

Fijian chiefs split over political crisis

Tim Joy
13 March 2001

Having met for two days, Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) broke up last Friday without making any decision on the country's political crisis. Acting President Ratu Josefo Iloilo called the 52 landed chiefs together to obtain advice after the Fijian Court of Appeal declared the military-installed Interim Government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase illegal. Unable to agree, however, the chiefs adjourned until this week to consider their options.

Meeting behind closed doors under tight security at army headquarters—the Queen Elizabeth Barracks in Suva—the GCC heard submissions on the court verdict from Qarase and interim Attorney General Alipate Qetaki. An unnamed chief quoted in the *Daily Post* indicated the character of the meeting: “It really is shameful personal differences, backstabbing, rivalry, political rivalry, jealousy, and the traditional power struggle—this was the basis on which some of us were making our decisions.”

Under the 1997 Constitution, upheld by the Court of Appeal, Iloilo has “reserve powers” to appoint a new government, recall the parliament that was violently disbanded last May 19 by racist gunmen led by George Speight, or formally dissolve the parliament and order new elections. In effect, the court ruled that Iloilo, who was installed by the military with Speight's support last May, can exercise these powers as Acting President until March 15.

The Constitution also allows the GCC—a relic of British colonial rule—to appoint a President to replace Iloilo. Having backed the Qarase regime since last year, the chiefs are reportedly considering four options, including one to defy the court ruling outright, overturn the Constitution and retain Qarase's government.

The other three options are to reinstate the ousted Peoples Coalition government of Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry, form a government of national unity that would include members of both governments, or call elections in August, with either Qarase's cabinet or departmental permanent secretaries running the administration until then. The latter plan would delay elections for five months to give the divided ethnic Fijian parties time to form a coalition against Chaudhry, the country's first Indo-Fijian prime minister.

Comprised of chiefs throughout the Fijian islands, the GCC largely rests on the social layers—traditional landowners and ethnic Fijian business operators—who stood to benefit from Speight's coup. It is these layers that the interim government has sought to serve by implementing a blueprint of economic and political privileges, subsidies and concessions for ethnic Fijians.

In a submission to the GCC meeting, Native Land Trust Board general manager Maika Qarikau warned that reinstating the Constitution would threaten proposed measures concerning native lands, including the transfer of some crown land back to the control of the chiefs. The chiefs receive 22.5 percent of all rent on leases from native lands, which cover 87 percent of Fiji.

Any move by Iloilo, Qarase and the chiefs to defy the court ruling, however, will trigger international retaliation. The Western powers have stepped up their demands for a return to the 1997 Constitution in order to stabilise the country politically and establish a government that will further open up the economy to foreign investment.

The diplomatic missions of Australia, New Zealand and the United States last week issued a joint statement threatening to impose further economic sanctions unless Fiji returned to “democratic rule”.

Moreover, John Hennessey-Nyland, the political and economic counsellor at the US embassy, warned of a “collective effort” to remove Fijian soldiers from United Nations international monitoring operations. Fiji has more than 1,500 troops stationed overseas on UN missions, which provide significant income for the army and its personnel.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported last week that Australia has threatened to cancel the SPARTECA-TCF scheme, which provides tariff concessions to Fiji's garment manufacturers, if the Fijian authorities ignored the court ruling.

Since last May, the garment industry, which employs 18,000 people, has already lost an estimated 40 percent of its overseas markets, including 50 percent of its Australian sales, because of political instability and trade bans. Two firms, Melbourne Garment Manufactures and DG Garments, closed last week, sacking 550 workers, following the closure

of two plants last month.

Despite claiming to defend democracy, the capitalist powers have made it plain that they want to see a coalition government installed without elections. During a visit to India, New Zealand Foreign Affairs Minister Phil Goff declared: “We feel the installation of a multi-ethnic and multi-party government of national unity will help heal the wounds created by last year's coup... The danger of having an election is it would highlight divisions at a time when it would be more useful to have a government of national unity to address the problems facing Fiji.”

