

Fiji's military leaders move to impose racialists' demands

Mike Head
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With Fiji's political crisis threatening to spiral completely out of control, the country's military high command mobilised troops onto the streets, revoked the Constitution and declared martial law on Monday. Armed forces chief Commodore Frank Bainimarama announced that he had assumed executive authority and would establish a military government. His statement followed discussions at military headquarters involving 1987 military coup leader, former Major General Sitiveni Rabuka.

While Bainimarama claimed to have acted with "reluctance," his measures revoked all political and democratic rights. Soldiers were given "shoot to kill" orders to enforce a 48-hour curfew. Troops on leave and all reservists were recalled to barracks. Soldiers wearing flak jackets and armed with automatic weapons replaced unarmed police at checkpoints in Suva. The next day, Bainimarama said he would assume the country's Presidency for at least two years.

The takeover appeared to be sanctioned by Fiji's traditional establishment, including Rabuka and President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. It followed the failure of Mara's last bid to resolve the crisis triggered by the May 19 seizure of parliament and hostage-taking of government ministers by racist gunmen led by failed businessman George Speight.

The armed forces leaders and their advisers have moved to grant Speight's remaining demands—the abrogation of the Constitution, an unconditional pardon for himself and the gunmen who seized parliament and the inclusion of his associates in an interim government. Abolishing the Constitution will mean a reversion to the system established by Rabuka's 1987 coup, whereby the prime ministership and key cabinet posts were reserved for indigenous Fijians.

Negotiations between senior officers and Speight's group commenced almost immediately, but reached no conclusion on Tuesday. Speight is insisting on an amnesty for all his followers, and that his demands be adopted as "legal decrees" before he releases his hostages.

Just two days before the military coup, Mara had dismissed the elected government of Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, appointed himself interim ruler, offered an amnesty to Speight's thugs and foreshadowed the formation of a hand-picked administration that could include Speight's followers. Speight had rejected Mara's plan, demanding that Mara himself resign, paving the way for the rewriting of the Constitution.

While acceding to Speight's agenda, Mara had attempted to maintain the 1997 Constitution and his own post. In doing so, Mara had been given a flimsy legal cover by one of Chaudhry's cabinet ministers. Ratu Tevita Momoaidonu had accepted Mara's appointment as acting prime minister and then resigned immediately. This manoeuvre allowed Mara to declare that the parliament had been dissolved on Momoaidonu's advice.

Resort to military rule is the latest in a series of moves by the country's ruling circles to accommodate Speight and his backers. Last week the Great Council of Chiefs, a hereditary body created by the British colonialists in 1870, acceded to most of Speight's demands but splits appeared to exist over the retention of Mara and the Constitution.

Mara appears to be a willing party to the military takeover, possibly on

the understanding that he will be reinstalled as President once the political crisis subsides. His private secretary, Joe Brown, told Reuters that military officials had informed him that Mara had "gladly given up the reins" after 10 days of trying to resolve the parliament house siege, where Speight is holding Chaudhry and other ministers, including Mara's daughter, Adi Nailatikau Mara, the tourism minister.

In another sign of Mara's complicity in the coup, his son-in-law, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, will lead the military's interim government. Nailatikau's selection to head the "Council of Advisers" also illustrates the incestuous character of official Fijian politics. When Rabuka ousted the Bavadra government in 1987, he displaced Nailatikau as army commander, but later appointed him High Commissioner to Britain.

Speight and his spokesmen have generally welcomed the military intervention. Speight's self-proclaimed deputy prime minister Ratu Timoci Silatolu said it was to be expected. "I suppose for the maintenance of law and order and for the safety of the lives of the public that was the only option for the military to take. And we are keen to negotiate with them, someone who understands the hostage situation—an institution that is totally Fijian."

