

Mutiny highlights deep splits in Fiji's military regime

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Sharp and unresolved differences within Fiji's military regime erupted to the surface on November 2 when members of the elite Counter Revolutionary Warfare unit who participated in George Speight's May 19 coup seized an armoury and other sections of the military headquarters in Suva, Fiji's capital.

Joined by at least 40 regular troops, the mutineers killed three soldiers, took five hostages, attempted to capture the Armed Forces chief, Commander Frank Bainimarama, and demanded negotiations with the military leadership. Their demands have not been made public, but one Australian media outlet said they included Bainimarama's replacement by the military's former media spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Filipino Tarakinikini, who is under investigation for his role in the May 19 parliamentary hostage-taking.

General Sitiveni Rabuka, the 1987 coup leader, went to the military complex to convene talks. But Bainimarama, having escaped from the barracks, ordered a full assault on the rebels. In the ensuing seven-hour battle, involving machine guns and bomb explosions, at least eight military personnel were killed and 28 injured before an estimated 20 CRW officers fled under the cover of darkness. On November 3, the military authorities imposed an all-day curfew and the streets of Suva were deserted as a manhunt continued for the rebels.

Thirteen members of the CRW unit were released from prison two weeks ago after the military's Interim Administration dropped treason charges against them, but they were then placed under investigation for possible court-martial for mutiny. Bainimarama was due to release the investigators' report. In addition, another 150 officers and soldiers were recently named for questioning over their participation in Speight's coup.

The resulting mutiny underscores the military regime's dilemma. The armed forces and their unelected Interim Administration, headed by merchant banker Laisenia Qarase, hold power as a direct result of Speight's coup and continue to rest on the social layers that backed the coup—ethnic Fijian businessmen, many of the traditional chiefs who own most of Fiji's land and high-ranking military personnel. Speight associates, such as Vice President Ratu Jope Seniloli, remain in the government and its “Blueprint for Fijian Development” aims to deliver many of Speight's demands, reserving special privileges and subsidies for ethnic Fijian business people and traditional chiefs.

But, facing the withdrawal of foreign investment and economic collapse, the regime is seeking to distance itself from Speight's group and clean up its international image. The government recently announced “refurbished” treason charges against Speight and his closest colleagues, including former CRW commander Ilisone Ligairi, who remain imprisoned on an offshore island. These measures have

provoked a backlash among Speight's supporters in the military.

These divisions not only affect the military but run through all the other institutions of power—including the presidency, the judiciary and the media. This was seen in the political crisis over President Ratu Josefa Iloilo's planned visit to Australia this week for urgent heart tests. The government-owned Radio Fiji reported that the military was not prepared to take orders from Vice President Seniloli, who was Speight's original nominee for president.

Radio Fiji quoted a “reliable source” saying that the military would not allow Seniloli to change official policy and also retained the right, under emergency decrees, to resume the powers it had handed to the president and the interim administration.

Qarase's regime initially tried to deny the report. On October 20, Home Affairs Minister Ratu Talemo Ratakele denounced Radio Fiji for broadcasting a “grossly irresponsible and mischievous” report that “was clearly designed to destabilise the existing status quo”. Armed soldiers arrested three Radio Fiji journalists—Francis Herman, Vasiti Waga and Maca Lutunauga—and took them to the military barracks for interrogation.

The three journalists refused to divulge their sources, however, and were released in the evening of the same day. All media outlets in Fiji, as well as the Fiji Media Council, condemned the arrests, indicating considerable opposition to Seniloli's retention as vice president.

Subsequent events confirmed that elements within the military had vetoed Seniloli's appointment as acting president. On October 29 the president's office announced that Iloilo would retain executive authority whilst in Australia, sidelining Seniloli. Police had earlier begun questioning Seniloli over his involvement with Speight. According to media reports, if the police lay charges against Seniloli, he will resign.

To make matters worse for the regime, recent High Court decisions have thrown new doubt on the military's usurpation of power and thus the legal basis of the government. In early October, Justice Peter Surman dismissed a challenge to the treason charges laid against Speight and others. He ruled that the military's Immunity Decree protecting the rebels was not valid because Speight's group had breached the Maunikau Accord signed with Bainimarama on July 9.

On October 25, while delivering a judgment on a compensation case, Justice Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi upheld the 1997 Constitution's provisions on protection against compulsory acquisition of property. Madraiwiwi stated that while the military government had purported to abrogate the Constitution, “this court will assume that the Constitution is extant on the basis that there have yet to be any judicial findings otherwise”. Justice Nazhat Shameem issued a similar judgment in a criminal case.

