

# Trouble in Paradise

Interview by Mavic Cabrera-Balleza

*In May this year, Fiji caught the world's attention because of a civilian coup that held 35 members of the parliament hostage, including Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudry. This was a rather unusual development for a country touted abroad as a peaceful, idyllic resort paradise.*



*At the UN General Assembly meeting held in New York the following month to review the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, Fiji did not have an official delegation as the 35 parliamentarians were still being held hostage at the time. It was at that meeting that Fiji women's groups made an appeal to the global women's movement by launching the Free Fiji Democracy Campaign. Not surprisingly, there was an outpouring of support not only from women's organisations but from other civil society actors as well.*

*Four months after the coup, all of the hostages have been released and coup leader George Speight has been charged with treason. Is everything well now in Fiji? Following is an interview conducted by Isis Communications Programme Manager Mavic Cabrera-Balleza with Raijeli Nicole of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement.*

**Q: Can you give us a brief background to the civilian coup that took place in Fiji?**

**A:** On the 19<sup>th</sup> of May this year, George Speight, a failed businessman, and his bunch of thugs took hostage 35 members of the parliament. They were aided by a handful of soldiers from the counterrevolutionary units of the Fijian army. Passing themselves off as champions of indigenous rights, they demanded the abrogation of the 1997 constitution, the most progressive version that our country has ever had. Before this, they forced President Ratu Kamisese Mara to step down. He did so for fear of his daughter's life (she was one of the hostages). Speight and his supporters accused the President of failing to address the issues of indigenous Fijians. In place of the *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT) (roughly translates to Fijian Political Party), they wanted to establish the *taukei*, an indigenous form of civilian government which they would easily dominate. And true to the tradition of coup mounters, Speight's group demanded a general amnesty for all those who took part in the takeover.

I think the coalition government was also rather complacent—they'd been warned time and time again that there would be a coup but they did not do anything to address the situation. In fact, six months before the incident, rumours of an impending coup were already very strong. In March and April, there were marches organised in the capital city and the country's western division protesting the leadership style of Prime Minister Chaudry.

The protesters called attention to the land compensation scheme set up for farmers of Indian origin. There was a prevalent perception that jobs in many government ministries were being taken away from indigenous Fijians and given to ethnic Indians. These protest marches

were really mobilised capitalising on the anxieties that Indians were going to take over the whole of Fiji and the indigenous people would be reduced to second class citizens in their own country. The protest marches were organised with support from the SVT party, Methodist church, failed politicians, and failed businessmen.

**Q: George Speight claims to have launched this coup to win more power for indigenous Fijians and rein in the influence of Fiji's ethnic majority who are of Indian origin...What can you say about this?...Did the ethnic conflict bring about the coup?**

**A:** Let's just say that race is being used very well by politicians and failed businessmen to further their own personal interests. They play on the fear that Indians will come and take over. In the case of Speight for example, his real agenda was to control the mahogany export trade that is reported to be worth US\$300 million.

But interestingly, native Fijians and the ethnic Indians in the Western province (where majority of them are), live together very well. They speak each other's language, they know and respect each other's cultural ways.

The challenge for NGOs, activists, academics and other civil society actors is to educate society, particularly those elements of the masses that are so easily led astray by simplistic notions of ethnic supremacy. People need to know, identify with and believe in what is in the constitution—that is, the 1997 constitution.

**Q: What were the impacts of the coup on the women of Fiji?**

**A:** Women are affected by any crisis. Many women workers in the garment industry lost

# Fiji's History in Capsule

**1874** - Fiji ceded to Great Britain and as part of its colonial administration policy brought in thousands of indentured labourers from India to work on cotton and sugar plantations.

**1920** - The indentured system came to an end in 1920, after prolonged protests by Mahatma Gandhi and Reverend C.F. Andrews. By that time there were 35,000 free Indians in Fiji, who started work in transport, sales and trade. They sent their children to school and some went abroad to acquire more skills. The population increased as other Indians joined them. The native Fijians, however, had no flair for business. They were satisfied with subsistence agriculture.