Speight himself made disparaging remarks about Bainimarama's links to Mara and said the army was split over support for his coup. Speight claimed that four senior army officers with whom he was in contact had instigated the military move. He named Colonel Filipe Tاراikinkini—earlier named as Speight's new army commander—Commodore Bainimarama's deputy Colonel Alfred Tuatoka, Colonel Racuva and Major Caucau.

The military intervened in a desperate attempt to control the unstable situation. Gangs incited by Speight had rampaged through Suva, trashing a television station and terrorising residents and media representatives. Speight had announced a march on Government House, Mara's official residence. Fijian-Indian families and foreign citizens had begun to flee the capital. Further anti-Indian violence has been reported in Suva today.

For Fiji's ruling strata there is a danger that the turmoil can spark wider resistance to the ouster of the Chaudhry government. There are signs of developing opposition among working people—Indo-Fijian and ethnic Fijian alike—to Speight's reign of terror. In the tourist capital Nadi, on Fiji's western coast, banners were erected on some homes of indigenous Fijians denouncing Speight. The slogans included: "Mr President give us our government back" and "We want Chaudhry. Go to hell Speight".

More importantly, despite the refusal of the Fijian Trade Union Congress to call a general strike, the sugar cane farmers and labourers—mostly Fijian-Indian—have refused to harvest the sugar crop, leaving the sugar mills standing idle. This means economic disaster because the sugar industry provides 40 percent of the country's merchandise exports, employs 25 percent of the workforce and comprises 30 percent of manufacturing.

The Western powers most closely involved in Fiji, Australia and New Zealand, initially indicated sympathy for the military takeover. Australian

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said he understood Mara's decision to hand over to the military and initiate discussions with Commodore Bainimarama. Downer later announced that the Howard government had decided to impose only limited economic and sporting sanctions against Fiji. Moreover, these sanctions have not been applied immediately.

After Australian diplomats met with Bainimarama on Tuesday, Downer virtually endorsed the coup. He said he took encouragement from "reports that the military has assumed control solely for the purpose of restoring law and order and that it does plan to return the country to civilian rule as soon as possible". Later, Downer modified his stance, condemning Bainimarama's offer of a pardon to Speight and the gunmen.

Downer's New Zealand counterpart, Phil Goff, said the Labour government in Wellington would wait to see what the army would do with its power. He dropped all show of demanding the reinstatement of the Chaudhry government. "If it's a choice, I'd rather have the Army on the streets than Speight's thugs."

As these remarks reveal, the concern in international ruling circles has nothing to do with upholding the democratic rights of the Fijian people. Rather, their object is to prevent a destabilising breakdown of authority in Fiji, where the very issue of state power is in doubt. Their other primary concern is to protect the sizeable investments that Western companies have in the tourism, sugar, gold mining, garment and financial industries.

Likewise, the media proprietors in Australia have swung behind the military. Army rule is "better than anarchy" declared Tuesday's editorial in the Fairfax-owned *Australian Financial Review*. A military government "may offer hope" editorialised the Murdoch-owned *Australian*.

Various media and academic commentators have begun to laud Rabuka, the last Fijian military strongman, as a "charismatic" figure who could satisfy the Fijian nationalists while restoring a democratic façade, as he did by putting in place the 1997 Constitution.

That Constitution, however, entrenched not only racism—with the majority of parliamentary seats allocated by race—but also the privileges of the Great Council of Chiefs. Under Rabuka's Constitution, the chiefs nominate the President and Vice President, and their 14 nominees for the Senate (one for each province) exercise a parliamentary veto over legislation relating to the affairs of ethnic Fijians.

This is the Constitution that the Fijian Labour Party and trade unions have sought to uphold. Following Speight's May 19 coup they opposed general strike action and urged workers to place their faith in Mara. This perspective is endorsed by the international trade union bodies, including the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), which initiated bans on Fijian trade on Monday. In its statement, the Brussels-based International Confederation of Trade Unions still called on Mara to respect the Fiji Constitution and reinstate the Chaudhry government.