These rulings indicate support within the High Court for several imminent legal challenges to the scrapping of the Constitution. The government has demanded the transfer of the High Court cases to Suva from the Western Province, where deposed prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry has his base of support. The judiciary was badly split by the military's May 29 assumption of executive power. Several judges have resigned and lawyers' bodies have opposed the Chief Justice for endorsing the abrogation of the Constitution and drafting emergency decrees.

Even before the latest crisis, Qarase's administration was unable to establish firm control over the country, despite emergency rule. Nightly curfews have continued in the capital Suva, military checkpoints remain throughout the country, public meetings are prohibited and media outlets remain under constant threat of arrest, censorship or closure.

On October 28, the government partially lifted its ban on public meetings, but only for organisations preparing submissions to the handpicked Commission that will draft a new Constitution to bar Indo-Fijians from high political office and entrench the privileges of hereditary chiefs and business people. Under emergency decrees, police and army officers can shut down all other political meetings, processions and assemblies.

The regime faces considerable domestic resistance, particularly among Indo-Fijians. As one indicator of this, Chaudhry's Peoples Coalition and the main Indo-Fijian organisations have completely boycotted the formation of the Constitutional Commission, denouncing it as "farcical".

The regime's fragility was underscored on October 21, when the *Fiji Sun* reported that the Information Minister had written to Fiji TV asking it not to interview Chaudhry on its *Close-Up* program. Chaudhry, the letter declared, would promote "civil insurrection or disobedience", placing the TV company's operations "at risk" and posing "danger to the general public". Fiji TV defied the request, however, and Chaudhry's interview was broadcast without incident.

With investors and tourists nervous about the political turmoil, the economy has been in a state of collapse since May 19. Unemployment, already widespread before the coup, has soared, with up to one-third of workers losing their jobs in key industries. Official figures last week revealed the loss of more than 2,000 tourism jobs out of 6,500, as well as 1,500 jobs in the garment factories and about 2,000 in retail shops, other manufacturing and construction.

As a result, the number of homeless squatters—estimated at 14,000 families or 10 percent of the population at the end of 1998—has risen sharply and is likely to increase further as hundreds of Indo-Fijian small sugar farmers have their leases terminated in favour of the land-owning chiefs. In addition, hundreds of Indo-Fijians, including sacked workers and dispossessed sugar farmers, are still in refugee camps where they originally sought shelter from Speight's thugs.

Other statistics leaked last week indicate that investment, both foreign and domestic, has virtually dried up. The Fiji Trade and Investment Board has received just 26 inquiries since May 19—most of them not definite proposals—compared to an annual average of 140 project proposals.

The capitalist powers with most leverage over the Fijian economy—notably Australia, the European Union and the United States—have until now tacitly backed the military and Qarase, but they are demanding swifter action to organise a more secure administration. Their main concern is to stabilise the situation in Fiji and prevent similar turmoil throughout the Pacific region.

The Western powers have continued various preferential sugar and textile treaties with Fiji. The EU decided not to impose economic sanctions after consultations with the Qarase government in Brussels on October 19. Instead, the EU said it would monitor the administration's constitutional revision, Qarase's undertaking to hold "free and democratic elections" within 18 months and the progress of Speight's trial.

The Clinton administration recently decided to buy almost 9,500 metric tons of sugar at nearly double the world price. Noting that the EU and Australia had not imposed trade sanctions, US embassy spokesman John Hennessy-Niland said his government was honouring an agreement that had been in existence for several years.

Chaudhry's Labour Party-led alliance is appealing for the formation of a Government of National Unity with Qarase and the military as the most effective means of restoring order. As Chaudhry told a mid-September meeting of the Commonwealth Ministers Action Group in New York, such a government could better resolve the "law-and-order problem" and "restore investor confidence".

In a statement to the Pacific Islands Forum on October 27, the Peoples Coalition called for international mediation and supervision of the establishment of an all-party government, which would include representatives of the Great Council of Chiefs. This unelected regime would recommend constitutional amendments and policy changes to benefit indigenous Fijians—probably only slightly modifying Qarase's blueprint—before holding future elections.

Chaudhry's pleas have so far gone unrewarded. He recently returned to Fiji somewhat empty-handed after spending two months touring Australia, New Zealand, India, Europe and North America seeking support. On arrival back in the country, however, he said he had obtained the funds needed to mount a High Court challenge to the scrapping of the 1997 Constitution. Through these legal proceedings—which may be protracted—Chaudhry and the Labour Party are being kept in reserve, to be called into office if the Qarase administration proves incapable of restoring stability.



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