

Fiji vice-president jailed for treason over 2000 coup attempt

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Fiji's Vice-President Ratu Jope Seniloli and four other leading politicians, including the deputy speaker of the House of Representatives, were sentenced last Friday to jail terms for sedition and taking an illegal oath to commit a capital offence. Seniloli is the most senior figure to be found guilty for his role in the 2000 coup attempt.

In May 2000, George Speight and armed gunmen, including members of the army's elite counter-insurgency group, took over the parliament building and held the entire cabinet of Mahendra Chaudhry, the country's first ethnic Indian prime minister, hostage for nearly two months.

Seniloli was anointed by Speight as "president" and presided over the swearing in of a rebel cabinet in a ceremony in front of the local and international media. The other five accused were sworn in as part of Speight's so-called Taukei Civilian Government. All were found guilty as charged, except the current sports minister Isireli Leweniqila who claimed that he had been forced to take part.

Considering the seriousness of the charges, which carry a maximum of life imprisonment, Seniloli received a comparatively light sentence of just four years jail. Parliamentary deputy speaker Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure was sentenced to six years jail and three former parliamentarians Peceli Rinakama, Ratu Viliame Volavola and Viliame Savu received lesser terms.

Prior to Seniloli's sentencing, the High Court in Suva was subject to unprecedented security. Justice Nazhat Shmeen was under constant armed guard and anyone entering the courtroom was searched. All marches were banned and a midnight curfew was imposed. Although the police were in charge of security, Police Commissioner Andrew Hughes was in daily

communication with the military.

The guilty verdicts have exacerbated political tensions. Seniloli was only installed as vice-president as part of an agreement between Speight and the military to end the siege in 2000. The deal ensured that Chaudhry would not return to power and that a government headed by Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase would implement much of Speight's communalist program. Qarase's cabinet included a number of ethnic Fijian figures who were either openly sympathetic to or supported the coup attempt.

The Qarase government was reluctant to commence legal proceedings at all. Not only did the trial start four years after the events, but the accused were allowed to continue in their jobs despite the serious nature of the crimes. Qarase was concerned that the trial would destabilise his coalition and lead to further political unrest.

The Conservative Alliance (CA), which supported the Speight coup and is part of the ruling coalition, has already criticised the verdict. Party spokesman and MP Samisoni Tikoinasau said: "I speak for almost 100 percent of the Fijian people including the chiefs. The same people supported the upheaval of 2000". CA leader Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu issued a veiled threat, saying: "We respect any decision of the courts but it is not the last option".

Attending the Pacific Islands Forum in Samoa last weekend, Qarase also distanced himself from the court decision, saying he was "dismayed at the severity of the sentence". He said that he had great sympathy for the prisoners as they "had the courage to support indigenous control of Fiji". His comments are pitched at shoring up support for his government among layers sympathetic to the Speight coup and its communal demands.

In a similar vein, Foreign Minister Kieren Keke announced that the government was considering a pardon for Seniloli. The cabinet, however, is split on the issue. Attorney General Qoroniasi Bale publicly ruled out a presidential pardon and declared that Seniloli would have to carry out the full term of his sentence.

Speaking on Radio New Zealand International on August 9, Bale also pointed to a potential constitutional crisis, saying there may be no provision to remove Seniloli under the constitution. With the current president, Ratu Josefa Iloilo, suffering ill-health, Seniloli is in line to take over as president, whose powers include commander-in-chief of the country's armed forces.

The Australian and New Zealand governments have been pushing for the trial to go ahead. Canberra and Wellington supported the Qarase government but have insisted that his government press ahead with measures aimed at creating a stable climate for foreign investment. In a break with the usual diplomatic protocol, the Australian High Commission issued a statement welcoming the trial outcome as a demonstration of “the integrity of the judicial system and the observance of the rule of law”.

As part of broader plans to tighten its control in the South Pacific, Australia has installed officials in a number of key positions in Fiji—including the police and the legal system. Significantly, while Andrew Hughes, a former Australian Federal Police deputy commissioner, organised police security outside the High Court last week, Mark Tedeschi, a senior Australian lawyer, was prosecuting the case inside the court.

In his summing up, Tedeschi pointed to the concerns in Canberra and Wellington. “[T]his action [the 2000 coup attempt] struck at the core of the democratic system of government this country has enjoyed over the most part of its existence. The coup destroyed the image of Fiji internationally, and saw the collapse of its tourism industry and the flight in foreign exchange,” he said.

The verdict was hailed in Fijian business circles. Fiji Employers Federation President Hafiz Khan described it as “far sighted” while Fiji Chamber of Commerce President Taito Waradi said that it went a long way in restoring investor confidence.

the trial outcome sent “a very clear message that those who flout the law—whatever their rank in society—will be called upon to answer for their actions”. But it also sounded a note of caution, warning that “the next few days will be a test of the stability that has returned to Fiji since the days of 2000 when the nation tottered on the brink of total and possibly permanent disaster”.

The editorial highlights the fact that none of the issues that gave rise to the 2000 coup attempt have been resolved. In conditions of deepening social crisis, sections of the Fijian ruling elite exploited the growing opposition to the Chaudhry government to whip up anti-Indian sentiment in order to divide working people and shore up their own privileged position. The economic demands of Canberra and Wellington for further economic restructuring will only heighten the country's social and political tensions.



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