From trade, the Indians moved into the fields of law and medicine. Soon, every shop in Suva, the capital, was owned by Indians. They, however, could not own any land. Under a government decree, all the land belonged to the ethnic Fijians and the Indians could only lease it.

**1970** - Fiji gained independence from Great Britain.

**1972** - The first election was held. The Alliance Party made up predominantly of Fijian chiefs, a few Fiji Indian businessmen and part-European descendants of white settlers won.

**1977** - The second elections were won by the National Federation Party made up predominantly of Fiji Indians, which however could not agree on a government. Invoking emergency powers, the governor-general asked the Alliance Party to form a government, which it did very swiftly.

**1982** - The Alliance Party dominated the third elections.

**11 April 1987** - The fourth election was held. The Fiji Labour Party/National Federation Party coalition won. The coalition was seen as predominantly Indian even though the Coalition leader Dr. Timoci Bavadra, who was later sworn in as Prime Minister is an indigenous Fijian.

In the same month, Tavua villagers in the western side of Fiji set up roadblocks in protest of the new government. About 3,000 ethnic Fijians met at Viseisei village (Dr. Bavadra's home village where he is also the chief), Lautoka and signed a petition calling for Fijian political supremacy. 5,000 Fijian protesters marched through Suva, calling for the removal of the Bavadra government.

**14 May 1987** - Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, third in command in the Royal Fiji Military Forces, executed the first bloodless military coup. He suspended the Constitution, appointed himself Commander-in-Chief and named a 15-member interim administration to run the country.

**23 September 1987** - The Coalition and Alliance Party formed a caretaker government following the Deuba Accord, initiated by Ratu Ganilau.

**25 September 1987** - Rabuka staged his second coup as he believed the Deuba Accord will not deliver on the aspirations of Fijians.

**October 1987** - Rabuka issued two decrees formally abrogating the 1970 Constitution. He sacked Ganilau and formally declared Fiji a Republic.

**5 December 1987** - Rabuka dismissed his Taukeist government and announced a 21-member Alliance

cabinet. Ganilau is appointed President and Mara, Prime Minister.

**July 1990** - Ganilau promulgated the new Constitution, giving ethnic Fijians political supremacy. This constitution replaced the 1970 constitution. This is a racist constitution that allowed for the supremacy of Fijian chiefs (men in general). Because of this, Fiji Indians, other minority groups and women were treated as second class citizens.

**July 1991** - Rabuka resigned from the military to join the interim government as Deputy Prime Minister.

**June 1992** - Rabuka became Prime Minister after the chiefs-sponsored Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) (Fijian Political Party) captured the most seats.

**November 1992** - The government budget was disapproved after eight SVT members, led by Josefata Kamikamica, voted against it. New elections were called.

**January 1994** - Mara succeeded the late Ganilau as president.

**February 1994** - The SVT returned to power in the general elections with 31 seats. The dissident group led by Kamikamica formed the Fijian Association Party and won three seats. The National Federation Party captured 20 seats.

**1995** - The Constitutional Review Commission was set up with Sir Paul Reeves a former Archbishop and Governor-General of New Zealand with a Maori background as Chair. Soon after its establishment, it held wide ranging consultation with all sections of the community and submit-

ted recommendations to the President of Fiji.

**September 1996** - The Constitutional Review Commission completed a review of the 1990 Constitution. Rabuka and NFP leader Jai Ram Reddy led the way for the review to give Indians fairer political representation.

**April 1997** - The joint-parliamentary select committee looking into the Reeves report agreed on a multi-party executive government with 71 seats—31 for ethnic Fijians, 27 for Indians, two for generals and one for Rotumans.

**July 1997** - Negotiations took place between main political parties and the Constitutional Amendment Act of 1997 came into force. The new constitution was passed unanimously by the Great Council of Chiefs and by both houses of parliament.

