

Mounting opposition in Fiji to racist coup

Mike Head
8 June 2000

Amid numerous signs of mounting popular opposition to the racist coup headed by disgruntled businessman George Speight—as well as international pressure to keep Speight out of office—Fiji's martial law administration has suspended talks with Speight and his group and demanded the release of their 31 hostages.

In a statement on June 5 announcing a deadlock in the negotiations with Speight, the head of the Fijian military, Commodore Frank Bainimarama referred to both local and overseas hostility to Speight's demands for the immediate inclusion of his team in a new government. "There has been a lot of talk of backlash not only from the local community but the overseas community if any member of George Speight and his group is included in an interim government," Bainimarama said.

The Commodore did not elaborate on the domestic "backlash". He revealed, however, that he had received a message from the European Union (EU) threatening to end all Fijian sugar imports if Speight's group were given cabinet posts. He also indicated that various foreign ambassadors and high commissioners had expressed similar sentiments.

As a result, Bainimarama said, he would consider no more demands from Speight, who led a group of military commandos and armed thugs into parliament on May 19 and took Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, various cabinet ministers, other MPs and officials hostage. At the same time, Bainimarama said Speight's concerns would be addressed in a new constitution.

Despite openly sympathising with Speight's agenda of stripping Indo-Fijians of political and economic rights, the military commanders seem to fear that a racist "Fijians only" regime involving Speight will be incapable of maintaining order and restoring the completely shattered economy. At a press conference on June 6, Bainimarama declared that he and his officers were seeking to restore "some normalcy" and to "bring stability" to the country. If he allowed Speight to enter a government it would "bring the country down".

Bainimarama originally intervened on May 29, by revoking the Constitution, imposing martial law and assuming executive authority in an attempt to resolve the political crisis. After a week of appeasing Speight—and reportedly coming very close to a deal with him—Bainimarama has stated that a military government must be maintained for at least three months to ensure stability.

To increase the pressure on Speight, Bainimarama set a June 6 deadline for senior military officers to abandon Speight's occupation of the parliamentary complex or be stripped of their commissions. Three officers did so, including Lieutenant Colonel Viliame Volavola, who had earlier been named Housing Minister in Speight's self-proclaimed administration. Those remaining inside the parliamentary complex include Intelligence Service head, Lieutenant Colonel Metuisela Mua and three other senior officers.

There are no differences of principle between the two camps. While attacking the army's plan to install its own interim government, Speight has admitted that he was willing to sign an accord with the military to provide for such a regime. Speight said the talks broke down when Bainimarama balked at the accord's preamble, which included a new list of nine conditions from Speight's camp.

Among the conditions were that before the hostages were released, the military would relinquish power to the Great Council of Chiefs and the chiefs would appoint Speight's ally Ratu Jope Seniloli as President.

One of Speight's main concerns is that once he releases the hostages—whom he described this week as his "trump card"—he will be left without any bargaining chips. Despite extensive media coverage for all his racist utterances, Speight has been unable to generate substantial popular support for his cause. His gatherings at the parliament have been limited to a few hundred followers.

Speight has renewed his earlier calls for the Great Council of Chiefs to arbitrate between the two groups and sponsor the formation of an interim civilian government to draw up a new racially-based Constitution. The chiefs, however, are now split along regional lines—with chiefs from western provinces threatening to secede. The council's chairman, the 1987 military coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka, has refused to convene the council.

For their part, the military officers have set no deadline for the release of the hostages and ruled out any use of force to end the parliamentary siege. Even as he announced the suspension of talks, Bainimarama said: "We have not even considered the military options as a means of freeing the hostages." Bainimarama has also cut off the salaries of the hostage MPs, declaring that under martial law they are no longer on the official payroll.

Significantly, Bainimarama emphasised that Western ambassadors had informed him that they "understood" the reasons for the military's seizure of power, even though their governments had publicly expressed disapproval. This is a clear indication that the Western powers with key economic and strategic interests in the South Pacific—notably Australia, New Zealand, Britain, France and the United States—have urged the military to retain its grip on power and keep Speight out of office in order to ensure that events do not escalate out of control.

Another indication is that British Commonwealth ministers meeting in London have not imposed sanctions on the Fijian military regime but merely suspended Fiji from voting at Commonwealth gatherings.

Of mutual concern to Speight, the military and the capitalist powers is the danger that rising opposition to the coup could spark wider discontent among the increasingly impoverished Fijian population.

Even though the media coverage has focused almost exclusively on the events and machinations in and around the parliament, glimpses have emerged of intense hostility toward Speight's thugs, among Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians alike. One journalist who drove from the capital Suva to Nadi, the commercial, tourism and sugar centre on the west of the main island, reported road signs such as "George [Speight] is a terrorist and belongs in prison, not in the position of Prime Minister".

Even though the Fiji Trade Union Congress (FTUC) has repeatedly postponed a threatened general strike, decisive sections of the working class have either walked off the job or been thrown out of work by the collapse of tourism and other industries in the wake of Speight's hostage-taking.

Sugar cane farmers—mostly ethnic Indian tenant farmers working small plots—and their wage labourers have refused to harvest this year's crop, leaving 4.5 million tonnes of cane standing. Mills are not running and seasonal workers have been turned away. Farmers are defying the military

regime, which has threatened to prosecute them under martial law for boycotting the harvest.

