

Fijian vice-president on trial for treason

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Amid extraordinary security precautions, the trial of Fiji's Vice-President Ratu Jope Seniloli and five other leading political figures on charges related to their participation in the May 2000 coup attempt opened in the Suva high court on Monday. The six have been charged with sedition and taking an illegal oath to commit a capital offence, and, if found guilty, could face life imprisonment.

The case threatens to further expose the intimate involvement of sections of the Fijian political establishment in overturning the Labour Party-led government of Mahendra Chaudhry, the country's first ethnic Indian prime minister. In May 2000, George Speight backed by armed gunmen, including members of the army's elite counter-insurgency group, stormed the parliament and held Chaudhry and most of his government hostage for nearly two months.

The six defendants are accused of actively supporting the coup attempt and of taking part in the swearing-in ceremony of Speight's so-called Taukei Civilian Government. While they have pleaded not guilty, their support for Speight is no secret. The entire ceremony on May 20, 2000 took place in the glare of international and local media with Seniloli, who was anointed "president" by Speight, presiding over proceedings.

The fact that it has taken four years to bring Seniloli to trial and that he remains vice-president despite the seriousness of the charges indicates that he continues to have high-level backing. If the current president, Ratu Josefa Iloilo, dies or steps down Seniloli would take over the post. Flaunting his contempt for the proceedings, Seniloli arrived at court on Monday in a vice-presidential motorcade.

Seniloli's co-accused include sports minister Isireli Leweniqila, parliamentary deputy speaker Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure and former parliamentarians Peceli Rinakama, Ratu Viliame Volavola and Viliame Savu. Vakalalabure was made Speight's attorney-general,

Leweniqila minister for tourism, Rinakama minister for youth, and Volavola minister for works. Savu, an ethnic Fijian communalist leader, has only just been released from jail after completing his sentence for an earlier coup-related conviction.

Tensions in the Fijian capital Suva are high and police have heightened security around the court and parliament. The presiding judge, witnesses and state prosecutor are all under constant police guard. Police spokesperson Mesake Koroi revealed that members of the newly-established Tactical Response Unit and the military would be responsible for security at the court.

On the opening day of the trial, prosecutor Mark Tedeschi, a leading Australian lawyer, tendered evidence that Seniloli knew of the coup attempt in advance. In a police interview after the end of the putsch, Seniloli admitted that Speight had called him on the eve of the coup and asked him to come to the parliament building and provide leadership.

The first witness to be called was deposed prime minister Chaudhry who testified to being threatened and manhandled by Speight and his armed thugs. He explained that he had refused to witness the swearing-in ceremony or formally resign his post, and was seriously beaten as a result. Chaudhry identified all the accused except Savu and Volavola as having been present in the parliament building and having engaged in discussions with Speight.

The trial is expected to last for weeks and is certain to exacerbate tensions in the ruling elite. The current prime minister, Laisenia Qarase, was first installed by the military as part of efforts to end the standoff in 2000. An agreement was struck with Speight, with the backing the Australian and New Zealand governments, which effectively deposed Chaudhry and installed a regime openly sympathetic to Speight's aims.

In moving against Chaudhry, Speight sought to whip up anti-Indian sentiment and strengthen land-owning

and business privileges of the ethnic Fijian chiefs and entrepreneurs. Qarase's administration included known coup supporters and was based on a program that included many of Speight's communalist demands. Seniloli was installed as vice-president at Speight's insistence as a guarantee that the measures would be carried out.

Qarase won an election that was eventually called in September 2001, after a campaign that was marred by communalist politics. Speight's own Conservative Alliance was permitted to stand candidates and its MPs were given posts in the new cabinet. The election was conducted under the 1997 Constitution—a document that entrenches the country's ethnic divisions and is heavily weighted toward ethnic Fijians, at the expense of ethnic Indians—nearly half the population.

Australia and New Zealand gave their blessing to the 2001 election and backed the Qarase government, which pledged to carry out the demands of foreign investors for further economic restructuring. At the same time, however, the two regional powers have more directly intervened in Fiji's administration in a bid to prevent any repetition of the 2000 events, and the earlier 1987 military coup, which have destabilised the country.

Under pressure from Canberra and Wellington, Qarase has been compelled to put Speight and his fellow conspirators on trial. Speight was eventually arrested, charged and found guilty of treason and is serving a sentence of life imprisonment. The push by the former colonial powers for prosecutions has nothing to do with any concern for justice or democratic rights, but seeks to deter any future coup plotters and ensure stable conditions for foreign companies.

It is no accident that the chief prosecutor in the current trial is a senior Australian lawyer. In the wake of the 2000 coup, Canberra has insisted on the installation of a number of Australian officials in key positions in Fiji. These include the appointment last year of Andrew Hughes from the Australian Federal Police as Fiji's new police commissioner and another Australian lawyer Peter Ridgeway as the country's deputy director of public prosecutions. Other Australian personnel function as advisers to the military, police and various government departments.

While the trial of Seniloli and his co-accused has eventually begun, the court proceedings pose a number

of dilemmas for the Qarase government. Qarase is heavily dependent on Australia and New Zealand for political support and economic aid. At the same time, the case threatens to sow divisions in the ranks of his administration and the Fijian ruling elite as a whole. It could also further expose the upper echelons of the military, police, Fijian chiefs and business as the backers of the Speight coup.

The bitterness of the divisions was evidenced by the pre-trial wrangling over whether Seniloli should resign his post. On June 22, Ratu Epeli Ganilau, chairman of the unelected Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), publicly called on the vice-president to step down. His call reflects concerns in ruling circles about the underlying social and political tensions, which have been exacerbated by discriminatory measures against ethnic Indians introduced by the Qarase government.

In a speech reported in the *Fiji Times* on June 15, Ganilau openly criticised government policies, declaring: "Unemployment would be at its all-time high, tribal conflict will re-emerge.... Ethnic tension and ethnic cleansing would be the order of the day. Independence would be erased from our national vocabulary.... Corruption is now the standard practice and everyone from the Executive, the judiciary and the civil service ... are available at a price."

Just days later, former GCC deputy chairperson and Senator Adi Litia Cakobau declared that Ganilau had no right to call for Seniloli's resignation. He was joined by other senior Fijian political figures, including information minister Simione Kaitani. Kaitani, another open supporter of the Speight coup who was sworn in as one of Speight's ministers, is clearly worried about the implications of the trial for his own political future. More broadly, however, Seniloli's defenders represent the interests of layers of traditional landowners and business operators who have benefited from the policies implemented after the coup.

Whatever the outcome of the trial, the proceedings are certain to fuel further political unrest.



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