

## Fiji

Prime Minister Sitiveni Ligamada Rabuka made a startling, if refreshingly accurate, observation about the situation in Fiji during a state visit to New Zealand in April 1993. "Some of us have been going around the world saying that everything is nice in Fiji. It is not," he said. "We have to accept that" (*FT*, 2 Apr 1993). The year 1993 was not a very nice one for Rabuka and his government. Dogged by one scandal after another, its backbenchers threatening rebellion, its policies for effective national government marred by resurgent provincialism, the *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* government finally met its end in November when the budget was defeated in Parliament. It was forced to resign after only eighteen months in office. The country began to prepare for the next general elections, due to be held in mid-February 1994. The year ended on a note of confusion and disarray.

There was other unhappy news during the year as well. Siddiq Moiddin Koya, a founding member of the National Federation Party, its longtime controversial leader, a leading criminal lawyer, and a chest-thumping orator who had played a conciliatory role in Fiji's transition to independence in 1970, died of a heart attack in April. Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau died in December from leukemia. He was the Tui Cakau, paramount chief of the Tovata confederacy, longtime Alliance

minister and deputy prime minister, Fiji's second governor general, and, after the 1987 coups, the republic's first president. The Great Council of Chiefs swiftly elevated first vice president (and longtime Alliance prime minister) Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara to the presidency. Mara's unsurprising ascendancy caused much disquiet in Rabuka's camp. Mara has a well-known and highly developed disregard for Rabuka. His own preferred successor as prime minister was Josefata Kamikamica, Rabuka's arch political rival. The relationship between the two men will be watched with great interest in 1994.

For all its problems, 1993 began on a hopeful note, with talks continuing on a possible government of national unity. Rabuka, who had sprung the idea in Parliament late in 1992 without consulting his own party or the Great Council of Chiefs, was vague about what exactly he meant. His proposal was littered with unexceptionable statements, including the perceived need to "develop a social and political partnership that transcends suspicion and distrust, that elevates us as a nation and gives us a combined sense of common destiny and purpose" (Fiji 1993). However, a few months earlier, he had stated categorically that acceptance of the principle of the paramountcy of Fijian interests was a precondition for national unity. Initially, Rabuka's critics were skeptical, seeing his unity proposal as a tactic to divert

attention away from his manifold political problems. Indo-Fijian leaders Jai Ram Reddy of the National Federation Party and Mahendra Chaudhary of the Fiji Labour Party were skeptical. They wanted the government's commitment to certain principles of power-sharing that were just and fair to all communities in Fiji. Nonetheless, they agreed to join Rabuka in informal discussion of his proposal.

The talks faltered because of the vagueness of the concept, as well as opposition from powerful Fijian groups. Ratu Mara, whose blessing was clearly critical, said publicly that a government of national unity would not work under the terms of the 1990 constitution. Mara's caution was echoed by his proteges, including Josefata Kamikamica and Finau Tabakaucoro (*FT*, 15 Feb 1993). Rabuka's own cabinet was unenthusiastic and relegated the proposal to a long-term objective. The Great Council of Chiefs listened politely to the proposals in May, but avoided taking a stand by asking the government to ascertain the feelings of ordinary Fijians through the machinery of provincial administration.

With the unity proposal languishing in the provinces, Rabuka shifted gear and began preparing the ground for his promised review of the constitution. He set up a cabinet subcommittee chaired by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade Filipe Bole. The committee was subsequently expanded to include four members of the Opposition headed by Jai Ram Reddy, and met twice during the middle of the year. The first of its three tasks was "to develop further, and to

try to reach a broad consensus on, a set of fundamental principles which is to be the basis of mutual co-existence in Fiji as a unitary but multi-racial and multi-religious state." Second, it was to devise the draft terms of reference for the proposed parliamentary select committee on the constitution. The final task was to look at other models of government "considered appropriate for Fiji in terms of promoting unity and harmony among all its communities, and their equitable representation and participation in the political leadership of the country, both in Parliament and in government" (Reddy 1993). The recommendations of the committee were to be submitted to an independent constitutional commission. The talks were followed quietly in the media, raising hopes for a peaceful resolution of various issues surrounding the review of the constitution. As it happened, all this work was put in abeyance with the defeat of the Rabuka government.

The Fiji Labour Party did not participate in the discussions on the constitution. It had withdrawn its support for Rabuka and walked out of Parliament in June to protest his failure to act on promises to them a year earlier (Lal 1993). These included an immediate review of the constitution, repeal of the 10 percent value-added tax on most consumer items and of the labor reforms, and consultations on the Agricultural Landlord and Tenants Act. Rabuka's rebuff placed the Fiji Labour Party in a precarious position, since they had nothing to show for supporting his bid to become prime minister. The results of a by-election in the Indian constituency of Rewa-Naitasiri underscored Labour's predicament. In

a fiercely contested battle, the National Federation Party's Aptar Singh won handily over Labour's Ramesh Chand (though this is a strong NFP constituency). Defeated and disillusioned, Labour returned to Parliament in August and began to repair its relationship with Rabuka's known opponents.