Tourist resorts have been emptied and airlines have diverted their flights, leaving thousands of workers without jobs. “Occupancy has reached an all-time low and the employees, most of whom are indigenous Fijians, have begun to face the reality of the situation,” said National Union of Hotel and Catering Employees secretary Timoci Naivaluwaqa.

Most teachers and many other government employees are not working. Schools remain closed. Many shops and businesses have shut their doors, particularly in Suva, where nearly 170 shops have been looted, damaged or destroyed. The Suva City Council has threatened to lay off its workers because of the collapse of revenue from rates. One handicraft company, Sandollars, has laid off 300 villagers.

Strikes have also hit the tourist industry, garment factories and fisheries. Clothing employers have warned that many of the 20,000 garment workers—usually women earning just \$80 a week—face the loss of their jobs. Hundreds of workers have already been placed on reduced hours.

The hardship for working people will intensify as more investors withdraw funds, jobs are destroyed, interest rates soar and the currency is devalued, driving up prices. Among the most vulnerable are about 23,000 farmers and 100,000 other workers who depend on the sugar industry, which supplies 30 percent of the country's exports.

The EU has postponed the scheduled June 8 signing in Suva of the successor to the Lome Convention, which allowed Fiji and other Pacific, African and Caribbean countries preferential access to European markets. Under it, Fijian sugar growers received three times the world price. The Suva Convention would have extended this concession for 20 years, along with duty free access for Fijian-made garments and canned tuna.

An estimated 600 people, including many ethnic Fijians, attended an anti-Speight rally in the western village of Viseisei on June 3. The rally was dubbed a prayer meeting because political rallies are banned under martial law. Organisers said many more would have attended but for fear of reprisals.

Those convening the gathering, including politicians, chiefs, businessmen and religious preachers, sought to channel the anti-coup sentiment in the direction of regional separatism, speaking of a breakaway by three western provinces. Among the speakers was ex-Attorney-General Sir Vijay Singh, who was a co-founder of the former ruling Alliance Party established by President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. Singh declared that the conflict in Fiji was not Fijians versus Indians, but east versus west.

The Western provinces, home to one-third of Fiji's 800,000 people, are the wealthiest and most economically developed regions. They include some 90 percent of the country's sugar cane and associated industries, the international airport and much of the tourism industry, most of the garment factories and a gold mine. As such, these regions are more closely integrated into, and dependent upon, the flows of global capital.

Because of this economic base, the leaders of about 70 chiefs from five provinces have threatened to secede. One of their spokesmen is Ratu Tevita Momoedonu, a former Labour Party cabinet minister who teamed up with President Mara in an earlier bid to accommodate Speight's demands. With Chaudhry held prisoner, Momoedonu accepted appointment as Acting Prime Minister, allowing Mara to then dismiss the government and shut down the parliament. When this failed to appease Speight, Mara stood aside for the military takeover.

It is indicative of the orientation of the western chiefs that they boast of support from the United States. The US ambassador to Fiji, Osmond Sit, has held meetings with them and refused to publicly disavow their claims of US backing. “There's a grave division in the Council of Chiefs,” Sit said. “The western chiefs are holding their own meeting on the western side of this island and they are going to determine their own course of action.”

Whether or not the United States is actively fomenting the separatist

cause, there is no doubt that the US and other capitalist powers have intervened against Speight. They require the continued restructuring of the small Pacific economies to clear the way for unrestricted global exploitation of their natural resources and cheap labour. These demands undermine small-time business operators such as Speight and his associates.

Led by Australia and New Zealand, operating through the South Pacific Forum, the Western powers have imposed extensive economic “reforms” on the island mini-states over the past decade and a half, including budget-cutting, privatisation, abolition of protectionist measures and financial deregulation. This program has shattered the very existence of the nominally independent statelets set up in the 1970s and 1980s.

Citing comments by William Sutherland, a former deputy secretary-general of the South Pacific Forum, a report in the *Australian Financial Review* on June 5 observed: “The economic rationalist agenda imposed by successive Australian governments (and the World Bank) to improve South Pacific economic performance has increased unemployment, adversely affected the poor and the low-paid and heightened the risk of social disaffection and political instability.”

Throughout the political crisis, the Labour Party of ousted Prime Minister Chaudhry and the trade union leaders of the FTUC have refused to call a general strike or any other form of mobilisation of working people against Speight's coup or the martial law regime. Instead, they have held “amicable” talks with Bainimarama and sought an alliance with sections of the chiefs and business leaders to produce an outcome acceptable to investors. In a statement on June 5, FTUC general secretary Felix Anthony said he was trying to limit the bans applied by international unions.

The Labour and trade union leaders played a similar role after Rabuka's 1987 coup. Once he was released from military custody, ousted prime minister Timoci Bavadra refused to challenge the Governor-General's dissolution of parliament and offered to serve on the Governor-General's proposed council of advisers. Bavadra was intent on preserving an alliance with the Indian Federation Party, based on sections of Indo-Fijian business. His successor, Chaudhry, who previously headed the FTUC, ensured that the Labour Party functioned within the political framework established by Rabuka.



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