

## Coups and ethnic politics in Fiji<sup>1</sup>

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Fiji's December 2006 military coup and the abrogation of the country's Constitution in April 2009 have generated conflicting reactions. Australia, New Zealand, the European Union, the Commonwealth and the Pacific Islands Forum have condemned the actions of coup leader, Frank Bainimarama, who currently serves as interim prime minister. They have sought Bainimarama's agreement to fresh elections and to restarting the 'President's Forum' dialogue with elected politicians, which he abandoned in April. A significant minority of the civil society movement within Fiji has, however, backed the post-coup government's reformist agenda, even in some cases to the point of accepting that it must be enacted through authoritarian means.

Overseas, Bainimarama's government also has outspoken sympathisers who tend to be still more enthusiastic about the regime's objectives and less critical of military repression than the coup leader's fellow travellers in Fiji. Within the country, those with opposing views have been silenced, particularly since the media clampdown of April 2009. As a result, Fiji's government has been able to complain loudly, without provoking a storm of protest in the local press, that criticisms of its actions are based

on ignorance of Fiji's history and a lack of awareness of the unique difficulties that the country has faced since independence. That claim is deeply misleading.

Those who attempt to justify Fiji's December 2006 coup argue that the military's action was necessary to move the country's political arena away from control by ethnically based politicians and parties. According to the Vanuatu-based Pacific Institute of Public Policy, for example, the coup provided a 'circuit breaker' that could rid Fiji of corruption and racism, reform a 'gerrymandered electoral system' and 'embrace one-person one-vote' (Pacific Institute of Public Policy 2009). Even the abrogation of Fiji's Constitution in April has not stilled the sympathy of those who believe Bainimarama's coup constitutes a 'revolution for clean-up', as the Fiji Labour Party's Lekh Ram Vayeshnoi called it in June 2007 (*FijiLive*, 25 June 2007; *Fiji Daily Post*, 22 June 2007). (His leader, Mahendra Chaudhry, is now furiously backtracking on such claims, following his party's departure from Bainimarama's government.) The claim that the coup is 'revolutionary' is, after all, the only plausible rejoinder to those who argue for the sanctity of the rule of law and the inviolability of democracy. Father Kevin Barr, one of several Catholic leftists who have

## Policy dialogue

taken up positions in the new order, argued in December 2006 that Bainimarama's coup should be seen in the context of those many cases in the history of nations in which 'kings were deposed, wars were fought, governments were ousted or revolutions were begun in order to bring about a more just regime change' (Baleinakorodawa, Barr and Qalowasa 2006).

In accord with this type of insurrectionist interpretation, Bainimarama has cast himself in the role of a modern-day Robespierre seeking to transcend the parochial divisions of the *ancien regime* or as a reborn Kamal Attaturk intent on building a modern secular order. It would be hard to deny that the early history of nation building has often involved crushing communalist challenges to the emergence of the modern state, often as the domestic by-product of external wars. International opinion has, however, swung against suppressing communalist ideology as a route to robust state formation—partly, perhaps, because the world wars of the mid-twentieth century discredited nationalist ideology. No-one seriously imagines that it is possible to resolve the difficulties in Iraq or Afghanistan by concerted attacks on the Sunni Muslims in Iraq or the Pashtuns in Afghanistan. The recent crushing of Tamil separatists by Sri Lanka's army might have been a resounding military victory, but it hardly constitutes a durable political settlement. It is inconceivable that an assault on the institutions of indigenous Fijian post-colonial rule might yield a viable future for that country.