Chaudhry's deputy prime minister Tupeni Baba, an ethnic Fijian, openly challenged Chaudhry's leadership of the Peoples Coalition last week and urged Iloilo to form a unity government without elections. He declared that he would be prepared to join a coalition with those who supported Speight's coup, something that Chaudhry has refused to do.

Baba called on Chaudhry to resign after a meeting of the Peoples Coalition caucus attended by three of the coalition's five parties. Backed by Adi Kuini Speed, leader of the Fijian Association Party and widow of former Labour prime minister Timoci Bavadra, Baba claims to have the support of a majority of the disbanded parliament.

Abandoning his previous demand for reinstatement, Chaudhry advised Iloilo to call fresh elections, after either dissolving parliament or recalling it in order to change the voting laws. But Baba, who met Iloilo separately, declared that the president was not obliged to accept Chaudhry's advice and could appoint an alternative prime minister.

While conforming to the Western powers' opposition to early elections, by moving against Chaudhry, Baba and Speed are seeking to appease the military and the chauvinist elements whipped up by Speight.

The *Fiji Times* reported that in a submission to the National Security Council last week, armed forces chief Commodore Frank Bainimarama declared that Chaudhry's reinstatement would be the “highest” threat to national security.

Five ethnic Fijian parties have restated their opposition to Chaudhry's return to office. The Soqosoqo ni Vakaveluwa ni Taukei (SVT), Veitokoni ni Lewenivanua Lotu Vakarisito/Christian Democratic (VLV/CDA), a faction of the Fijian Association Party, the nationalist Vanua Takulova Party and the Taukei movement issued a joint statement last week reiterating their demand for the abrogation of the 1997 Constitution.

The 1997 Constitution, which entrenched racially-based elections and the role of the unelected Great Council of Chiefs, was already heavily biased towards ethnic Fijians. The Fijian racist parties calling for its abrogation are demanding the imposition of further restrictions on the

democratic rights of Indo-Fijians. Speight went so far as calling for the complete disenfranchisement of Indo-Fijians who constitute nearly half of the population.

Two former prime ministers, ex-president Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and the 1987 military coup leader General Sitiveni Rabuka, are also involved in the jockeying for position. On the first day of the GCC meeting, Rabuka resigned as the body's chairman, declaring his readiness to stand for parliament and the prime ministership again.

Prime minister until defeated in the 1999 elections, Rabuka has publicly backed the 1997 Constitution, which he introduced under pressure from Australia and New Zealand. Rabuka supported the military's seizure of power following Speight's coup attempt but has argued that the Constitution protects ethnic Fijian interests, enshrines the GCC's position and will best deliver political stability.

Another former armed forces chief, Ratu Epeli Ganilau, who is Mara's son-in-law and the son of Fiji's first president, replaced Rabuka as GCC chairman.

Mara was the country's first and longest-serving prime minister—from 1970 to 1986—and president from 1992, until he stood aside after Speight's storming of parliament. He attended the GCC meeting, making his first public appearance since last May. The GCC could re-appoint him as president, in order to utilise his connections with the Western powers, as well as within the Fijian elite.

Media and other interests in Fiji have expressed alarm at the political vacuum left by the court ruling and the GCC's indecision. The Murdoch-owned *Fiji Times* warned in an editorial: “At a time when the nation needs a united council with a common resolve to take the country forward, it is instead confronted with a chiefly body splintered by dispute.” As a consequence, “the nation is adrift in uncharted waters”.

Clearly, the GCC and the Fijian authorities are running out of time to decide whether and how to abide by the Court of Appeal decision. But the obvious lack of “common resolve” is an indication of the difficulties confronting the Fijian elites as they try to resolve the sharp differences in their own ranks and at the same time satisfy the demands of the major powers and global investors.



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