This document recognises human rights for all and protects indigenous rights especially land and other resources. That is, the Constitution states clearly that the Great Council of Chiefs (made up of the chiefs representing the 14 provinces in Fiji) is the sole custodian of Fijian interests. Moreover, for any amendments to be made to laws governing Fijian interests, any government would have to get the consent of at least nine of the 14 chiefs/provinces and in addition, the Parliament would have to get two-thirds of the votes. This effectively meant that any changes to laws and policies governing Fijian interests would be extremely difficult.

The constitution was considered by many political analysts as one of the best constitutions in the world. It had a very strong Bill of Rights provi-

sion and it made Fiji the second country to recognise sexual orientation after South Africa.

**May 1999** - Elections were held under the new Constitution. The People's Coalition made up of the Fiji Labour Party, Party of National Unity (from Western province) and Fijian Association Party (the break away group from the SVT party) garnered majority of the seats. The labour party alone won 31 of the 71 seats.

**19 May 1999** - Mahendra Chaudhry was sworn in as Fiji's first Indian Prime Minister after President Mara persuaded the Fijian parties to support him. Two indigenous Deputy Prime Ministers are appointed one of which is a woman, Adi Kuini Bavadra (widow of first deposed Prime Minister, Dr. Timoci Bavadra). Majority of ministers in the cabinet are indigenous Fijians.

**21 April 2000** - About 500 ethnic Fijians led by ultra nationalist politician Apisai Tora (in the 1970s he was a member of the NFP party, part of the Rabuka interim administration after 1987 coup and now he is again part of the Qarase interim administration) marched through Lautoka in protest against the government.

**28 April 2000** - Over 4,000 Fijians staged a second protest march in Suva.

**19 May 2000** - On the first anniversary of the Chaudhry government, another protest was staged. It attracted a bigger crowd of 10,000 people. While it was taking place, a group of armed men led by George Speight stormed the Parliament and captured Chaudhry and the members of the parliament. The Chaudhry Coalition government was held hostage.

**May to July 2000** - Fiji was subjected to George Speight's brand of 'thuggery rule.' (Local outspoken journalists and international media had called Speight and his men a bunch of thugs). The Fiji Military Forces stepped in after widespread civil unrest and the Commander acted as the head of the nation. The 1997 constitution was said to be abrogated and decrees were put in place. However, the 1997 constitution is still being used by the judiciary and its abrogation is still in question.

**13 July 2000** - Mahendra Chaudhry, and the remaining 17 hostages were released after being held captive for 56 days. The other 16 hostages were released periodically in the two months following the coup.

This final release (ordered by the Great Council of Chiefs, the body vested with safeguarding Fijian interests) was one of the preconditions to the signing of the *Muanikau accord*—an agreement which saw the Speight camp returning all arms to the military barracks in exchange for their immunity and the inclusion of their supporters in the interim administration.

**26 July 2000** - George Speight and supporters were arrested after they did not honor the accord (they are still in possession of arms). They also continue to undermine and intimidate the efforts by the military to have an interim administration established.

**August 2000** - An interim administration led by Laisenia Qarase, a commercial banker, is appointed by the military. They are vested with the role of returning Fiji to Parliamentary democracy. The interim administration is made up of businessmen, two members of the deposed Coalition government, and staunch supporters of the 1987 and 2000 coups.

their jobs and this has a direct correlation with the increase in the number of women in the sex trade. There has also been a marked increase in the number of domestic violence cases. A problem that has been further exacerbated with the police indicating that they have national issues to deal with.

In terms of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement work, our proposed legislative changes on the Family Law Bill, Industrial Relations Bill, Sexual Offences Bill are all on hold, as we cannot push these under a body that is not democratically elected. Hence, discriminatory laws will have to be endured by women for at least another four years.

It has been particularly saddening to note that the Fijian women in parliament have been supporting the men and allowing the men to further disadvantage their position. As for the movement for women's emancipation, this coup has taken us back by several decades. Ethnic or any form of fundamentalism is not generally supportive of women's rights and this one is no exception. This coup will further entrench the traditional patriarchal Fijian status quo. Most Fijian women who went to parliament during the coup did so to cook, to sing hymns and to serve.