Fiji's military clampdown was not accompanied by mass killing; but would those who sympathise with Bainimarama's suppression of ethno-nationalism have opposed this had it been? When Bainimarama (through spokesman Neumi Leweni) repudiated any negotiated settlement in the aftermath of the abrogation of the Constitution, rejecting Commonwealth/UN

efforts to assist in brokering a President's Forum, he was effectively throwing down the gauntlet to opponents. When the soldiers and police convicted of the murders of three indigenous Fijians—Sakuisa Rabaka, Nimilote Verebasaga and Tevita Malasebe—were released from prison in April, the transparent objective was to send a message to the military rank and file that if they shed blood to protect the regime they would be protected from legal action. No violent reaction to Bainimarama's regime has resulted as yet. The rather desperate hope of coup opponents for a Methodist-inspired uprising in August 2009 failed to materialise (and this was in itself indicative of a striking failure of the political opposition). Were it to do so, however, how far would the sympathisers of the suppression of ethno-nationalism be prepared to go? Does the coup regime survive only because of the good graces of its opponents and the absence of the kinds of popular resistance seen recently in Thailand, Honduras, Iran or, a few years back, Pakistan?

Surveying the international experience of coups aimed at bridging ethnic divisions, it is striking how few cases give credence to that objective. West African military coups after independence were frequently depicted as efforts to counter tribalism or tackle civilian corruption, but they almost invariably proved to be instruments for the triumph of militarised ethnocracy. Coups aimed at countering ethnic polarisation tend to morph quickly into vehicles for the ascendancy of one or the other group.

Bainimarama's coup started out amid grandiose claims of multi-racialist objectives, but has tended to morph into a takeover that bears greater resemblance to previous ethno-nationalist seizures of power. Old hands from Sitivena Rabuka's post-1987 coup governments, such as Foreign Minister (and veteran *Taukei* movement supporter), Inoke Kubuabola,

## Policy dialogue

Chinese Ambassador, Jim Ah Koy, and Education Minister, Filipe Bole, have been restored to important positions. Contrary to Bainimarama's claims at the UN General Assembly meeting to be waging a battle of 'new élites' against 'old élites', ageing figures in the Fijian establishment associated with Fiji's first post-independence Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara—such as Ratu Epeli Nailatikau and Ratu Epeli Ganilau—now occupy pivotal positions in the new order. The early enthusiasm of some in the Fiji Indian political élite for Bainimarama's coup has faded, with the departure of Mahendra Chaudhry's Fiji Labour Party from government in August 2008. The multiculturalist objectives of the coup are still loudly proclaimed at meetings of the United Nations or before gatherings of ethnic Fijian soldiers at the Queen Elizabeth Barracks, but these now sit awkwardly alongside events at home.

The exigencies faced by regimes created by coups—unable to rule by consensus—generally put paid to anti-corruption objectives even faster than the patronage networks cultivated by civilian regimes. Where military forces acquire some legitimacy in the nation-building process or play some enduring role in guarding secular state traditions (as in Turkey or Indonesia), they generally earn this through prestige acquired during the struggle for independence or in conflicts with external adversaries. More usually, 'coups to end all coups' that aim to transcend communal divisions have ended in forms of dictatorship. This was the case in Syria, for example, where, after 18 coup attempts, the Ba'ath Party in the 1960s seized office, pressing a pan-Arabist and socialist ideology; but by the 1970s, with Hafez al-Assad in control, the party moved to cement the position of an Alawi-dominated ruling élite against popular Sunni opposition.

Fiji's experience of coups—no-one killed in 1987, 16 killed in 2000 and four so far

since 2006—gives some encouragement to theories of Pacific exceptionalism and non-violence. Many of the early African, Thai and Latin American coups, however, were much less violent than those that followed. With time, there is logic to repeated coups becoming ever more questions of life and death, with perpetrators becoming bound to 'make or break' suppression of dissent. Bainimarama, if he fails, is unlikely to spend his future basking on a tropical island, as did his predecessor, George Speight, leader of the 2000 coup.

