem quite prepared to accept the removal of the elected Chaudhry government, so long as Chaudhry's cabinet is prevailed upon to resign and the existing political structure is maintained. Their main aim is to ensure that a regime is cobbled together that can satisfy their economic and political needs.

Both the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the Commonwealth sent envoys to Suva for talks with the various parties. Annan's delegate, Sergio De Mello, and Commonwealth's representative, Don McKinnon, a former New Zealand foreign minister, publicly condemned the coup. They also met with Speight,

however, giving the gunmen a degree of legitimacy. McKinnon went as far as to state that recent marches and protests against the Chaudhry government had to be taken into account.

On the day of the coup, about 5,000 people marched through Suva, demanding Chaudhry's removal, following a similar march on April 28. Marchers denounced the government's planned changes to land laws, accusing it of moving to “usurp land” from native landowners. They also attacked Chaudhry for showing “disrespect” for the Council of Chiefs. Other grievances included the removal of Fijians from top government posts and measures to lessen the powers of the presidency.

The marches were called by the Fijian chauvinist Taukei Movement led by Apisai Tora, who lost his parliamentary seat at last year's general election. Last month Tora revived the Taukei, which also staged marches as a prelude to the 1987 coup.

The nationalist agitation around the land question serves to divert poor Fijians away from the underlying causes of worsening unemployment and deteriorating living conditions, which have affected all working people—Fijian and Indian alike. As with other former colonial states, the country's wealth and resources remain largely in the grip of overseas multinationals working with and through local business elites.

Large portions of Fiji's economy are dominated by Australian companies such as Westpac, Colonial National Bank, ANZ Bank, Qantas, Ansett, QBE Insurance, News Limited and Foster's brewery. Under an Australian import credit scheme, Australian-owned clothing and textile firms employ several hundred workers turning out low-price garments for export back to Australia.

The conditions of Fijian workers suffered further in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial meltdown, in which the Rabuka government devalued the Fijian dollar by 20 percent, drastically increasing the cost of living.

Recent statistics have given a glimpse of the widening gap between the country's rich and poor. Fiji's Welfare Department said requests for family assistance jumped by 46 percent between 1992 and 1997, with requests by single parents rising by 64 percent. For the first time, assistance was being distributed to rural areas outside urban limits.

It is this social polarisation that lies at the heart of the Fiji crisis, yet it has gone largely unmentioned in the media coverage. Moreover, ordinary working people, both Fijian and Indian-Fijian, have been denied any independent political voice. The organisations ostensibly representing them, the trade unions and the Labour Party, have prevented any unified movement, with the Fiji Trade Union Congress rapidly reversing its call for a general strike last Monday.



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