

Fijian Vice President faces trial on coup charges

Frank Gaglioti**26 June 2003**

Fiji's Vice President Ratu Jope Seniloli, two government ministers and four other leading participants in the May 2000 racialist coup mounted by George Speight, are due to re-appear in court in the capital Suva on July 23, charged with engaging in a seditious enterprise. They are also charged with taking an illegal oath to commit a capital offence, and face possible life imprisonment.

The prosecutions are extraordinary, not only due to the political status of the accused, but also because their arrests were so belated, coming three years after the offence. They are alleged to have taken oaths of office to join Speight's regime after he stormed the parliament and took Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and most of his government hostage.

Speight and his closest associates were arrested in July 2000 and charged with treason. By contrast, several key figures, including Seniloli, Speight's choice as president, were permitted to occupy senior posts in the government installed by the military under merchant banker Laisenia Qarase.

Qarase's government ludicrously protested that it did not have the resources to investigate the crimes alleged against Seniloli and his co-accused. Yet, Speight's swearing-in ceremony was filmed before a throng of international press photographers and the defendants were well-known coup supporters.

During the lengthy trial in March this year of politician Timoci Silatolu and journalist Joe Nata, both convicted of treason, a crucial exhibit was a video of a ceremony in which Seniloli was clearly seen swearing in Silatolu as a post-coup prime minister. On the video, he also swore in as a minister one of his co-accused, Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure, who punched the air in defiance and cried.

On May 8, Seniloli first appeared before court amid a tight security cordon. With him were Youth, Sports and Employment Minister Sireli Leweniqila, nationalist

politician Viliame Savu, who is currently serving a prison sentence on a coup-related charge, and two former parliamentarians, Peceli Rinakama and Viliame Volavola. Leweniqila was Speight's attorney general, Rinakama was his Education, Science and Technology Minister, and Volavola was Minister of Works.

On June 11, Deputy Speaker Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure and the Lands Minister Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu appeared before the court as well. Vakalalabure was Speight's Civil Aviation Minister and Lalabalavu was the Housing and Urban Development Minister.

Despite the evidence against them, Qarase has moved against the coup supporters in the most tentative manner possible. On June 11, he refused to sack or even stand aside the arrested ministers, arguing that "a criminal charge is not proof of guilt". In spite of the seriousness of the charges, the accused were immediately released on bail of \$US5,200 each.

Speight's coup exposed deep rifts within Fijian ruling circles, and split the military. By ousting Chaudhry, Fiji's first prime minister of Indian descent, Speight and his backers sought to mobilise a Fijian chauvinist movement to strengthen land-owning and business privileges for ethnic Fijian chiefs and entrepreneurs.

Qarase has been reluctant to prosecute the coup leaders for fear of provoking another coup. More fundamentally, his government was itself a product of the coup, installed by the military, which took control and refused to reinstate Chaudhry's elected government. Qarase's cabinet included known coup supporters and largely implemented Speight's anti-Indian program.

Seniloli was anointed vice president as part of the political accommodation known as the Maunikau Accord between Speight and the armed forces chief, Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, which ended the hostage crisis. The Accord also sought to meet the demands of the regional powers, Australia and New Zealand, for an end to the

political turmoil.

The Howard government in Canberra, supported by the Clark government in Wellington, endorsed the compromise. In order to stabilise the situation in the South Pacific's most populous country and largest economy, they accepted the formation of Qarase's military-backed government and tolerated its chauvinist program. At the same time, they insisted that Qarase carry through severe austerity programs and measures to reopen the economy to international exploitation.

It appears that the reversal of the decision not to prosecute Seniloli has been made under pressure from the Howard government. Having worked with the Qarase government for three years, Canberra is now demanding that the prosecutions proceed in order to shore up what remains a shaky political situation and as a warning to any future coup plotters.

According to a recent article in the *Bulletin* magazine, the Australian High Commissioner in Fiji Susan Boyd urged Qarase's government to ensure the arrests took place: "Boyd has forged a close relationship with Qarase and is said to be a trusted confidante...The trial of the vice-president and his co-defendants is going ahead with Australian assistance."

To ensure that the trials are not aborted, an Australian lawyer, Peter Ridgway has become Deputy Director of Public Prosecutions, taking charge of the prosecutions. On June 11, Australian Federal Police Assistant Commissioner Andrew Hughes was appointed Fiji's new Police Commissioner.

These are only two of the more prominent and publicised placements of Australian personnel in key government and military posts. Half a dozen advisers have been attached to the Fijian military and a similar number of officials installed in the criminal legal system. Australian Federal Police officers are also working in Fiji.

These developments represent an underlying shift in Australian policy. Over recent years, the Howard government has taken an increasingly bullying stance toward Fiji and other Pacific region states, demanding that they adopt "structural adjustment programs," slashing public services and living standards, privatising key facilities and removing barriers to investment. These measures have only deepened the economic and social crisis and political instability in these countries.

Now, in the name of preventing "failed states," Canberra is adopting more blunt and direct forms of intervention. The shift flows from the Howard government's participation in the war against Iraq as a

junior partner of the Bush administration. Media outlets such as the *Bulletin*, owned by Kerry Packer, are openly heralding a new era of Australian dominance in Fiji and throughout the region.

According to the *Bulletin*: "Australia is now indisputably the No.1 foreign power in Fiji and is asserting itself in ways that were inconceivable during the Labor years and even Prime Minister John Howard's first two terms. Alarmed by the steady degeneration of Australia's island neighbours, Howard is spearheading a concerted diplomatic effort to influence and assist the government of Fijian Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. It signals a distinct shift in Australian policy in the South Pacific—not just engagement but direct, hands-on intervention."

The *Bulletin* states that "island leaders like Qarase are ... more receptive, aware of the new *realpolitik* that sees Australian power significantly enhanced by its role in Iraq and closer relationship with the United States. In a region of 'big-man' politics, Howard also has fresh stature; having been dubbed 'man of steel' by the biggest man of all [US President Bush]."

By placing Seniloli and his co-accused on trial, Qarase hopes to appease Australia and New Zealand, but the decision places his government in a very tenuous position. His ruling coalition includes the Conservative Alliance Matanitu Vanua Party (CAMV), which backed Speight's coup.

Unlike the Solomon Islands, where it has just announced plans to dispatch a military and police force, the Howard government has proceeded more cautiously in Fiji. But the insertion of Australian personnel into key posts in Fiji is clearly aimed strengthening Canberra's role in the country's state apparatus and to prepare for any contingencies, including direct intervention.



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