In other words, the idea of an army that stands above the fray, insulated from ethnic politics, finds little historical support. That is especially the case when the military itself reflects communal divisions—as it does in Fiji, where the military remains 99 per cent indigenous and negligible effort has been made towards broadening its make-up. (The names of new recruits published in the local press attest to the continuing ethnic imbalance.) Elsewhere, purportedly neutral armies have quickly come down on one or other side in protracted conflicts. In Northern Ireland, the largely Catholic and Republican civil rights movement was suppressed by the Protestant-dominated Royal Ulster Constabulary in the 1960s. British troops arriving to keep the peace in 1969 were notoriously greeted with cups of tea provided by the beleaguered Catholic communities of Derry and West Belfast. Within days, Britain's claim to be performing a peacekeeping role had been repudiated by Republicans. Bloody Sunday, internment without trial and the hunger strikes followed.

After two decades of civil strife, the eventually agreed peace process in Northern Ireland provides some inspiration for the parties to other seemingly intractable conflicts. The 1998 Good Friday agreement—despite considerable teething difficulties—brought Republican and Loyalist politicians together

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## Policy dialogue

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in a power-sharing arrangement. It was an outcome that accords with what the world now knows about how to handle politicised ethnicity: that the forcible suppression of broadly backed communalist ideology, however distasteful that ideology is, rarely works. Power sharing—as experimented with for the first time since independence in Fiji during May–December 2006—brings better results, even if lasting transformation of the political order requires a great deal of hard work and effective leadership.

Underpinning theories about the military transformation of Fijian politics often lies a naive instrumentalist theory of politicised ethnicity. In its crudest version, the prevalence of communal voting in Fiji is blamed on the British legacy of racially based electorates, which survived in the 1970, 1990 and 1997 Constitutions. Racially based voting, however, which is common to both the 57 per cent ethnic Fijian and 37 per cent Fiji Indian populations, does not occur simply in the communal constituencies, but also in the open contests in which all Fiji's eligible citizens may participate. Societies such as Guyana, Bosnia and Northern Ireland also exhibit strong communal voting patterns; but none of these has Fiji-style, race-based electoral rolls. Some attribute this situation to the strength of primordial sentiments, as if cultural affinities are always impervious to political change. Constructivist theories, in contrast, reject both instrumentalist interpretations of ethnicity as some kind of 'false consciousness' engineered by unscrupulous élites and the primordialist or culturalist theories of innate and inevitable difference. Ethnic identification is not the only possible type of political outlook in societies such as Fiji's, but it can—and in that context did—become a powerful and enduring source of political identification. For that reason, efforts simply to annihilate the political representatives of powerful social forces are unlikely to be successful,

and are likely to generate worse problems than they are aimed at resolving. The better approach, as indicated by the Northern Ireland and South African settlements, is to try to accommodate distinct groups in a social compact, and to depoliticise ethnicity.

Perhaps all the lessons of history and global politics will leave exceptionalists and cultural relativists unconvinced. Perhaps Fiji will buck the global trend and, with time, communalist ideologies will fade and electoral loyalties change. Speaking on SBS Television's *Dateline* program in July 2009, Bainimarama acknowledged that his hostility to elections was driven by the fact that any poll would lead to the re-election of the very government he deposed. If, as this suggests, the regime lacks the ability to rule by consensus then to survive it at least needs to consolidate a dependable command structure through the state bureaucracy. Yet since the social base of the regime remains weak, its systems of authority will inevitably remain fragile. The post-coup purges of those identified with the old order have now given way to purges of those who staked their careers on the success of the new, with the core ruling circle growing ever narrower, ever more insular and thus more brittle. Perhaps the response of Samuel Finer, author of *The Man on Horseback: the role of the military in politics*, to his own question is apposite: he asks why, given the strength of military forces around the world and the consequent vulnerability of civilian governments, there are not more military dictatorships internationally. His answer is twofold: 'one weakness is the armed forces' technical inability to administer any but the most primitive community. The second is their lack of legitimacy: that is to say, their lack of moral title to rule' (Finer 2002:14). In other words, soldiers tend not to be very good at politics.

## References

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at the Crawford Fiji Updates in Canberra and Brisbane in August 2009