

Fijian military court convicts 15 soldiers on mutiny charges

Frank Gaglioti**26 November 2002**

On November 15, a court martial in Fiji found 15 soldiers, including an army captain, guilty of involvement in a mutiny at Queen Elizabeth Barracks in November 2000. However, while the proceedings pointed to the involvement of figures within the country's military, political and business elites, no legal action has been taken against them.

The mutiny lasted less than a day. On November 2, 2000, troops under the command of Captain Shane Stevens seized the armoury and other buildings at the army's headquarters in Suva, then attempted to arrest army chief Commander Frank Bainimarama who evaded capture. In the ensuing counteroffensive, four soldiers were killed and four mutineers were beaten to death after being captured.

The mutiny followed months of instability after businessmen George Speight along with members of the army's elite Counter Revolutionary Warfare (CRW) unit seized control of parliament house in May 2000 and ousted the Labour Party-led government of Mahendra Chaudhry. The military led by Bainimarama suspended the country's constitution, took control, installed an interim government headed by the current Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase and negotiated an end to the siege on terms favourable to Speight.

Both the military and Qarase were sympathetic to Speight's racialist aims in ousting Chaudhry, the country's first ethnic Indian prime minister. The interim government's "Blueprint for Fijian Development" incorporated many of Speight's demands to preserve the privileged position of ethnic Fijian chiefs and business operators. The November 2000 mutiny erupted when Qarase, under strong international pressure, sought to distance himself from the coup and announced treason charges against Speight.

For his part in leading the mutiny, this month's court martial formally sentenced Captain Stevens to death but rapidly commuted the sentence to life imprisonment. Just prior to the sentencing, the Qarase government had indicated that it planned to abolish capital punishment in the armed forces. The other soldiers were given jail terms ranging from 18 months to eight years. All were members of the CRW unit, which was disbanded after the mutiny. Another 25 soldiers await trial.

From the outset, the government and the army were concerned over the potential of the court martial to provoke further unrest in the military and to reveal the involvement of members of the ethnic Fijian elites. The decision to commute Stevens' death sentence was aimed at putting an end to the matter quickly and without further recrimination.

Even so, evidence heard at the trial indicated that the plot went far beyond Stevens. Colonel Ilaisa Kacisolomone, who headed the court martial panel, commented: "This court and anyone who following the proceedings... will be well within the mark if we are still niggled by some doubts as to whether or not we have been fully apprised of the events leading up to November 2 and whether all the key players behind the mutiny have been or will fully be exposed."

Stevens alleged he had been following orders from key figures among Fiji's chiefs and senior military personnel. He named Chief Ratu Inoke Takiveikata, a high chief in the Suva area and Colonel Ulaiasi Vatu Takiveikata, who was an open Speight supporter and a minister in Qarase's interim government. Vatu has denied any involvement in the mutiny.

Stevens also implicated Lieutenant Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini and former Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, who led an army coup in 1987 and went to the army headquarters during the mutiny, purportedly to

convene negotiations. Tarakinikini was a former head of the CRW unit, whose officers openly participated in the May 2000 coup and supplied Speight's thugs with guns. He has conveniently been seconded to the UN and is currently in Afghanistan. Both denied the allegations.

The proceedings indicated that the mutiny was not a spontaneous protest over the government's decision to charge Speight with treason, but the start of a coup. The aim was to replace military chief Bainimarama and oust the interim government. Stevens testified that chief Takiveikata had supplied the soldiers with mobile phones and other items. Takiveikata and Colonel Vatu contacted him on the morning of the mutiny to say that civilian supporters were on the way to the army base and that the coup had the backing of Rabuka and a number of chiefs.

In the course of the trial, key evidence, which would have supported Stevens' allegations, simply disappeared. On September 3, police sergeant Luke Navewa told the court that files containing statements by Vatu and Tarakinikini were missing. Two days later, Navewa revealed that an interview tape with Stevens was also missing. According to defence attorney Rabo Matebalavu, the tape contained details of senior military and police personnel involved in the mutiny, and revealed the existence of a "Diners Club" of former and current government ministers who supported it.

No move has been made against any of the figures named during the court martial. The Qarase government rests on a narrow social base and is beholden to the same chauvinist layers who backed, or were whipped up behind, Speight's coup. Qarase is well aware that any serious investigation into the November 2000 mutiny would lead to members of his own cabinet and has the potential to destabilise his government.

As an editorial in the *Fiji Sun* commented: "While it is well and good to sentence Stevens and his group over the mutiny, the issue is unfortunately far from being solved."



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