Meanwhile, Rabuka was consolidating his own base in the Fijian community, presenting himself as the uncompromising champion of their interests. He announced a number of measures including increasing the Fijian scholarship fund; establishing a small-business agency to advise Fijians on how to run small ventures; promising financial assistance to the provincial councils and Rotuma to buy shares in the exclusively Fijian investment company, Fijian Holdings; providing funds to Fijian *mataqali* 'land owning units' to purchase fee simple land; floating the idea of exempting Fijian businesses from income tax for up to twenty years; and transferring the management of 73,841 hectares of state land to the Native Lands Trust Board. Not all of these promises were carried out, as Rabuka's nationalist Fijian critics often pointed out, but the message was clear. Rabuka was moving in the right direction for Fijians, and it was only a matter of time before the government's pro-Fijian policies bore fruit. Indo-Fijian leaders complained of the discrimination against their people in the public sector, in statutory bodies, and in government aid programs. But their voice mattered little in a political system where the Indo-Fijian community itself was marginalized.

Many Fijians applauded the general thrust of Rabuka's policies, but others

wanted further restructuring of power within Fijian society. In May, a group of western Fijians led by Ratu Osea Gavidi, the founding leader of the now defunct Western United Front, and Sakiasi Butadroka, leader of the Fijian Nationalist Party, launched the Viti Levu Council of Chiefs to promote the interests and aspirations of Fijians of the main island of Fiji. One of the council's resolutions was that the presidency of the republic should be rotated among the four confederacies (Kubuna, Tovata, Burebasaga, and the as yet not formally recognized, Yasayasa Vaka Ra) instead of only the first three; that all state, and eventually fee simple, land be converted to native tenure; that Fijians be handed back all ownership of fisheries and mineral rights; that the government, rather than landowners, pay the administrative costs of running the Native Lands Trust Board; and that Fijians be given preferential treatment in the exploitation of natural resources (such as forestry and fisheries). Only when these concerns had been addressed, hinted the council, should the question of reviewing the constitution be considered.

Clearly, Rabuka was riding a tiger he could not dismount at will. But all his other problems paled into insignificance beside the revelations in the report of the commission of inquiry into the so-called Stephen Affair, presented by retired judge and politician Sir Ronald Kermode. Anthony Stephens, a local part-European businessman with previous brushes with the law and a close association with extremist Fijian politics, had been charged in mid-1988 with illegally

importing arms into the country. After being cleared, he sued the government for F\$30 million in damages, but agreed to settle for nearly \$10 million in cash and other benefits. The terms of the deed of settlement were leaked to the press and exposed in Parliament by Opposition Leader Jai Ram Reddy, leading to the resignation of Attorney General Aptaia Seru. Under considerable public and parliamentary pressure, Rabuka appointed Kermode to inquire into the sequence of events leading to the deed of settlement, the legality of the procedures followed, and the involvement of ministers and civil servants in the affair.

Kermode's report, issued in July, was a damning indictment of all the principal players (1993). Stephens was described as being "dishonest in seeking to obtain money from the National Bank of Fiji in an illegal manner and in doing so, the evidence *prima facie* appears to disclose that he may have committed more than one criminal offence." Attorney General Seru was accused of lying and gross negligence. Said Kermode: "Seru's explanation indicates how unsuited he was to hold the position of Attorney General." Most important, Rabuka's conduct was found to be "quite irregular and improper" in several respects. His action "as regards the events leading up to the execution of the Deed were not only improper but *prima facie* illegal." Predictably, Rabuka denied the report's charges and proclaimed his innocence, refusing to stand aside to allow a judicial review of the report's principal findings regarding his role. Eventually, he agreed somewhat reluctantly, but by then the damage had been done. His

integrity and reputation were attacked in Parliament and in the media, and dissidents within his own party prepared to move a motion of no confidence in him. The report gave Rabuka's opponents the excuse and the weapon they needed to "do Rabuka in."

Several Fijian backbenchers wanted Rabuka out. One was Josefata Kamikamica, Mara's protege, the interim government's finance minister, and Rabuka's rival for the top job, who had declined all invitations to join the government. Ratu Mara's son, Finau, was a key player behind the scenes. In the Senate, Tailevu politician Adi Finau Tabakaucoro, led the anti-Rabuka campaign. Another vocal opponent was sacked Minister for Information Ila Kuli who, like the others, sought to disguise personal revenge as principled opposition. Methodist Church General Secretary Manasa Lasaro persuaded Kuli to postpone his no-confidence motion in the interest of Fijian unity, while the Taukei Movement, or what remained of it, staged protest marches in support of Rabuka. The division in the Fijian camp erupted into the open. Rabuka's hold on power was contested, and his days numbered.