The unravelling of the Fijian state results directly from the requirements of international investors. As elsewhere in the world, the global markets have demanded the dismantling of the formerly protected national economy, to make way for open-market production for export. Fiji has become a centre for cheap labour production of garments in particular. In the 1970s garment exports from Fiji were negligible. By 1996 they constituted nearly 23 percent of the country's merchandise exports.

The previous Labour Party-led government of Timoci Bavadra, ousted by Rabuka in 1987, sought to facilitate investment including through the reduction of the Council of Chiefs' grip over land titles. Rabuka's coups sought to reverse Bavadra's measures and restore protection for ethnic Fijian businesses but the resulting decline in investment and growth compelled his regime to accommodate to the dictates of international capital. To provide a more democratic image for the country, constitutional changes were adopted in 1997 that reduced some of the entrenched political privileges of indigenous Fijian leaders.

In May 1999, in the first elections held under that Constitution, Rabuka was ousted as prime minister. His Fijian nationalist party, Soqosoqo ni

Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) won only seven of the 71 seats and his chief coalition partner, the Indian business-backed National Federation Party lost all 19 "Indian"-designated seats to Chaudhry's Labour Party.

The Chaudhry government has continued the process of opening the economy to global exploitation, particularly by abandoning promised minimum wage laws and by extending commercial leases over agricultural land. This has inflamed power struggles, intrigues and splits within the Fijian elite, with many of the participants seeking to incite anti-Indian chauvinism as a means of acquiring a social base. According to former SVT official Jone Dakuvula, SVT-inspired agitation and destabilisation activities against Chaudhry began almost immediately.

While Chaudhry was reviled as the first ethnic Indian prime minister, Speight's backers also resented Mara's continued grip over political and economic patronage. That is why Speight has demanded Mara's removal, as well as Chaudhry's. Regional tensions between chiefs from each of the three traditional confederacies have played a part.

In addition, Fiji's two wealthiest individuals, Fijian-Chinese entrepreneur Jim Ah Koy and Fijian-Indian businessman Hari Punja, are known to have strongly opposed Chaudhry's Labour-led coalition government. Both took out newspaper advertisements during the week to publicly deny supporting and financing Speight's actions.

Ah Koy, who was finance minister in Rabuka's last government, has known Speight's family for 30 years, helped Speight's short-lived business career and has expressed sympathy for Speight's aims. Speaking on television last week, Ah Koy said Speight's group's move was unconstitutional and illegal but he understood their frustrations and anger. He blamed the Chaudhry government's "arrogance and obduracy in not listening to the sensitivities of the indigenous Fijians".

Ah Koy has nothing in common with most indigenous Fijians, 80 percent of whom are workers, peasants, small farmers and unemployed. He is a millionaire who owns tourism resorts, office buildings, a computer company, properties in Australia and Papua New Guinea and 80 percent of Air Fiji.

Hari Punja particularly opposed the Chaudhry government's moves to undercut his control of the rice market—in which he once held a monopoly—by increasing subsidies to local growers. Punja owns rice and flour mills, property, an insurance company, a radio station and substantial offshore assets, notably in Australia.

Punja's wealth—he boasts an income of \$5 million a year—is also in stark contrast to the poverty of most Indian-Fijians. No less than 90 percent of them are small farmers, workers and unemployed. A 1996 survey found that half of those classified as poor in Fiji were Indians, with incomes 14 percent lower than those of poor Fijian households.

Ordinary Fijians and Indians alike have suffered severe cuts in living standards over the past three decades since Britain handed political control over Fiji to the local elites, led by Mara. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, real wages fell by a staggering 25 percent. This impoverishment is expected to worsen in the coming period as the European Union phases out its subsidy of 40 percent of the sugar crop.

In these worsening economic conditions, whatever regime is finally put in place will rapidly come into conflict with the needs and aspirations of the working class and urban and rural poor who will be forced to bear the brunt of the loss of jobs, social services and declining living standards.



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