**Q: How did women's groups in Fiji respond to the conflict?**

**A:** During the crisis, women's groups led by the National Council of Women of Fiji (NCWF) organised the Women's Action for Democracy and Peace (WAD'aP) which undertook various forms of protest including the *Women in Black* and the *Candle Light of Hope* campaigns and peace vigils. Petitions, media statements were likewise circulated around the world. And to generate support from the global women's movement and the

international community, we launched the Free Fiji Democracy Campaign.

Another initiative that came out of WAD'aP was the formation of the "Good Governance" Working Group which commenced a countdown from a total of 1,095 days beginning 28 July, the day the Interim Administration of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase was sworn into office. The objective of the countdown is to remind the current administration

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of their commitment to return the country to parliamentary democracy. We are also demanding full restoration of the 1997 amended constitution.

Recently, a group of indigenous women activists came forward to counter the views put out by the Interim Administration which are largely Fijian male and chiefly. We consider it important to express an alternative view and to show that as indigenous women we do not agree with the policies as outlined in the Qarase administration's Blueprint for the Protection and Advancement of Indigenous Fijians. We want to stress that we do not support this nationalist Fijian macho manner of doing politics and we do not recognise this as a representative view of how all Fijians

think. We want to see changes in the Fijian psyche which is the chiefly male way of thinking.

**Q: What is your assessment of the current situation?**

**A:** The military has put in place an Interim Administration (IA) and banker Laisenia Qarase was sworn in as Prime Minister. The term of this administration will be for two years. The business community has rallied behind him and you can see that their confidence has come back a lot faster than in 1987 (the second military takeover in Fiji's history took place in September 1987).

The Blueprint that the IA is talking about is modeled after the modernisation theories of the 1960s. That is, pour in money into indigenous projects and the indigenous community welfare will improve. In effect, the trickle-down theory is supposed to be at play. Some of the policies that have been implemented so far include prioritisation of small business schemes; interest-free loans to boards managing indigenous affairs; and other "affirmative action" programmes that reserve 50 percent for indigenous Fijians. What is interesting is that it's the same policies that were put in place in 1987 but they didn't work. It must also be remembered that even loans reserved for Fijians by the government bank after 1987 were the poor performing loans—Mr. Qarase should know that and here he is doing it all over again but on a national level now.

I am quite concerned that the affirmative action programmes and policies in the Blueprint will ensure that the rich Fijians composed mostly of chiefs will get richer while the poor only gets poorer. My personal opinion is that it's really scary to have a banker as the leader of the nation as he sees business as the

only form of development—develop the commercial sector and all other sectors will develop and benefit—there's no human face to their analysis.

**Q: Do you agree that the country is now in the process of going back to normalcy?**

**A:** The military actually uses the term 'normality'—though what it really means is still not clear. The IA has been eager to bring about 'normality' and has moved towards salvaging the country's ailing economy. In particular, it's trying to secure crucial preferential trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand that have both imposed smart sanctions and have called for a return to democratic rule. At the same time, it is fighting the calls for tougher trade sanctions being advocated by the People's Coalition government and unions in Fiji, New Zealand and Australia.

Some persons visiting Fiji and those eager to return to 'normality' will argue that the situation today is good and it's almost like "*nothing happened except you get reminded of the coup because of the nuisance curfew hours and the military roadblocks.*"

This air of perceived 'normality' is brought about by events such as the reopening of schools after a nation-wide disruption to schooling for at least eight weeks. The University of the South Pacific resumed on-campus classes with the majority of regional students returning. The electricity for the whole nation has been restored after the main centres were forced to operate on rationed electricity (four hours per working day) for six weeks. George Speight and his men are all facing charges of treason, the only crime in Fiji punishable by death. Other persons involved in the looting and other terrorist, thuggery activities are being rounded-up by the police and



Raijeli (second from left) with colleagues in the Fiji Women's Rights Movement in one of the farewell parties held before her departure for New Zealand

some have already been charged. Many persons have said that they have been able to return to carrying out duties and activities that they used to do during 'pre-coup' days such as shopping, going to movies and playing sports, etc. At the international level, Mr. Qarase addressed the United Nations on the situation in Fiji and stated that the country was moving towards 'normality.' There is also the fact that Fiji has been allowed to participate in the next Commonwealth games. The country also continues to send its soldiers to be part of the UN peace keeping force in the Middle East, East Timor and Bosnia. Tourism has started to pick up again after major tourist markets in Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia and different parts of Asia have lifted their travel ban advise to Fiji.