Personal animosities apart, Rabuka's problems were compounded by allegations of mismanagement, or lack of management, in statutory organizations. A strike at Fiji International Telecommunications Limited had left its scars, including the transfer and eventual sacking of Communications Minister Kuli. The appointment of controversial businessman Jim Ah Koy, Rabuka's close friend, to statutory bodies, including the chairmanship of

the Fiji Trade and Investment Board, was questioned in the press. So, too, were allegations regarding the tangled affairs of the Fiji Ports Authority, which led to the departure of Chief Executive Isimeli Bose and Chairman Navitlai Naisoro. Fijian Holdings Limited was rocked by accusations of insider trading by its senior Fijian directors. And questions were asked about the propriety of awarding the tender to upgrade the Nadi International Airport to a company (Minsons Limited) in which Rabuka, his wife, and Civil Aviation Minister Jonetani Kauakamoce owned shares. Whatever their merits, the allegations served to tarnish the image of the government and its leaders. As head of that government, Rabuka became the main target.

The long-simmering tensions came to a head in the November budget session of Parliament. Finance Minister Paul Manuelli presented his F\$707 million (US\$847 million) budget as a sensible document to combat the ills of the economy following the devastating effects of cyclone Kina, which had visited Fiji in late 1992 (Manuelli 1993). Proposed measures included further deregulation of trade and the labor market. Import licensing protection was to be partly removed from rice, powdered milk, canned fish, and coffee, and replaced by a 50 percent tariff for powdered milk, 40 percent for milled rice, and 10 percent for brown rice. The budget also anticipated an increase in the national deficit from F\$135 million (US\$88 million), or 2.5 percent of the gross national product, to F\$185 million (US\$120.8 million), or 4.8 percent of the gross national product. The budget was designed to

increase Fiji's international competitiveness.

Opposition Leader Jai Ram Reddy led the attack on the budget. He described it as a fiscally irresponsible document that proposed an unsustainable level of expenditure and fiscal deficit, as well as an escalation of public debt and debt service. The budget, he said, was long on rhetoric but short on specific proposals to remedy the economic ills; it had an inappropriate set of expenditure priorities (too much on the military and too little on health, education, and social welfare); and it was inflationary and socially regressive because of higher fiscal duties on basic consumer items. Labour leader Chaudhary echoed Reddy's criticism, adding that unless the "instability, fear, insecurities, and uncertainties" caused by the racially lopsided constitution, the acute law and order situation, and corruption were not remedied, Fiji would not prosper (*FT*, 23 Nov 1993).

Although the opposition's criticism was predictable, the government had not anticipated the rebellion of six of its own backbenchers and one cabinet minister. Josefata Kamikamica led the attack. Interestingly enough, and unlike the opposition, Kamikamica did not disagree with the underlying economic philosophy of the budget, nor with its general direction. Rather, the thrust of his criticism concerned the micromanagement of the economy, not in itself sufficient justification for voting against the budget and bringing down the government. But with twenty-seven opposition members against the budget, the anti-Rabuka faction of the *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* saw the perfect opportunity

to realize their plan to derail Rabuka. When the budget came up for vote at the second sitting of the House of Representatives, they voted with the opposition.

The Fijian dissidents had refused to abide by the *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* parliamentary caucus decision to support the budget. However, they had briefed Mara, the acting president, of their intention to vote against it. That led to speculation about Mara's role in the downfall of the Rabuka government, but at this writing the details are not clear. What is known is that the dissidents and the Fiji Labour Party had asked Mara not to dissolve Parliament but to sack Rabuka and appoint another (Fijian) prime minister. They told Mara that their vote against the budget was not a vote against the government as such, but against Rabuka as its head. Knowing of his antipathy toward Rabuka, they expected Mara to view their proposal sympathetically. Whatever his private feelings, Mara accepted Rabuka's constitutionally correct advice to prorogue the Parliament and call for fresh elections. In this, Rabuka was supported by Reddy, who argued that the defeat of the budget was tantamount to the defeat of the government, not just the prime minister. Parliament was dissolved on 19 January 1994, and general elections scheduled for mid-February 1994.

The year 1993 was a tumultuous one for Sitiveni Rabuka. His hold on power proved unsteady, and his political map was disfigured by many false starts and scarred memories. His own inconsistencies, failure to deliver on promises, and inexperience contributed to his dif-

ficulties. He admitted to thinking with his heart rather than with his head. These problems were compounded by disloyalty from within his own ranks, and from others who refused to recognize him as a legitimate successor to Ratu Mara's political throne. Fijian politics faces a rocky future. Provincialism is on the rise, and parliamentarians proclaim their loyalty to province rather than political party. The year's events showed again that the certainties of the past had disappeared. A new, uncertain era was on the horizon.

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