**Q: So—has everything gone back to normal in Fiji?**

**A:** As much as Mr. Qarase and his IA would like the people of Fiji and the international community to believe that we are indeed on the road to 'normality,' there are a number of factors that continue to persist or have emerged that make Fiji a nation with many

festering undercurrents.

In fact—first of all we should ask ourselves, what is the definition of 'normality' in Fiji? For the military, normality is clearly the removal of arms from the hands of the public and the restoration of law and order. For the deposed People's Coalition, it is the return to Parliamentary democ-

racy and the 1997 constitution. For the IA (and this is being propelled by PM Qarase), normality is Fijian political supremacy even if it means having a racist constitution while it pushes for the so called *Fijian unity*. For the Great Council of Chiefs, normality is preserving the Fijian way of life and that means keeping positions of privilege in society. For the big businesses and MNCs, normality means being able to continue their operations and make profits. For factories in the tax-free zone—this crisis gives them another opportunity, another scapegoat to justify their poor wages and poor working conditions. They want the public to sympathise with them in these difficult post coup times and blame unions and NGOs for the trade sanction calls—but they neglect to mention that they have enjoyed tax free concessions for the last 13 years. For the churches—normality is to keep their numbers constant. For the ordinary indigenous Fijians, normality is the reality—of life without money or having too little to meet all obligations—rigid cultural obligations that leaves them continually indebted. For the Fiji Indians, normality is the underlying dream to be acknowledged and treated as truly Fiji citizens

and to be left alone from the racial undertones that just never go away. For the ordinary citizen, normality is the struggle to make ends meet, overcome the burden of having to pay the price for the SVT's government, IMF and World Bank economic policies which have continued to marginalise their position. For civil society organisations, NGOs—normality is the return to the 1997 constitution, the return to Parliamentary democracy. The constitution that is built on principles of human rights, equality, peace and democracy and that gives us the foundation and basis for our work. It is people friendly and allows the disadvantaged members in our society a fair means of pursuing just livelihoods. The constitution and democratic system allows us to address and to monitor government's role in addressing socio-economic problems in the nation. The May 19<sup>th</sup> coup (and also the 1987 coups) were never about indigenous aspirations or the indigenous cause. In fact, Fijians always had control over their land and their other resources and this was enshrined in the 1997 Constitution. The question then to ask is—whose interests were being stripped away by a progressive 1997 constitution and other accountable and transparency mechanisms that were being initiated and implemented? Going back to the question at hand—is everything well in Fiji? I firmly believe all is not well.

**Q: What are the other areas or issues that women's groups and other civil society actors should look into?**

**A:** Right now, there are a lot of stresses on civil society organisations, NGOs and the churches to assist the many thousands affected by the coup. More and more children are on the streets. Just recently, there was a nationwide radio appeal for donations to the Save the Children Fund, to help families provide school uniforms, textbooks, fees, lunch and transport.

We have seen more women suffering from depression or some form of mental health problems. As a women's NGO, sometimes we feel so inadequate. There is very little racial tolerance—Fiji Indians do not feel safe in the country. Even more so when the Prime Minister appears on national TV espousing his supremacist policies.

The challenge for the women's movement and also for other civil society organisations, NGOs, activists and academics is to show our constituents how the race card is being used and how it further marginalises women's positions in society. Part of the problem in Fiji is that we (NGOs) didn't take the constitution back to the people once it was enacted. Much of our effort now will have to involve constitutional and political education. We have to try to build a culture that demands accountability and transparency—no more culture of silence and acceptance. ♪

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